The Wheel of Fortune: Thematic Providence in Cicero's *In Pisonem* and Tacitus' *Dialogus*

In this paper, I examine the Wheel of Fortune in two Latin works, one in Cicero's *In Pisonem* and one in Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*. In both cases, the Wheel appears in passing: the former is a pun, and the latter mentions that pun as a hackneyed expression from Republican oratory. Despite this appearance, I suggest that the image is more than just a verbal flourish as it paves the way for a larger theme. In Cicero, the theme of Fortune is a dominant one as a distributor of due returns. In Tacitus, the mention of the Wheel comes during a similar discussion of Fortune's role in providing an outlet for success.

The first extant use of the Latin expression comes from Cicero's oration against Lucius Calpurnius Piso, where the statesman attacks the former consul's debauchery and that of his colleague, Aulus Gabinius. He especially criticizes the latter's lack of prescience in performing a particular type of dance that evokes Fortune's cyclical imagery: "When he twisted that leaping circle of his [*illum suum saltatorium versaret orbem*], not even then did he fear Fortune's wheel [*fortunae rotam*]" (*In Pis*. 22). Cicero's wordplay is, perhaps, a bit trite, but it initiates a (one man) discussion of Fortune. To lay the groundwork, Cicero uses the term *fortuna* on a different register as an indication of professional success—either in its positive or negative sense—by comparing his own career with those of his targets (e.g., 41, 51). But in the middle of the speech, he provides a degree of multiplicity by distinguishing between the conception of divine Fortune as happenstance ("those weapons of Fortune," *Fortunae enim ista tela sunt*, 43; cf. *Fam.* 5.12.4, *fortunaeque vicissitudines*) and Fortune as a purposeful entity of just reciprocity. By Cicero's estimation, a providential force has shackled Piso with his proper comeuppance, namely ill-repute (*ignominia*, 45, *infamis*, 53, *infamia*, 65, etc.), and has given the proper perquisites to Cicero.

The multiplicity of Fortune in Cicero—either as a measurement of prosperity, a convenient catchword for capricious chance, or as a notion of just divinity with an active role in human events—finds a parallel in the historical works of Tacitus. On the one level, there is the happenstance and outcomes of events, which are largely the province of chance (*casus eventusque rerum, qui plerumque fortuiti sunt*, *Hist*. 1.4.1); on the other, there are the driving forces and causes (*ratio etiam causaeque*). Tacitus depicts Fortune—perhaps more a causative abstract than any particular deity—as the instigator of these forces, for example, at the beginning of Vespasian's rise (*struebat iam fortuna…initia causasque imperio*, *Hist.* 2.1.1; cf. 1.51.1). He applies a causative depiction of Fortune again in an echo of Sallust (*BC* 10.1, *saevire fortuna ac miscere omnia coepit*), when Tiberius' savage nature emerges (*Ann.* 4.1.1, *repente turbare fortuna coepit, saevire ipse*). Sejanus acts as the agent of Fortune here (*initium et causa penes Aelium Seianum*).

Preceding his more ambitious historical projects, Tacitus evokes the Ciceronian image of the Wheel of Fortune in his *Dialogus*, which provides a convenient means of connecting this work with the *In Pisonem*, both through the direct repetition of the image itself and through the similarity of theme suggested by that image, i.e., different registers of the term *fortuna*. Tacitus' respondent Aper, championing contemporary oratory, presents Cicero's phrase as a cliché (*Dial*. 23). But the Wheel connects with a theme of the dialogue: like Cicero, Tacitus also addresses the vicissitudes of *fortuna*, namely the rewards—temporal and metaphysical—of oratory and poetry respectively. But whereas Cicero's ideal of divine punishment is the loss of public reputation, the world in which Tacitus' dialogue takes place does not provide the same controller of proper values.

Tacitus draws attention to Fortune's cyclical nature in his respondents' discussion of changing styles and popular representatives of them, a discussion that contrasts the tastes of the past with those of the present. This discussion further highlights the changing political world in which the dialogue is set. In Cicero's day, oratorical ability could serve as the basis for a prominent career and public reputation. But in the world of Tacitus' dialogue, free speech has been curtailed and professional accusers (*delatores*) are the most prominent representatives of oratory. Under these circumstances, just rewards cannot be delivered—even from the subjective perspective of a Cicero—in the form of everlasting fame for the great or ignominy for the base. But there are other outlets for deserved fame that emerge in the course of the dialogue: poetry is offered as an alternative for oratory, both in its ability to avoid the sycophancy of the *delatores* and to demonstrate lasting artistic excellence. As oratory diminishes, other literary possibilities emerge, including history writing.