



# A historical Cato caught in the vortex of an ancient biography

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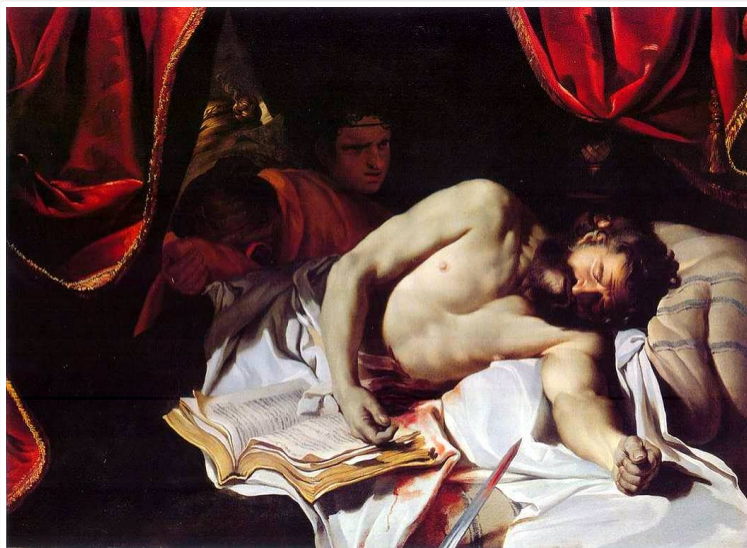
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## A historical Cato caught in the vortex of an ancient biography

August 5, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, H24H](#)

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Renaissance Opera is notorious for taking liberties with the facts in its portrayal of historical characters. Vivaldi's *Cato in Utica* is no exception. My presentation explores here some strikingly comparable situations in ancient biographies, which value the integrity of plot and character—seemingly at the expense of historical facts. A case in point is Plutarch's *Cato the Younger*, which gives us the initial impression that it veers from the reality that was Cato. It can be argued, however, that the literary construction of this biography is as "operatic" in its artistry as is the musical essence of Vivaldi's *Cato*.



"Suicídio de Catão de Útica," circa 1646, Charles Le Brun [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

§1. Renaissance Opera is notorious for taking liberties with the facts in its portrayal of historical characters. Vivaldi's *Cato in Utica* is no exception. My presentation explores here some strikingly comparable situations in ancient biographies, which value the integrity of plot and character—seemingly at the expense of historical facts. A case in point is Plutarch's *Cato the Younger* [[Greek](#) | [English](#)], which gives us the initial impression that it veers from the reality that was Cato. It can be argued, however, that the literary construction of this biography is as "operatic" in its artistry as is the musical essence of Vivaldi's *Cato*.

§2. A case in point is the "death scene" of Cato. Metastasio, the librettist for Vivaldi's opera, first intended for Cato to die onstage in the arms of his daughter Marcia (spelled Marcia in Latin), but then Metastasio had a change of heart. He decided to have the old man die off stage and to have Marcia report her father's death scene. But then Metastasio had a second change of heart. He now opted for a happy ending: after the army of Caesar defeats the army of Cato in Utica, near ancient Carthage, Caesar decides to spare the life of Marcia's father in order to ingratiate himself to the daughter. What a happy ending! Caesar gets the girl, and the girl's father is saved from execution. In the [Glimmerglass Festival production of Vivaldi's Cato in Utica](#), however, thanks to the sparkling dramaturgy of [Kelley Rourke](#), the stubborn old man has it his way: he dies by his own hand, just as he stages his "exit" in Plutarch's *Cato the Younger*.

§3. Now that I have made my point, which is that Plutarch's *Life of Cato the Younger* is as "operatic" in its artistry as is the musical essence of Vivaldi's *Cato*, I will survey some selections from Plutarch. Each selection, as we will see, is a scene of "high drama" that will delight the operatic sensibilities of a librettist like our well-meaning friend Metastasio. In the case of each selection, I will attempt my own English translation of Plutarch's original Greek text.

### Selection 1: Cato's "death scene"

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[68.2] εἰσελθὼν δὲ καὶ κατακλιθεὶς ἔλαβεν εἰς χεῖρας τῶν Πλάτωνος διαλόγων τὸν περὶ ψυχῆς· καὶ διελθὼν τοῦ βιβλίου τὸ πλεῖστον καὶ ἀναβλέψας ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς, ὡς οὐκ εἶδε κρεμάμενον τὸ ξίφος ὑφῆρθητο γὰρ ὁ παῖς ἐπι δειπνοῦντος αὐτοῦ, καλέσας οἰκέτην ἠρώτησεν ὅστις λάβει τὸ ἐγχειρίδιον. σιωπῶντος δὲ ἐκείνου πάλιν ἦν πρὸς τῷ βιβλίῳ· καὶ μικρὸν διαλιπὼν, ὥσπερ οὐ σπεύδων οὐδὲ ἐπειγόμενος, ἄλλως δὲ τὸ ξίφος ἐπιζητῶν, ἐκέλευσε κομίσει.

[68.3] διατριβῆς δὲ γινομένης καὶ μηδενὸς κομίζοντος, ἐξαναγνοὺς τὸ βιβλίον αὐθις ἐκάλει καθ' ἓνα τῶν οἰκετῶν καὶ μάλλον ἐνέτεινε τὴν φωνὴν τὸ ξίφος ἀπαπῶν· ἐνὸς δὲ καὶ πύξ τὸ στόμα πατάξας ἤμαξε τὴν αὐτοῦ χεῖρα, χαλεπαίων καὶ βοῶν ἤδη μέγα παραδίδοσθαι τῷ πολεμίῳ γυμνὸς ὑπὸ τοῦ παιδὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν οἰκετῶν, ἄχρι οὐ κλαίων ὁ υἱὸς εἰσέδραμε μετὰ τῶν φίλων καὶ περιπεσῶν ὠδύρετο καὶ καθικέτευεν.

[68.4] ὁ δὲ Κάτων ἐξασαστὰς ἐνέβλεψέ τε δεινὸν καὶ ἴπότε, εἶπεν, ἐγὼ καὶ ποῦ λέληθα παρανοίας ἡλωκῶς, ὅτι διδάσκει μὲν οὐδεὶς οὐδεὶς μεταπειθεῖ περὶ ὧν δοκῶ κακῶς βεβουλεύσθαι, κωλύομαι δὲ χρῆσθαι τοῖς ἐμαυτοῦ λογισμοῖς καὶ παροπλίζομαι; τί δ' οὐχὶ καὶ συνδεῖς, ὦ γενναῖε, τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἀποστρέφεις, μέχρι ἂν ἐλθῶν Καῖσαρ εὕρη με μηδὲ ἀμύνασθαι δυνάμενον;

...

[68.6] ἰδόντες δὲ πεφυρμένον αἵματι καὶ τῶν ἐντέρων τὰ πολλὰ προπετωκότα, ζῶντα δ' αὐτὸν ἐπι καὶ βλέποντα, δεινῶς μὲν ἄπαντες ἔσχον, ὁ δὲ ἱατρὸς προσελθὼν ἐπειράτο τῶν ἐντέρων ἀτρώτων διαμεινάντων ταῦτά τε καθιστάναι καὶ τὸ τραῦμα διαρράπτειν. ὡς οὖν ἀνήνεγκεν ὁ Κάτων καὶ συνεφρόνησε, τὸν μὲν ἱατρὸν ἀπέωαστο, ταῖς χερσὶ δὲ τὰ ἔντερα σπαράξας καὶ τὸ τραῦμα ἐπαναρρήξας ἀπέθανεν.

[68.2] After entering his room and lying down, he [= Cato] got a hold of Plato's dialogue 'On the Soul,' [= the Phaedo], and when he had read through most of the text, he looked up above his head, and not seeing his sword hanging there on the wall (for his son had taken it away while Cato was still at dinner), called a servant and asked him who had taken the weapon. The servant made no answer, and Cato returned to his book; and a little while after, as if in no hurry, but simply looking for his sword, he ordered the servant to bring it.

[68.3] But, since there was some hesitation, and no one brought the weapon, he finished reading his book, and this time he called his servants one by one and in an ever louder voice, demanding his sword. One of them he struck on the mouth with his fist, and bruised his own hand, angrily shouting that his son and his servants were betraying him unarmed into the hands of the enemy. Finally his son ran in weeping, together with his nearest and dearest, After embracing him, they started lamenting and begging him to stop.

[68.4] But Cato, rising to his feet, gave them all a solemn stare, and he said: 'When and where, without my knowledge, have I been pronounced to be a madman? You see, no one instructs me or tries to change my mind in matters where I am thought to have made bad decisions, but I am prevented from using my own judgment, and I have my weapons taken from me! Why, noble son, don't you tie your father's hands behind his back, so that Caesar may find me unable to defend myself when he comes?'

...

[68.6] They saw that he was smeared with gore, and that most of his intestines were protruding, but that he still had his eyes open and was still alive; and they were feeling just terrible. But the physician went to him and tried to put his intestines back in place, which remained uninjured, and to sew up the wound. In reaction, when Cato came to and became aware of this, he pushed the physician away, tore his intestines out with his hands, tore away at the wound still more, and that is the way he died.

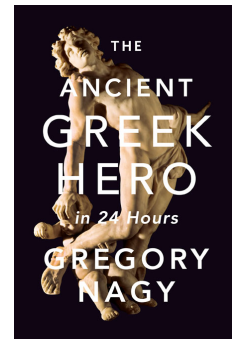
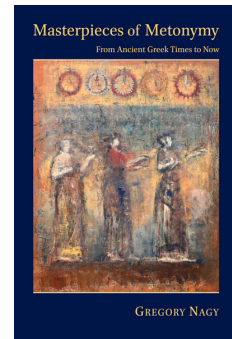
Plutarch Cato the Younger 68.2–6[1]

§4. As we see in this "death scene," Cato "dies hard." He hates Caesar, and so, everything that Cato does—including his act of suicide—is motivated by his passions.

## Selection 2: Cato's "most embarrassing moment"

§5. Speaking of passions, I must include here a "scene" engineered by Cato in full view of the Roman Senate in session. This "scene" involves Servilia, a half-sister of Cato, who became a lover of Caesar. In this "scene", in all its drama, Cato tries to embarrass Caesar by hinting at this love affair. As we examine this quasi-operatic "scene," we may well ask ourselves a rhetorical question: has Cato here succeeded in embarrassing Caesar—or perhaps himself?

[24.1] εἰ δὲ δεῖ μηδὲ τὰ μικρὰ τῶν ἡθῶν σημεῖα παραλιπεῖν ὥσπερ εἰκόνα ψυχῆς ὑπογραφομένους, λέγεται, τότε πολλὴν ἄμιλλαν καὶ μέγαν ἀγῶνα πρὸς τὸν Κάτωνα τοῦ Καίσαρος ἔχοντος καὶ τῆς βουλῆς εἰς ἐκείνους ἀνηρημένης, δελτάριον τι μικρὸν ἔξωθεν εἰσκομισθῆναι τῷ Καίσαρι. τοῦ δὲ Κάτωνος εἰς ὑποψίαν ἄγοντος τὸ πρᾶγμα καὶ διαβάλλοντος εἶναι πινας τοῦς κινουμένους, καὶ κελεύοντος ἀναγινώσκειν τὰ γεγραμμένα, τὸν Καίσαρα τῷ Κάτωνι προσδοῦναι τὸ δελτάριον ἐγγύς ἐστῶτι.



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[24.2] τὸν δὲ ἀναγνόντα Σερβιλίας τῆς ἀδελφῆς ἐπιστόλιον ἀκόλαστον πρὸς τὸν Καίσαρα γεγραμμένον, ἐρώσης καὶ διεφθαρμένης ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, προσρῖψαί τε τῷ Καίσαρι καὶ εἰπεῖν, “κράτει, μέθυσε,” καὶ πάλιν οὕτως ἐπὶ τὸν ἐξ ἀρχῆς λόγον τραπέσθαι.

[24.1] Now, since we must not neglect even the slightest signs of character in making a portrait, as it were, of a soul, the story goes that, back then, at a time when Caesar was earnestly engaged in a great struggle with Cato and when the attention of the senate was riveted upon the two men, a little note was brought in from outside to Caesar. Cato tried to make it an object of suspicion and implied that it had something to do with the conspiracy [of Catiline]. So he [=Caesar] called on him [= Cato] to read the writing out loud. Then Caesar handed the note to Cato, who stood near him.

[24.2] But when Cato had read the little note, which was a letter written in obscene language by his sister Servilia to Caesar, with whom she was passionately and unashamedly in love, he tossed it back to Caesar, saying, “Hold on to it, you drunken fool,” and then continued his speech where he had left off.

Plutarch Cato the Younger 24.1–2

### Selection 3: Cato’s troubles with women

§6. The topic of the troubles that Cato had with women who were close to him now brings Plutarch to a new part of his narrative. I see here a kind of pathology in thought-patterns that eroticize and sexualize women as ‘earth mothers’ just waiting to be impregnated:

[24.3] φαίνεται δὲ ὅλως ἀτύχημα γενέσθαι τοῦ Κάτωνος ἡ γυναικωνίτις. αὕτη μὲν γὰρ ἐπὶ Καίσαρι κακῶς ἤκουσε: τὰ δὲ τῆς ἐτέρας Σερβιλίας, ἀδελφῆς δὲ Κάτωνος, ἀσχημονέστερα. Λευκόλλω γὰρ γαμηθεῖσα, πρωτεύσαντι Ῥωμαίων κατὰ δόξαν ἀνδρὶ, καὶ τεκοῦσα παιδίον ἐξέπεσε τοῦ οἴκου δι’ ἀκολασίαν. τὸ δὲ αἰσχιστον, οὐδ’ ἡ γυνὴ τοῦ Κάτωνος Ἀτιλία τοιοῦτων ἐκαθάρειυσεν ἀμαρτημάτων, ἀλλὰ καίπερ ἐξ αὐτῆς δύο παιδία πεποιημένους ἀνάγκην ἔσχεν ἐκβαλεῖν ἀσχημονούσαν.

[25.1] εἶτα ἐγγιμη θυγατέρα Φιλίππου, Μαρκίαν, ἐπιεικῆ δοκοῦσαν εἶναι γυναῖκα, περὶ ἧς ὁ πλεῖστος λόγος: καὶ καθάπερ ἐν δράματι τῷ βίῳ τοῦτο τὸ μέρος προβληματώδες γέγονε καὶ ἄπορον. ἐπράχθη δὲ τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον, ὡς ἱστορεῖ Θρασεάς, εἰς Μουνάτιον, ἄνδρα Κάτωνος ἐταῖρον καὶ συμβιωτὴν, ἀναφέρων τὴν πίστιν;

[25.2] ἐν πολλοῖς ἐρασταῖς καὶ θαυμασταῖς τοῦ Κάτωνος ἦσαν ἐτέρων ἕτεροι μᾶλλον ἔκδηλοι καὶ διαφανεῖς, ὧν καὶ Κοῖντος Ὀρτήσιος, ἀνὴρ ἀξιωματὸς τε λαμπροῦ καὶ τὸν τρόπον ἐπιεικῆς, ἐπιθυμῶν οὖν τῷ Κάτωνι μὴ συνήθης εἶναι μηδὲ ἐταῖρος μόνον, ἀλλ’ ἀμῶς γέ πως εἰς οἰκειότητα καταμιξαι καὶ κοινωνίαν πάντα τὸν οἶκον καὶ τὸ γένος, ἐπεχείρησε συμπεῖθειν ὅπως τὴν θυγατέρα Πορκίαν, Βύβλω συνοικοῦσαν καὶ πεποιημένην ἐκεῖνῳ δύο παῖδας, αὐτῷ πάλιν ὡσπερ εὐγενῆ χῶραν ἐντεκνώσασθαι παράσχη.

[25.3] δόξη μὲν γὰρ ἀνθρώπων ἄτοπον εἶναι τὸ τοιοῦτον, φύσει δὲ καλὸν καὶ πολιτικόν, ἐν ᾧ καὶ ἀκμῆ γυναῖκα μήτε ἀργεῖν τὸ γόνιμον ἀποσβέσασαν, μήτε πλείονα τῶν ἱκανῶν ἐπιτίκτουσαν, ἐνοχλεῖν καὶ καταπρωχεύειν οὐδὲν δεόμενον, κοινομένους δὲ τὰς διαδοχὰς ἀξίους ἀνδράσι τὴν τε ἀρετὴν ἄφθονον ποιεῖν καὶ πολύχυτον τοῖς γένεσι, καὶ τὴν πόλιν αὐτὴν πρὸς αὐτὴν ἀνακεραννύει τὰς οἰκειότησιν. εἰ δὲ πάντως περιέχοιτο τῆς γυναικὸς ὁ Βύβλος, ἀποδώσειν εὐθὺς τεκοῦσαν, οἰκειότερος αὐτῷ τε Βύβλω καὶ Κάτωνι ἢ κοινωνίᾳ παίδων γενόμενος.

[25.4] ἀποκριναμένου δὲ τοῦ Κάτωνος ὡς Ὀρτήσιον μὲν ἀγαπᾷ καὶ δοκιμάζει κοινωνῶν οἰκειότητος, ἄτοπον δὲ ἡγεῖται ποιέσθαι λόγον περὶ γάμου θυγατρὸς ἐτέρῳ δεδομένης, μεταβαλὼν ἐκεῖνος οὐκ ᾔκνησεν ἀποκαλυψάμενος αἰτεῖν τὴν αὐτοῦ γυναῖκα Κάτωνος, νέαν μὲν οὖσαν ἔτι πρὸς τὸ τίκτειν, ἔχοντος δὲ τοῦ Κάτωνος ἀποχρῶσαν διαδοχὴν.

[25.5] καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν εἰπεῖν ὡς ταῦτα ἐπραττεν εἰδὼς οὐ προσέχοντα τῇ Μαρκίᾳ τὸν Κάτωνα: κύουσαν γὰρ αὐτὴν τότε τυγχάνειν λέγουσιν. ὁ δὲ οὖν Κάτων ὁρῶν τὴν τοῦ Ὀρτησίου σπουδὴν καὶ προθυμίαν οὐκ ἀντεῖπεν, ἀλλ’ ἔφη δεῖν καὶ Φιλίππῳ ταῦτα συνδόξαι τῷ πατρὶ τῆς Μαρκίας. ὡς οὖν ὁ Φίλιππος ἐντευχθεὶς ἔγνω τὴν συγχώρησιν, οὐκ ἄλλως ἐνεγγήθη τῇ Μαρκίᾳ ἢ παρόντος τοῦ Κάτωνος αὐτοῦ καὶ συνεγγυῶντος. ταῦτα μὲν οὖν, εἰ καὶ χρόνιος ὕστερον ἐπράχθη, μνησθέντι μοι τῶν γυναικῶν προλαβεῖν ἔδοξε.

[24.3] It appears that Cato’s world of women was a total disaster. I say this not only because this same one [= his sister, named Servilia] was talked about maliciously with regard to Caesar: the things that happened with the other Servilia, also a sister of Cato, were still more unseemly. She was the wife of Lucullus, a man of the highest repute in Rome, and had borne him a child, but she was thrown out from his house for indecent behavior. And what was most disgraceful of all, even Cato’s wife Atilia was not free from such transgressions: although he had two children by her, he was forced to throw her out because of her unseemly behavior.

[25.1] Then he married a daughter of Philippus, Marcia, a seemingly suitable wife, about whom there was a great deal of talk; and this part of Cato’s life, as in a drama, has given rise to controversy and is hard to explain. It happened as follows, according to Thrasea, who refers to the testimony of Munatius, Cato’s companion and intimate friend. [25.2]

Among the many lovers [erastai] and admirers of Cato there were some who were more noteworthy and illustrious than others. One of these was Quintus Hortensius, a man of splendid reputation and excellent character. This man, desiring to be more than a mere associate and companion of Cato, and in some way or other to bring his whole family and lineage into community of fraternal kinship with him, attempted to persuade Cato, whose daughter Porcia was the wife of Bibulus and had borne him two sons, to give her to him as noble soil for the production of children. [25.3] According to the opinion of men, he argued, such a course was absurd, but according to the law of nature it was honorable and good for the state that a woman in the prime of youth and beauty should neither quench her productive power and go idle, nor, by bearing more offspring than enough, burden and impoverish a husband who does not want them. Moreover, community in fraternal heirs among worthy men would make virtue abundant and widely diffused in their families, and the state would be closely bonded together by their fraternal alliances. And if Bibulus were wholly devoted to his wife, Hortensius said he would give her back after she had borne him a child, and he would thus be more closely connected both with Bibulus himself and with Cato by a fraternity of children.

[25.4] Cato replied that he loved Hortensius and thought highly of a community of relationship with him, but considered it absurd for him to propose marriage with a daughter who had been given to another. Then Hortensius changed his tactics, undid the veil covering up the way he talked, and boldly asked for the wife of Cato himself, since she was still young enough to beget children, and Cato had heirs enough. [25.5] And it cannot be said that he did this because he knew that Cato didn't care about Marcia, for she was at that time pregnant by him, as it is reported. But, seeing the earnestness and eager desire of Hortensius, Cato could not refuse, but said that Philippus too, Marcia's father, must approve of this move. So, Philippus was consulted and expressed his consent, but he would not give Marcia in marriage until Cato himself was present and joined in giving the bride away. This incident occurred at a later time, it is true, but since I had taken up the topic of the women of Cato's household I decided to head it off at the pass.

Plutarch Cato the Younger 24.3–25.5

#### Selection 4: Cato's early prioritizing of 'brotherhood'

§7. Cato's prioritizing of the Roman aristocracy as his own 'brotherhood' comes through clearly in this anecdote about his stubborn allegiances as a child:

[3.5] ἔτι μὲν οὖν παιδᾶριον ὦν μικρόν, ἀπεκρίνατο τοῖς ἐρωτῶσι τίνα φιλεῖ μάλιστα, τὸν ἀδελφόν τίνα δευτερον, ὁμοίως τὸν ἀδελφόν, καὶ τρίτον, ἄχρι οὗ πολλάκις λέγοντος ἀπέπειν ὁ ἐρωτῶν, γενόμενος δ' ἐν ἡλικίᾳ μάλλον ἐβεβαίον τὴν πρὸς τὸν ἀδελφόν εὖνοιαν.

[3.5] When he was still a little boy, and was asked whom he loved most, he answered, "My brother"; and to the question whom he loved next, likewise, "My brother"; and so a third time, until, after many such answers from him, his questioner gave up.

Plutarch Cato the Younger 3.5

#### Selection 5: Lamentations that await the bitter end

§8. To conclude, I show another dramatic moment involving Cato and the women in his life. In this moment, we see the lamentations of these women for the doomed Cato. And these lamentations, I suggest, are a properly operatic setting for the self-made drama of his life:

[27.2] Κάτωνι δὲ οἱ πρῶτοι τῶν πολιτῶν συνηγανάκτου καὶ συνηδικούντο μάλλον ἢ συνηγωνίζοντο, πολλῆ δὲ τὴν οἰκίαν αὐτοῦ κατῆφεια καὶ φόβος εἶχεν, ὥστε τῶν φίλων ἐνίουσι ἀσίτους διαγρυνῆσαι μετ' ἀλλήλων ἐν ἀπόροις ὄντας ὑπερ αὐτοῦ λογισμοῖς, καὶ γυναῖκα καὶ ἀδελφὰς ποτνωμένους καὶ δακρυσάσας.

[27.2] In the case of Cato, the foremost citizens shared in his indignation and sense of wrong more than they did in his struggle to resist, and great depression and foreboding prevailed in his household. What resulted was that some of his friends abstained from food and kept vigil all night with one another in futile discussions about his best interests, while his wife and sisters wailed [cried out "potnia!"="O my goddess!"] and wept.

Plutarch Cato the Younger 27.2

I pick up here on the "operatic" behavior of the women in Cato's life. Their "performances" of wailing and weeping are a most appropriate setting for the final exit of Cato.

§9. I close with a video clip from the HBO serial Rome, featuring an "operatic" exit for Brutus.

#### Notes:

[1] All Greek text via Perseus: <http://data.perseus.org/texts/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0007.tlg050>.  
Translations by G. Nagy.

Tags: [Cato the Younger](#), [Glimmerglass Opera](#), [Vivaldi](#)

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