

Getting Your Way in Cicero's Dialogues
Daniel P. Hanchey (Baylor University)

Cicero's rhetorical and philosophical dialogues have long been read as *exempla* of the aristocratic Roman social virtue of *humanitas* (e.g., Becker 18-23). But for all the manners and mutual respect that the interlocutors demonstrate towards one another, *De Oratore's* Crassus proves remarkably uncooperative. He regularly refuses to participate or to accede to the request of one of the junior interlocutors to give a speech on oratory. Why is Crassus so belligerent?

Jon Hall has identified Crassus' behavior as "social evasion." In this paper I contend that Crassus' lack of cooperation was not in fact simply a display of modesty or an effort to avoid association with "tongue-wagging Greeks" (Hall). In fact, Crassus had a very specific motivation: those making requests of him asked in the wrong terms. These requestors repeatedly asked him to speak on an "*ars*" of oratory, when for Crassus, ideal oratory consisted of much more.

The first request comes from Sulpicius, who specifically asks Crassus to give an account of an *ars* of oratory, for which he promises Crassus a reward of *gratia* (1.96-107). *Ars*, like its Greek counterpart *technē*, refers to a specific and teachable skill that can be classified and expressed in, for example, a treatise. Cicero had produced just such a treatise on rhetoric in his youth (*De Inventione*), a treatise he specifically disavows in the opening of *De Orat.* It outlines a set of rules which purport to produce a successful orator. But, if oratory could be reduced to a specific set of precepts, it would become available to anyone. If a set of precepts is all that is necessary, any Roman with the ability to read could have success in the forum.

Cicero revised his approach with *De Orat.* Here, Cicero's general argument is that true oratory requires a *rara avis* who can merge the disciplines of philosophy and rhetoric (not to mention statecraft). Such a combination of skills cannot be taught by a list of precepts; it is available only to the *boni*. The move towards the classification of oratory as an *ars* mirrors a cultural shift towards commercial activity; both *ars* and commerce make available to the masses that which was previously only accessible to the aristocrat. In Caesar's Rome, this is precisely the scenario Cicero wished to combat. Crassus refuses Sulpicius for this reason, eschewing his wrongly-calibrated offer of *gratia*.

The interlocutors of book 1 finally do convince Crassus to speak some (though not about an *ars*), but only when Antonius assumes the mantle of asker. His request is for Crassus to speak on something *plus quam ipsam artem* (1.110). Antonius thereby shows that he understands what Sulpicius does not, that *ars* alone is insufficient. The requests and refusals continue throughout the dialogue, and, in each case Crassus' refusal can be traced to his discomfort with the mass availability of an *ars*. The ideal orator, he insists, is not any joe off the street; he is virtuous, he is wise, and can do more than deliver a speech.

Bibliography

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- Hall, Jon. "Social Evasion and Aristocratic Manners in Cicero's "De Oratore"." *The American Journal of Philology* 117, no. 1 (1996): 95-120.