The Power of Eloquence and the Political Subtext of Cicero’s *Orator*

In this paper I argue that a close analysis of Cicero’s treatment of the controversy between the Attic and Asiatic styles of oratory and his emphasis on the stylistic quality of *vis*, strength, in his rhetorical treatise the *Orator* allows for a nuanced reading of the work’s political subtext. Crucial to my reading is a careful consideration of the historical circumstances in which Cicero composed the treatise. Placed in a position of political powerlessness upon his return to Rome in late 47 BCE as a result of Caesar’s dictatorship, Cicero directed his energies to study and embarked upon a period of intense literary activity. Although Cicero had very limited direct political influence in 46, the Republic was never far from his mind, as can be gleaned from his letters and his more ambitious literary works of that year. During the summer he composed his *Cato*, a panegyric commemorating Cato Uticensis. In his dialogue on eminent orators the *Brutus*, although the characters claim that they are not going to talk about politics, some scholars have argued that the work can be read in its entirety as a funeral oration for eloquence as a result of its death at the hands of the oppressive dictatorship of Caesar (Gowing 2000, Dugan 2005).

This is the background against which we must read the *Orator*. In the treatise Cicero claims that he is writing principally as an aesthetic critic (*Or.* 112). The work is ostensibly Cicero’s critical defense of his own preferred oratorical style, which his opponents, the neo-Atticists, polemically called Asiatic. A careful reading of the treatise and his other rhetorical works, however, shows that for Cicero the debate between the Attic and Asiatic styles of oratory has much greater significance than mere aesthetic concerns. According to Cicero, the neo-Atticists’ aesthetic program robs their oratory of its full force, and he constructs the neo-Atticists’ style as antithetical to his own ideal of eloquence (*Or.* 24-32, 228-229; cf. *Brut*. 283-284, *Fam*. 15.21.4). In particular Cicero focuses on one crucial aspect of the true Attic orators which the neo-Atticists neglect, namely *vis*, strength. Cicero elevates this aspect to principal importance, both by stressing it as one of the essential characteristics of the orators whom he holds in highest esteem (*Or.* 26, 29, 111, 234; cf. *De or.* 3.138, *Brut.* 38) and by closely associating it with the grand style (*Or.* 97, 128). This style is most capable of rousing the audience’s emotions and stirring them to action, which for Cicero is the greatest achievement of an orator (*Or.* 69). Accordingly, by emphasizing the great popular appeal of eloquence in his rhetorical works, Cicero draws attention to the potential political power of oratory. In the passages of the *Orator* in which he looks up from his appointed task to address his dedicatee, Brutus, Cicero both gives his clearest utterances to the subversive political intent of the work and seeks to use Brutus, who was a favorite of Caesar, as a shield to protect himself from any ramifications (*Or.* 33-35, 141-148, 238). Thus Cicero, while professing that in writing the *Orator* he is only engaging in an aesthetic critique of eloquence, is simultaneously making a critique of Caesar’s oppressive regime which has bereaved oratory of its former power.

In comparison to the scholarly interest which his speeches and letters have generated, Cicero’s rhetorical works are relatively underrepresented. John Dugan’s 2005 book, *Making a New Man: Ciceronian Self-fashioning in the Rhetorical Works*, was an effort to redress this balance. Although Dugan devotes a lengthy chapter to the *Orator* and admirably discusses many aspects of the treatise, he says very little about its subversive political nature. My paper addresses this very issue and is an attempt to fill an important void in the scholarship on Cicero.

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