

Observations on the influence of Joseph Addison's  
play, *Cato a Tragedy*, on George Washington's  
character

by

Jon Gubera

Respectfully Submitted to

Dr. Peter Gibbon

Director of the NEH Seminar on George Washington  
at Boston University

7/15/05

The plethora of publications over the past decade on characters such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and others have inspired the current movement, whether intentional or not, to revitalize the importance of the founding generation of the United States. Many authors like Joseph Ellis, David McCullough, and Gordon Wood are attempting to reinvigorate (or recreate) the lives of these ‘old, dead White men,’ and teach this generation their importance to the founding of our republic. A major issue in discovering the mystery of these antiquated, American heroes is determining what inspired them to divest themselves of much of their personal lives and commit themselves wholly to public service to a cause (revolution, Constitution, nation-building) that most “Enlightened” Europeans predicted would result in utter failure. It is an undisputed fact that George Washington revered Joseph Addison’s play, *Cato a Tragedy*. What is disputed, however, is what or who actually shaped Washington’s incredibly noble character that led him to committing his entire fortune/future to the causes of American revolution and republicanism.

In a current television commercial, the head coach of the Duke Blue Devils, Mike Krzyzewski, states, “I don’t see myself as a coach. I see myself as a leader, who happens to be a coach.” Coach “K” is considered one of, if not the best college basketball coach in history. A good teacher is simply a good leader, leading the students to their fullest potentials. George Washington was obviously a leader during and after the Revolutionary War, but if he were alive today, I could see him as a highly successful coach at the collegiate or professional level. I became intrigued by the play, *Cato A Tragedy*, when I learned that Washington not only saw the play several times, but also had it performed at the Valley Forge winter quarters during what was, according to Don Higginbotham, “Perhaps a low point (in the war) in terms of regimental stability...(as) Washington complained, ‘a Regt (regiment) is scarcely the same a week together’”<sup>1</sup>. I am a leader too; I coach varsity volleyball (boys and girls), teach three high school courses, and serve as the Dean of Academics. As a leader I am always searching for methods to help improve the successes of my students, teachers and athletes. Motivation and inspiration are two key elements in the augmenting of player or student production. I

use a couple of videos to help motivate my players before games; Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* is one of them. It is a story of the Scottish minority push during the Middle Ages for independence from the English majority. I was curious as to how Washington motivated his "players" during a war where the odds were heavily against them. One of the answers lies in the play *Cato*. In my reading of the play I discovered why Washington chose to have it performed at Valley Forge, and why it was a personal favorite of his and, in fact, of many of the Founders. This paper has four parts to it: part one will provide a summary of three major themes in the play with evidence to support those themes; part two will list specific lines from *Cato* and juxtapose them with lines from Washington; part three will challenge Joseph Ellis on a reference he used concerning the influence of *Cato* on Washington in his book, His Excellency; part four will challenge Richard Brookhiser's use of *Cato* and its effects on Washington from his book, Rediscovering George Washington. I believe Ellis and Brookhiser do not give enough credit to the influence that the play had on Washington's life.

### Summary of the major themes of the play:

*Cato a Tragedy* is a story of steadfast virtue, youthful love, and loyalty, all three of which were omnipresent in George Washington's life. The lead character, Cato, is a senator in the Roman North African province of Utica (modern-day Libya). Caesar has already conquered most of the Roman Empire, and is in his final stages of securing total, dictatorial power as he makes his way through the Roman provinces of North Africa. Cato holds fast to the virtues of republicanism, the foundation of the greatness of the Roman Empire, and refuses to acquiesce to Caesar's request to willfully submit to his power. Virtue in the play is associated with staying true to the ideals of republicanism and not allowing passions to sway oneself off course, thus Cato is seen as the most virtuous person in the play. Caesar even offers terms to Cato that most, in fact all, of his senate would have accepted yet Cato stayed true to the republic. Cato chooses death over slavery in the end by committing suicide when Caesar approaches the city.

Throughout his adult, political life, Washington held onto the ideals of republicanism. He never accepted an offer to become dictator of America, and he was the first modern-day leader of the European 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> century eras to turn over

power freely and actually retire from public life. He became what the Roman senator Cicero always preached, but in fact did not practice (as discovered by Petrarch): the sage retiring to private life after committing completely to the service of the republic.

Youthful love is portrayed in the relationship between Juba, the Numidian Prince, and Marcia, the daughter of Cato. Also, there is love found between Portius, son of Cato, and Lucia, daughter of Lucius (another senator). Of course, with youthful love comes jealousy, deceit and envy. Sempronius is the villain in the story. He is a friend to Cato and a member of the senate, yet he plots the mutiny against Cato. He is motivated by a lustful desire to be with Marcia, but he fails when his plot is spoiled and he is killed by Juba. Sempronius is aided in his villainous efforts by Juba's chief general of the Numidia army, Syphax. Syphax delivers one of the more memorable lines of the play when he is trying to convince Juba to give up his efforts at courting Marcia:

*Syphax* - "Believe me, Prince, tho'hard to conquer love,  
Tis easie to divert and break its force:  
Absence might cure it, or a second Mistress  
Light up another flame, and put out this. (flame for Marcia)  
The glowing Dames of Zama's Royal court (another North African king)  
Have faces flusht with more exalted charms;  
The Sun, that rolls his chariot o'er their heads,  
Works up more fire and colour in their cheeks:  
Were you with these, my Prince, you'd soon forget  
The pale unripen'd, Beauties of the North."<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, inter-racial or inter-cultural relationships were frowned upon then as they were throughout Western culture until the 1990s! But, Juba's retort bespeaks why he loves the virtues of Cato, and why Cato eventually blesses Juba's request to court Marcia:

*Juba* - "Tis not a sett of features, or complexion:  
The tincture of skin, that I admire.  
Beauty soon grows familiar to the Lover,  
Fades in his eye, and palls upon the sense.  
The virtuous Marcia tow'rs above her sex:  
True, she is fair, (Oh, how divinely fair!)

But still the lovely Maid improves her charms  
With inward greatness, unaffected wisdom,  
And sanctity of manners. Cato's soul  
Shines out in every thing she acts or speaks  
While winning mildness and attractive smiles  
Dwell in her looks, and with becoming grace  
Softens the rigour of her Father's virtues." <sup>3</sup>

Loyalty to the cause is portrayed in several scenes, one of which is by Marcus, Cato's other son, who is also in love with Lucia like his brother, Portius. Portius and Lucia don't have the heart to tell Marcus, but he soon finds out and only wishes now to die a noble death, which he does when he kills Syphax during the general's attempted escape. Marcus dies, but Cato is satisfied (and Portius agrees) because he died defending the virtues of republicanism by killing a traitor to the good cause:

*Cato* - "Thanks to the Gods! my Boy has done his duty.

....

How beautiful is Death, when earn'd by Virtue!  
Who would not be that Youth? what pity is it  
That we can die but once to serve our Country!"

*Portius* - "Thy life is not thy own, when Rome demands it." <sup>4</sup>

I understand why Washington had this play performed at Valley Forge. Lucia is now happy because she can marry Portius (she had sworn not to marry anyone while Marcus was alive because it would cause him too much pain). The message of staying the course in troubled times is omnipresent in the words of Cato throughout the play. Staying the course means staying true to the republic and curbing one's passions. When the Utica senators are questioning whether or not to submit to Caesar, Cato responds:

*Cato* - "(While yet our liberty and fates are doubtful)  
With resolution, friendship, Roman brav'ry,  
And all the virtues we can crowd into it;  
That Heaven may say, it ought to be prolong'd." <sup>5</sup>

Washington was fighting to prolong the war and its mission which was to free the Americans from the chains of British despotism and mercantilism. Valley Forge was a

difficult time, and perhaps the right time use a motivational tool like the play *Cato* to inspire his otherwise indifferent, fatigued, or hopeless troops. Washington was inspired by the play, and I believe he thought its message(s) would serve to motivate his troops just as I am inspired by the movie *Braveheart*, and I believe it helps motivate my players. After studying Washington for three weeks I am most impressed with his abilities to both unite and lead men of differing interests to a common and successful cause. The play *Cato* was undoubtedly one of the tools he used in his manipulation of the individuals to fight the good cause during turbulent times.

Specific References in Washington's life to the Cato play (this is NOT an exhausted list, just a sampling):

1) **Sempronius (from Cato) says**, "Which of the two to chuse, Slavery or Death!"<sup>6</sup>

**Washington in a letter to John Bannister, a Virginia delegate to Congress, in 1778**

he argues that Congress needs to pick up its financial commitment to the cause or else, "...the councils we pursue and the part we act, may lead decisively to liberty, or to Slavery."<sup>7</sup>

2) **Cato says**, "Let not a torrent of impetuous zeal

Transport thee thus beyond the bounds of Reason;

True Fortitude is seen in great exploits

That Justice warrants, and the Wisdom guides;

All else is towering frenzy and distraction."<sup>8</sup>

**Washington says**, "When Men are irritated, and the Passions inflamed, they fly hastily and chearfully to Arms..."<sup>9</sup>

**Washington says**, "Men are very apt," he said, "run into extremes;..."<sup>10</sup>

It would appear that both men share an understanding of the average man.

3) **Addison to the Princess of Wales as a dedication of the play to her:**

"And all the glories that our Age adorn,

Are promis'd to a people yet unborn."<sup>11</sup>

**Washington's 'Circular to the State Governments,' Newburgh, June 8, 1783**

“...it is yet to be decided, whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse...not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn Millions be involved.”<sup>12</sup>

**4) In a letter Washington wrote to Sally Fairfax on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1758,**

“...I should think my time more agreeable spent believe me, in playing a part in Cato with the Company you mention, & myself doubly happy in being the Juba to such a Marcia as you must make.”<sup>13</sup>

Point of contention with Ellis:

Joseph Ellis gives the following account in his book on Washington, “When Madison was leading the charge in the House of Representatives to strike down the Jay Treaty and failed in 1796 (a treaty endorsed by Washington), Thomas Jefferson wrote the following to console Madison: ‘...Washington’s stature alone caused the defeat, for he was the one man who outweighs them all in influence over all the people.’ He quoted a famous line from Joseph Addison’s *Cato*, Washington’s favorite play, and applied it to Washington himself: ‘a curse on his virtues, they have undone his country.’”<sup>14</sup> Ellis does not accurately (or at least completely) explain the reference to *Cato* made by Jefferson about Washington. The quote, “a curse on his virtues...” from the play is a line delivered by Cato, the senator, while he is condemning Caesar’s actions. Lucius, a fellow senator, is urging Cato to submit to Caesar and not lay down his life because Cato is such a valuable man to all of society. The full exchange is as follows:

*Lucius* - “The Victor never will impose on Cato ungenerous terms. His Enemies confess the virtues of humanity are Casar’s.”

*Cato* - “Curse on his virtues! they’ve undone his Country. Such popular humanity is Treason.”<sup>15</sup>

So Jefferson is really equating Washington with Caesar, a dictator who ruined the Roman republic. It is a very harsh, but literary, criticism that would be naked to the present-day eye untrained to the Addison’s play. It was a more indirect way of calling Washington a dictator in 1796. It was, of course, a Republican campaign to stop a nationalist policy

(the Republican party was started at this time by Madison and Jefferson), so Jefferson sees himself as Cato trying to stop the inevitable force known as Washington or Caesar. I'm sure being equated to Caesar was the type of criticism to which Washington was referring to as wearing him down while serving as the President. In the final assessment of the Jay Treaty, it was approved by the House by a 51-48 vote, so the measure still went through republican measures, although it was Madison and Jefferson who were bending the Constitutional framework concerning treaties because it only requires the "consent of the Senate;" nowhere in the Constitution is the House mentioned concerning treaties. The real Caesars in this scenario must, quite frankly, be the Republican party leaders-- Madison and Jefferson. They were breaking the Constitutional law, not Washington, for their own political benefit. In fact, Washington's response to the Republicans actions during the Jay Treaty was, "With respect to the motives wch. Have led to these measures, and wch. Have not only brought the Constitution to the brink of precipice, put the happiness and prosperity of the Country into imminent danger." <sup>16</sup> The point here is that *Cato* was a well-known play to all of the Founders as evidenced by Jefferson's allusion to the play in a letter to Madison. In addition, Jefferson was the consummate politician; he accuses others of breaking the rules of the republic, while he is the one who actually perpetrates the act for his own benefit. Was this foreshadowing of his Louisiana Purchase?

### Point of contention with Brookhiser:

In Richard Brookhiser's book on Washington, Rediscovering George Washington: Founding Father, he spends about eight pages on the philosophical foundation of Washington's character. He specifically cites three documented influences: Seneca's *Morals*, the *Rules of Civility* (author not confirmed), and Addison's *Cato*. I must contend with Brookhiser on his point about the differences between how Cato, the Roman senator, handled mutineers and how Washington dealt with the same crowd. Brookhiser gives the following spliced excerpt from *Cato*:

In Act III, Cato quells a mutiny by reminding the rebellious soldiers of his sufferings.

*Cato*: "Have you forgotten Libya's burning waste?..."

Who was the first to explore the untrodden path,  
When life was hazarded in every step?...  
Who was the last in all your host that thirsted?...  
Hence, worthless men! hence! and complain to Caesar,  
You could not undergo the toil of war,  
Nor bear the hardships that your leader bore.”<sup>17</sup>

“The mutineers are as abashed as the officers at Newburgh would be in 1783, after Washington quelled their unrest. But, what a different appeal Washington would make to them! Unlike Cato, he would stress what he and they had undergone together... Perhaps for this reason, the meeting at Newburgh ended in reconciliation, while Addison’s hero orders his restive soldiers executed.

*Cato*: ‘When by just vengeance guilty mortals perish,  
The gods behold their punishment with pleasure.’”<sup>18</sup>

This connection is flawed in two crucial ways: it leaves out a major component of the speech that Cato delivers to the mutineers, and the situation of the mutineers in *Cato* are far different than those of Washington’s at Newburgh. Cato did not summarily order the execution of the mutineers; in fact he offered the chance of a pardon that Brookhiser neglects to include in his account of the play:

*Cato*: “Learn to be honest men, give up your Leaders,  
And pardon shall descend on all the rest.”<sup>19</sup>

So, Cato offers a pardon to the mass of men if they offer up their leader(s). The mutineers do not because their leader is Sempronius, a Roman senator and friend of Cato! Sempronius has assured the men before the mutiny that he would protect them. The mutineers say nothing to Cato because he turns them over to Sempronius’ care to be executed. The mutineers, of course, believe they have nothing to worry about because their leader is in control of their supposed punishment. However, when Sempronius takes them away, he screams at them for their inability to kill Cato and their succumbing to Cato’s charges of holding onto the traditions of the Roman republic. Sempronius is angered by fact that his mutineers won’t carry through with the plan because they are mesmerized by Cato’s speech. The following is the exchange between Sempronius and the mutineers after Cato has persuaded them that they were wrong:

*Leader of the Traitors:* “Sempronius, you acted like yourself,

One would have thought you had been half in earnest.”

*Sempronius:* “Villian, stand off! base groveling worthless wretches,

Mongrils in faction, poor faint-hearted traitors!”

*Leader:* “Nay, now you carry it too far, Sempronius:

Throw off thy mask, there are none here but Friends.”

*Sempronius:* “Know, Villians, when such paltry slaves presume

To mix treason, if the plot succeeds,

They’re thrown neglected by: But if it fails,

They’re sure to die like dogs, as you shall do.

Here, take these factious monsters, drag’em forth

To sudden death.”

*Enter Guards*

*Leader:* “Nay, since it comes to this-----“

*Sempronius:* “Dispatch’em quick, but first pluck out their tongues,

Least with their dying breath they sow sedition. “<sup>20</sup>

It is Sempronius who is ruthless towards the mutineers, not Cato. Comparing the Newburgh conspiracy to the Sempronius conspiracy is incorrect. The mutineers in *Cato* are going to capture Cato and turn him over to Caesar so as to save their own lives, whereas the mutineers in the Newburgh incident are asking Washington to lead them against the American republic that is not compensating them for their services. The only similarity that one can draw from the aforementioned, unconnected scenarios is the reaction of the mutineers in both cases to the speeches delivered by their esteemed leaders. In *Cato*:

*Lucius:* “See, Cato, see th’unhappy men: they weep;

Fear, and remorse, and sorrow for their crime

Appear in every look, and plead for mercy.”<sup>21</sup>

The account of the Newburgh conspiracy said that when Washington pulled out his spectacles to read a letter to the officers because he had “...grown blind too in the service to his country,” several of the men started to cry. This would be the only point of comparison between the events in *Cato* and the Newburgh conspiracy.

What Washington and Cato shared was a respect from the men that they led; a respect that they both earned in combat (leading by example), and kept throughout their tenures as leaders by means of delivering great speeches, and maintaining a sincere commitment to the ideals of republicanism, virtue and honor. John Shy sums up Washington's leadership this way, "More important than professional skill or his human sensitivity is that the leader behave as his followers think he should--that he look, act, and sound like the leader they want. Washington could not have elicited such feeling from the men around him had he, like other great leaders (Cato!), not believed in himself and in the cause of American union. Belief is the real magic of leadership."<sup>22</sup> The stories of George Washington and of Cato serve as great role modeling for other leaders, such as myself: a teacher, coach, and administrator. I hope I can successfully let my students know that I believe in their abilities and our goals on a daily basis; or at least (in the spirit of George and Cato) when the time calls for it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Don Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Addison, *Cato a Tragedy* (London, Printed for the Company, 1730), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Cato*, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Cato*, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> *Cato*, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Cato*, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Genius of George Washington* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1980), p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> *Cato*, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Morgan, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Cato*, Preface written by Joseph Addison to Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, 1714.

<sup>12</sup> Washington's famous "Circular to the States" in 1783 is found reprinted in dozens of books and articles.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Ellis, *His Excellency* (2004), p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Ellis, p. 229.

<sup>15</sup> *Cato*, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Ellis, p. 230.

<sup>17</sup> *Cato*, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Brookhiser, *Rediscovering George Washington: Founding Father* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> *Cato*, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> *Cato*, p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Cato*, p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> Higginbotham, p. 85.