“More August and Statesmanlike”: Cicero’s Demosthenic Self-Fashioning

For Plutarch, I am sure, noting seemed more inevitable than the comparison of Cicero, the greatest of Roman orators, with Demosthenes, the greatest of the Greeks. Indeed, in the preface to his life of Demosthenes, he makes a point of noting their many similarities: both became powerful from humble beginnings, both were exiled and then returned, both clashed with kings and tyrants, and both, finally defeated by these tyrannical enemies, perished at the exact moment that the rest of their countrymen lost their freedom (*Dem.* 3.3-5). This, he concludes, cannot have been mere chance; it was divine will that made their natures so similar.

Plutarch was hardly the first to note the similarities between Cicero and Demosthenes: we know of a *Comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero* by the Greek rhetorician Caecilius of Caleacte, and the comparison between the two orators was a commonplace in later Roman literature (see, e.g, *Dial.* 25.3, Juv. 10.114, Quint. 12.11.26, Gell. 15.28.6). Nor does any of this come as much of a surprise to a modern reader, for we find the comparison just as inevitable as Plutarch did: why wouldn’t we compare the Roman who titled his final set of speeches the *Philippics* with his Greek predecessor?

Yet if we look at the facts with fresh eyes, this air of inevitability falls away. Demosthenes, after all, was fighting the incursion of a foreign king into his city-state, while Cicero was a Roman opposed to other Romans who were attempting to change the constitution from within. In this paper, I contend that it is largely because Cicero *wants* us to find a parallel between his circumstances and Demosthenes’ that we find one, and that it is largely because Cicero wants to be seen as a political martyr along Demosthenic lines that we see him as one—that it is for the most part thanks to his own devices that he can be painted, as he is in Plutarch, as the last of the Roman orators, both the greatest defender and the greatest victim of free speech.

My argument rests less on the title of the *Philippics,* Cicero’s explicit bid to be compared with Demosthenes, and more on his implicit identification with Demosthenes in the three rhetorical works of 47-46 BC: *Brutus, De Optimo Genere Oratorum,* and *Orator.* In these three works, written in response to the Atticist controversy in which Cicero’s oratorical style was challenged, Demosthenes is aggressively promoted as “the most perfect orator and the one who lacks absolutely nothing.” (*Brut.* 35: *plane quidem perfectum et quoi nihil admodum desit*). Furthermore, it is clear that Cicero’s reasons for lavishing such praise on Demosthenes are not disinterested. Again and again in these three works, as I demonstrate, Cicero manipulates the details of his own biography and offers a somewhat tendentious analysis of his own style in order to make it appear as if he shared the very traits that made Demosthenes so great. In this way, he beats the Atticists at their own game, proving that his oratory is just as “Attic” as theirs.

But I also argue that there is another, much more urgent element to Cicero’s adoption of Demosthenes at this point in his career, and one that must be connected with his decision to call his Antonian speeches the *Philippics.* Wooten (1983) builds a case for Demosthenes’ political importance to Cicero in 44 and 43, and Douglas (1973) and Dugan (2005) both emphasize the political importance of the rhetorical works of 47-46. Putting both arguments together, I demonstrate that by 47, Cicero had already come to the conclusion that Rome now faced a loss of political liberty that paralleled the circumstances of Demosthenes’ final years. I conclude, therefore, that Cicero was interested less in Demosthenes for his oratorical success than for his political failure, for Demosthenes was that rare figure in antiquity, a politician whose failure brought him more glory than his successes. Cicero had also failed, but I believe he hoped that if he appropriated Demosthenes in the right way, he might succeed in the long run.

Works Cited

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