

## The δείνος Rhetor: Demosthenes and the Sublime

In his work *Περὶ ὕψους*, Longinus examines the rhetorical devices and the certain elegance of style which contribute to the sublimity of a passage. In doing so, he upholds Demosthenes as the paradigm of these figures of speech at every turn, describing in particular detail Demosthenes' use of apostrophe while 'exalting the Athenian ancestors to the rank of divinities' (*Περὶ ὕψους* 16.2). Longinus seems convinced that Demosthenes, despite the primarily rhetorical nature of his craft, belongs firmly within the echelons of the sublime authors. This makes sense in light of Longinus' definition of the sublime as 'located in a certain loftiness of language which sways every reader' (*Περὶ ὕψους* 1.3-4). According to Longinus, a lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself (*ἔκστασις*). As an extremely skilled writer and orator whose works have been appreciated by many throughout the ages, Demosthenes certainly possesses each of these qualities. In his treatment of the defeat at Chaeronea, moreover, Demosthenes' rhetoric takes the audience out of themselves, out of the situation in which they now reside after the disaster, and "fill[s] their hearts with ... the heroic pride of the old warriors of Hellas" (*Ibid.*).

As the definition of the sublime has developed, however, scholars seem to have engaged very little with the 'sublime' aspect of Demosthenes' writings which Longinus was so keen to point out. Edmund Burke revitalized discussion of the sublime in his 1757 treatise, in which he describes the sublime as an object which provokes terror and makes the reader feel small by comparison. There is also a certain pleasure in this feeling, however, for in experiencing terror, a man sees life as it is when stripped of the dull, unnecessary trappings of everyday existence. But what place has Demosthenes in this definition?

In a recent article, K. Merrow draws both Demosthenes and Nietzsche into conversation, noting that Nietzsche is at times alluding to the great orator in his own self-descriptions. In his comparison, Merrow notes Demosthenes' art of persuasion as "an uncanny, sublime force, a force that carries with it a potential fear about the possible deceptiveness of appearances" (Merrow 290). Longinus' use of the term δεινότης underscores this imagery, defining the sublime orator—of which Demosthenes is the supreme example—as a clever, intense, and subtly untrustworthy person who inspires fear in the listener (Longin. 34.4 et al.). This coincides with Burke's definition of the sublime as a certain Delight which finds its source in terror and fear.

Kant expands upon Burke's definition, making it a more rational concept. That is, while the sublime object is terrifying, it does not require a response of terror on the part of the reader. He also argues that anything compared to the sublime will be inherently small, for the sublime object is inconceivably great. It is this inconceivable nature which inspires the reader to a feat of the imagination in order to recognize it. Demosthenes, in swearing by the Athenian ancestors slain at Marathon, elevates them to the level of the inconceivable and ineffable—to the level of the gods. By examining the discussion of the sublime throughout the ages, we find that the courtroom itself becomes an unexpected yet ideal location for sublime rhetoric, once again placing Demosthenes at the top of the list of sublime ancient authors.

#### Bibliography

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