

Aesthetic Taste and Judgment in Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*

In this paper I focus on *iudicium* (“aesthetic taste/judgment”) as a vital concept for the history of oratory, ethics, and politics in Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*. Tracking this concept through the dialogue can enable us to investigate the roles that the tastes and judgments of individuals and of communities play in the change and evolution (or decline?) of oratorical (and literary) styles over time, as well as the relationships that aesthetics and literary styles have with larger ethical and political systems.

That *iudicium* is an important component of Tacitus' notion of oratorical criticism is evident from the opening of the work. Tacitus presents the *Dialogus* as his response to a question he says his dedicatee, Iustus Fabius, has frequently posed to him: “Why does our own age not flourish with orators as did previous ages?” As Tacitus claims in his introductory address to Fabius, when he was still a young man he heard some of the most eloquent men of the time discussing this very topic, and the dialogue that follows is Tacitus' recollection of this conversation. Indeed, Tacitus states that if it were a matter simply of expressing his own opinion (*sententia*), he scarcely would have dared to take up so great a question as it would entail expressing a low opinion regarding either the abilities (*ingenia*) of present orators, if they are not able to equal the orators of the past, or their tastes (*iudicia*), if they do not wish to equal them (*Dial.* 1).

The first of these two terms, *ingenium*, which at times is notoriously difficult to translate into English, is a key concept in ancient literary criticism. It is, for example, integral to one of the most significant efforts of Roman literary theory, the Younger Seneca's *Letter* 114 to Lucilius, the central claim of which is that an individual's speech is comparable to his life (*talis hominibus*

fuit oratio qualis vita, Ep. 114.1). Taking as his starting point Lucilius' alleged inquiry into why, in certain ages, there is a tendency for "literary styles" (*ingenia*) to incline toward certain faults, Seneca declares that it is not possible for an individual's *ingenium* to be of one "quality" (*color*) and his *animus* ("mind") to be of another (Ep. 114.3). As Seneca conceives it, the *animus* determines how an individual comports himself generally, and since literary *ingenium* is closely mixed in with the *animus*, it can be used as a way to form judgments about the character of an individual and even, if it is widespread enough, of an entire age.

Iudicium, however, could be construed as even more strongly indicative of character and of individual and community ethics than *ingenium*, as it denotes what people *choose* to do apart from what their abilities allow them to do. The issue of "taste" (*iudicium*) appears most prominently in the second of the three debates in the *Dialogus*, that in which Aper advances the case of modern orators (16.4-23) while Messalla defends the ancients (25-27). Aper presents Cassius Severus as a pivotal figure in the development of Roman oratory, asserting that Cassius arrived at a different kind of oratory as a result of his taste and intellect (*iudicio et intellectu*, 19.1), not because of feebleness of ability or ignorance of literature. Beyond the aesthetic choices of an individual such as Cassius, Aper is also interested in how the demands of the ears of the people contribute to changes in oratorical style. Notably, Aper makes the case for cultural progress among the Roman people since the earlier days of oratory, claiming that oratorical style has evolved to satisfy more sophisticated audiences (19-20). This story is an outlier from the narratives of decline from a period of ancestral virtue that are familiar from the Roman historiographical tradition. For his part, Messalla sees a similarity in taste among the best orators of the first century BC, but also moralizes *iudicium* by suggesting that it can be impeded by spite and envy (25).

Bibliography

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