

The *Novus Homo* and *Virtus*: Oratory, Masculinity, and the Self-Made Man

In this paper, I will draw attention to the parallels between the Roman concept of *virtus* and Crassus' ideal Orator from Cicero's *De Oratore*. Moreover, *virtus* is also connected to the career and life of Cicero, despite many accusations of “unmanliness” by his competitors. This paper argues that the central virtue of *virtus* changed as Roman society became more sophisticated, yet there are still elements which connect the classical meaning of *virtus* to its older definitions of “manliness.” *Virtus* as a central Roman virtue, slowly changed in meaning in the time between its first appearance in the works of Plautus and its use as “moral courage” made popular by Cicero himself. By following the evolution of *virtus* as per Myles McDonnell's book, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* one is able to see not only the linguistic transformation, but the social transformation which it mirrors. The older definitions of *virtus* included many of the less positive elements of manliness, such as rashness, and was primarily associated with skill in combat, as was expected of males in traditional Roman society. The ability to regulate and control one's emotions, was also central to the earlier notion of *virtus*, particularly fear in the face of death. Through time, with the help of Cicero, *virtus* came to encompass other elements found in a more civilized and urbane man, including the peaceful art of Oratory. This, fear in the face of death, becomes replaced by fear in the face of shame. The *virtus* of the orator is the courage in the face of shame. This transition in the basic meaning of courage, is fundamental both to the change of the concept of *virtus* and the development of the art of Oratory. As the roman state developed, civic duty became an element of *virtus* and, as the society developed there was more to “being a man” than just facing death in combat.

During this time another group, the self-styled Atticists, emerged. This group, through their attacks on Cicero, highlight exactly how some Romans conceptualized the deep connection between oratory and traditional *virtus*. However, the concept of “manliness” as it was seen by the Atticists is highly suspect.(Dugan, 2001) Through a regimen of self-denial and discipline, the Atticists attempted to preserve what they felt to be the traditional Attic style of oratory, rather than the bombastic

“Hellenic” oratory, which they claimed Cicero practiced. These two groups were well known to launch polemics at each other, yet one can infer some elements about the lifestyles of these Atticists through these attacks. Through comparison with the major elements of *virtus*, this paper demonstrates exactly how these “manly” Romans contradicted the traditional notion of *virtus* they claimed to uphold.

Central to this connection between the original concepts of “manliness” and the concept of oratory is the complex way the orator interacts with his emotions. Cicero, through the mouths of Crassus and Antonius, describes the role of emotions in the nature of the perfect Orator, while the Atticists preach the repression of emotion entirely, and instead relying on the art of rhetoric to persuade. Crassus and Antonius stress the importance of emotions as well as the character of the speaker and of using both to their fullest effect in speeches. Crassus advocates that the Orator live his life around constructing the ideal character, that everything the Orator does in his life feeds into his abilities as an Orator. It should come as no surprise that this notion of “self-fashioning” is central not only to Crassus' ideal Orator, but also to the political career of Cicero himself. (Dugan, 2005) Contrary to the claims of the Atticists, Cicero's career as a self-made man mirrors the traditional elements found within the older notion of *virtus*, the most obvious of which is self-sufficiency. Despite the fact that Cicero was the first *novus homo* without a prominent military background, the notion of “manly excellence” still influenced the specific self-image which he fashioned in his long political career. Cicero's career of self-fashioning, along with the ever evolving notion of *virtus* in Roman society were two parts of the same whole, culminating in a whole different kind of Roman virtue.

Works Cited

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