

## What Charybdis so Voracious? Ciceronian Hyperbole in the Second *Philippic*

*I know words. I have the best words.*

-President Donald Trump

As the current administration of the United States continually makes plain, hyperbole is alive and well in political discourse. The term (from the Greek, *ὑπερ + βάλλω*, “to throw over;” in Latin usually *superiacto*) signifies an exaggeration used for rhetorical or literary effect. There has been a great deal of work recently analyzing hyperbole as a literary tool in fictions, but little work applying such theory to oratory. Johnson (2010) points out how hyperboles in a story force readers to test reality, their own and the story’s, against an exaggerated, imaginative limit and thereby find meaning in the space between the real and ideal worlds. While the theory is no doubt useful, it must be adapted to understand how hyperbole is used specifically in persuasive oratory.

Accordingly, I consider hyperboles’ use and utility as a persuasive tool in the ancient orator’s arsenal to better understand what meanings can be communicated through exaggeration. To that end, I have catalogued and analyzed all the instances of hyperbole in Cicero’s second *Philippic* to make clear how and why he employed such devices. I hope to show not only how hyperbolic speech helps to form what Wooten (1983) defines as the second *Philippic*’s “disjunctive mode”—a stark with-Cicero-or-against-Rome binary—but also fuels what Hall (2002) has called Cicero’s “rhetoric of crisis.” I conclude that, contrary to its fictional capabilities, persuasive, rhetorical hyperbole does not ask its audience consider the limits of their subjectivity or test different realities against one another for new meaning. In fact, quite the contrary: as a persuasive tool, rhetorical hyperbole *denies* exactly that kind of imaginative reflection. It communicates instead an emotion meant to be felt rather than considered, and before one can reflect on its validity, the speech careens on to its next point.

There are about fifty undeniable instances of hyperbole in the second *Philippic*, ranging in grandeur from the simple and ubiquitous denouncements (“you, most foolish of all men!”) to Quintilian’s favorite, an extended narrative of Marc Antony so drunk and uncontrollable at a public assembly meeting that filled his lap—and the entire tribunal—with wine-stenched vomit. Most famously, Cicero charges Marc Antony with such extravagant gluttony that no Charybdis, no, not even Ocean itself could out-consume him. I have categorized Cicero’s hyperboles into a few essential types—superlatives, narratives, and comparisons—from which one can extrapolate to understand the figure of speech more broadly.

Although such bold exaggerations of the truth may insult our taste as readers, hyperbole remains an undeniably effective tactic of persuasion and political communication. Therefore, I believe it behooves us to study how hyperboles can affect us and how master rhetoricians have wielded such a powerful tool.

### Bibliography

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