Cicero, Rhetoric, and Republicanism in the *Columbian Orator*

The influence of ancient Greece and Rome on early America was pervasive, and recent scholarship (e.g., Richard 1995, Winterer 2004) has shown how this familiarity with the classics affected many aspects of American public and personal life. Much work, however, remains to be done in tracing out the specific strands of classical learning that early Americans encountered. This paper, by providing an examination of how a key classical figure, Cicero, is presented in a key schoolroom text of early America (Caleb Bingham's 1797 *Columbian Orator*), will model a strategy for how this sort of work can proceed.

For many early Americans, the *Columbian Orator* would have been the first introduction to the art of speaking and writing like an American: over 200,000 copies were sold, and the textbook went through twenty-three editions, the last one printed in 1860. As a radically egalitarian republican, Bingham believed that the new republic needed educated and equally egalitarian citizens to advocate on its behalf, and his textbook presented readers with a dignified, classical style of speech that was bare of any aristocratic affectations (Cmiel 1990).

The influence of Bingham's textbook on early American intellectual thought was profound. Abraham Lincoln pored over it during a cold Illinois winter, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harriet Beecher Stowe drew some of their nonconformist activism from its pages, and in 1830, a young slave named Frederick Douglass took 50 cents he had earned from polishing boots and bought himself a copy. Bingham's abolitionist spirit spoke powerfully to Douglass, who later said that "every opportunity I got, I used to read this book" (Blight 1998).

Each of these readers, and the thousands of others who learned their diction from Bingham's book, would have come into repeated contact with Cicero, the work's most prominent rhetorical authority: the textbook opens with an introduction that frequently cites *De*

Oratore and Cicero's other rhetorical treatises, Cicero is featured prominently among other ancient figures in the book's speaking exercises, and even the title of the book suggests a Ciceronian homage. Throughout the work, Bingham presents a version of Cicero that reflects his own agenda: this Cicero is an uncomplicated hero for the republican cause instead of the complex, often politically ambivalent man known to us from his letters.

It is not surprising that Bingham was primarily interested in Cicero as a republican statesman, and it is this aspect of Cicero's career that he highlights, particularly his role in the Catilinarian conspiracy. In this way, Cicero could be linked with the American favorite Cato (Ganter 1997), and both could serve as a united front in opposition to the tyrannical Caesar. Significantly, Bingham also connects Cicero's rhetorical mastery to his republican *bona fides;* he serves as the best proof that "eloquence can flourish only in the soil of liberty" (31).

Of course, Cicero was also a source of rhetorical instruction, on whom Bingham depended for most of his precepts on delivery and style. But it is clear that these precepts were only considered authoritative because of Cicero's service to the republic; Bingham believed that the best teaching was done by example rather than by rules (Ganter 1997), and it was Cicero's combination of rhetorical learning with republican ethos that made him particularly attractive.

Bingham clearly expected his readers to follow Cicero's glorious example. But in whitewashing Cicero's career (focusing, in effect, on aspects of his career that Cicero himself had self-interestedly highlighted in his rhetorical works *Brutus* and *Orator*), he stripped Cicero of nuance, foreclosing any more complicated readings of his motives. This, of course, was not unusual among eighteenth and early nineteenth century readers of the classics, but Bingham did have an unusually broad audience. In my conclusion, I will offer a brief account of the treatment

of Cicero in Bingham's readers, and ask how, and whether, we can measure the influence he had on the next generation of American writers and thinkers.

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