

Harnessing the Power of Rumor in the *Commentariolum Petitionis*

Marcus Tullius Cicero wanted to be elected consul. The author of the *Commentariolum Petitionis*, ostensibly Cicero's brother Quintus, purported to help. Successfully running for office, the treatise states, demands attention on two fronts (16). First, the candidate must win over his friends (*in amicorum studiis*). Second, the candidate must win over the Roman People (*in populari voluntate*). A favorable opinion among a broad array of constituencies will bring victory in the centuriate assembly. This impeccable logic relies heavily on the dynamics of rumor transmission to reach that amorphous *populus*. This paper will use current work in the field of social psychology to explore how the rumor lurking in the advice of the electioneering manual raises questions about elite behavior in and control of electoral outcomes.

The *Commentariolum Petitionis* names *rumor* as one of seven elements in the strategy for reaching the Roman People (41). People need to hear about Cicero and his fine qualities (*ut quam plurimorum aures optimo sermone compleantur* 49). This fundamental goal leads immediately to the discussion of rumor (*Sequitur enim ut de rumore dicendum sit* 50), but the recommended means for getting the word out (*ad rumorem concelebrandum*) has nothing to do with constructing networks for information dissemination (Laurence 1994). Instead, Cicero is encouraged to persist in his personal canvassing, to continue to display those admirable qualities that have earned him regard. Somehow, word will get out, but it will not be an intentional whispering campaign (*non ut ad populum ab his hominibus fama perveniat* 51). The implication is that Cicero's good deeds will be the pebble cast into the pond, naturally rippling to the far reaches with its tidings. This image echoes an earlier comment in the guide (*nam fere omnis sermo ad forensem famam a domesticis emanat auctoribus* 17), and it is surprisingly optimistic, surprisingly absent of manipulation.

It is also surprising given the typical reception of rumor, especially electoral rumors. Rumors, Cicero will soon say as consul defending a consul-designate, can quickly change the outlook of the electorate (*Nihil est incertius volgo Pro Mur.* 35), and Hardie emphasizes the stormy metaphors applied to rumor (Hardie 2012: 241). Such rumors can even undermine the support of friends (*Pro Mur.* 45), and fear of rumors is why the consular candidate Milo would never have laid a hand on Clodius (*Pro Mil.* 42).

Another surprise comes from contrasting the sincere expectation that the good will out as people learn about Cicero to the blatant call for slanderous attacks on Cicero's opponents. The manual itself is such a slanderous attack, affirming Cicero's hopes for victory with an extended character assassination of his opponents (7-12). This is, in fact, the approach adopted by Cicero in his speech *In Toga Candida* (and so raises questions about the relationship between these two texts). The opening barrage of the *Commentariolum* reappears near its end. The treatise concludes its review of reaching the Roman People with advice to make the campaign an impressive show piece—and, by the way, tar your opponents with whatever *infamia* can be made to stick (53).

Now that is a strategy for using rumor. Social psychologists have concluded that human beings have a bias toward negative rumors because we want to err on the side of avoiding harm (DiFonzo 2008: 32). When we hear those negative rumors, we are affected even if we don't believe the rumors (DiFonzo 2008: 27). The seminal work of Allport and Postman posited a Basic Law of Rumor, $R \sim A \times I$: rumor transmission is a product of ambiguity and importance (Allport and Postman 1947: 34). The fearful uncertainty about the intentions of Catiline and Antonius toward Rome's most powerful magistracy provided fertile ground in which Cicero could sow the rumors that would win him an election.

Select Bibliography

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