

The Courage to Save the Republic: *Fortitudo* and Politics in Cicero's *De Officiis*

When Marcus Tullius Cicero began to write his *De Officiis* in the fall of 44 B.C.E., the Roman Republic seemed destined to collapse at the hands of Marc Antony and his supporters (e.g. Cic. *Fam.* 10.1.1; 12.22). In order to save it, the orator used this treatise, based on the work of the Stoic philosopher Panaetius (Dyck 1996), to redefine four traditional Roman values in a way that would stabilize the tottering government (Long 1995). The third of these values, *fortitudo*, represented a particular challenge, as its general associations with military prowess instead of civil service (Cic. *Off.* 1.74) meant that it was not inherently stabilizing and could even spur brash men to threaten the state. The connection between *fortitudo* and martial valor created an additional hurdle. Cicero lacked an extensive military resume but needed to present himself as a firm authority over *fortitudo* in order to redefine it convincingly. Working within a framework of self-fashioning (Dugan 2005), this paper will analyze Cicero's efforts to build that authority. It will also investigate how his redefinition served to distance the virtue from his violent political opponents and associate it firmly with those who sought to preserve traditional republican governance.

Cicero opens his discussion of *fortitudo* not by stating what the virtue is (cf. 1.18; 1.20; 1.93), but by describing how it is perceived in Roman society. He observes that it plays a primary role in which actions people commend and which they insult (1.61). Notably, praise and blame represent the two components of epideictic speaking (Arist. *Rh.* 3.14.2), and thus the author connects this style of speech to *fortitudo*. Cicero, of course, was a master of epideictic who applied its techniques throughout his rhetorical career (Dugan 2005), and accordingly, by linking *fortitudo* to this type of oratory, he establishes himself as a credible authority over the virtue. But the orator also considered epideictic a critical component of a successful society,

inasmuch as it spurred Roman elites towards good deeds and deterred them from bad ones (Corbeill 2002). In framing *fortitudo* through epideictic speech, Cicero suggests that it, much like these elite, can be beneficial to the community, but only if a proper code of conduct guides it.

The author then indicates that this code of conduct requires service to the state, noting repeatedly that *fortitudo* is only a virtue when it serves to help the common good, and becomes a vice when employed for one's own benefit (1.62-63). The virtue even requires that one suffer damage to his reputation if doing so would aid the general public (1.84). This point carries personal and political significance for Cicero. Notably, he often portrayed his decision to leave Italy when faced with exile rather than resist as a self-sacrificing service to the community (Claassen 1992), and thus he embodies this ideal *fortitudo*. Furthermore, it serves as an indictment of Caesar, who justified his decision to march on Rome with an appeal to his damaged *dignitas* (Cic. *Att.* 7.11.1).

Cicero also works to minimize the importance of military prowess, weakening his opponents' claims to the virtue. He explicitly asserts that statecraft is more important to *fortitudo* than martial valor (1.74; cf. 1.82), arguing this point through several exempla (e.g. 1.75-76; 1.90). Included within his discussion is an account of his own efforts to suppress the Catilinarian conspiracy that remarkably omits any mention of violence and instead emphasizes his planning and attentiveness (1.77-78). Eliding his use of force does protect the orator from criticism that he acted as a tyrant, but it also sends a clear message to the reader: skillful politicking, not military ability, holds the power to save the state.

Cicero's discussion of *fortitudo* extends beyond simple ethical concerns. Throughout it, he works to craft a virtue that maintains the republican government and discourages threats to the status quo. His definition aligns closely with his own activities, elevating the orator and

depriving his opponents of one of their strongest claims to virtue. Recognizing these techniques provides a greater understanding of how Cicero navigated the ideological contest that dominated the months after Caesar's assassination.

Bibliography

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