

## Strategic Ambiguity: Polysemy and Persuasion in Cicero

As a Roman advocate argued his case in a criminal suit, he was rarely attempting to persuade a single omnipotent judge. Instead he was faced with a number of individuals—each of whom had to make a decision not just in response to the orator’s forensic arguments but also in the face of a host of social and political pressures. This paper argues that a key element in addressing a diverse audience lies in the power of ambiguous language. In particular, we will explore the effects of political division during Cicero’s defence of Roscius of Ameria.

Although the Romans went to great lengths to diminish the influence of politicians on trials and opportunities for bribery in their legal system, politics still had an undeniable hand in judicial decisions (Gruen). Furthermore, a panel of jurors may represent a variety of competing political affiliations. In such instances, the adroit advocate could harness the power of ambiguous language to speak to divided audiences. Cicero uses this strategy in a number of instances, as this paper suggests, but our primary example will be his speech in defense of Roscius of Ameria. Among the jurors hearing Roscius’ trial for parricide, there were some who had been harried by the Sullan regime and the abuse of proscriptions. There were others, however, who owed their senatorial status or newfound wealth to Sulla’s reforms. Cicero inevitably speaks about Sulla at several points in his speech, but his references to the (former?) dictator have given modern readers pause as to their import: Is Cicero showing due deference to a powerful figure or subtly criticising his regime? Scholars remain divided (Berry 2004, Dyck 2003, Kinsey 1982, Seager 1982).

Attempts to resolve this question reveal a persuasive mechanism still at work. The ambiguity that others modern scholars try to dispel is an effective method of persuasion. The jurors that are favourably disposed towards Sulla can think that Cicero has exculpated him;

others, wary of the dictator's methods, can hear an insinuated critique. Modern reception of the speech too frequently aims at removing this ambiguity and constructing a Cicero that is unequivocal in his political stance. This fits neither the man nor the occasion. Ambiguous language was a strategic necessity when presenting before an audience with divided loyalties. Rather than try to resolve these controversial passages, we should appreciate them as another weapon in Cicero's persuasive arsenal and recognize the methods of multivalent communication that would grow and mature with the rise of autocratic rule.

### Bibliography

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