

Arrian, Quintilian, and the Contest for Authority

In his prefatory letter to the *Discourses of Epictetus*, Arrian makes the following claims: he did not “compose” Epictetus’ discourses, he simply wrote them down word-for-word for his own use; these unedited notes have somehow fallen into the people’s hands; they are therefore rough-looking, and some readers might blame Arrian for this; he does not care, because the discourses are useful for moral edification, the same way Epictetus’ actual lectures were. Scholars still read this epistle as a plain statement of fact (Stadter 1980, 28; Dobbin 1998, xx–xxiii). Tore Janson, in his landmark work on Latin literary prefaces, does not even mention Arrian among his Greek comparanda. Yet prefatory letters are known to be a common vehicle for literary polemic. In the first part of this paper I outline the rhetorical nature of this letter by comparing it to a preface that is widely recognized as having a literary agenda: Quintilian’s epistle to Trypho. Both authors discuss in-lecture note taking and illicit dissemination of class materials among (current and former) students. Both authors claim that the text that follows is more authoritative than the “stolen” one. It is their authorial imprimatur that makes the current version superior, and Arrian and Quintilian both equate their own authority with the text’s. In doing so they use strikingly similar language. I put their statements side by side and establish the rhetorical parallelism that derives from them – a never-attempted comparison (Wirth 1967, 154 only glosses over this matter). I determine that Arrian makes a veiled but deliberate assertion that ethical edification in the *Discourses of Epictetus* comes from him as much as from his former teacher. The success of Arrian’s argument is evidenced in the reputation he enjoyed as a philosopher (a statue was erected in his honor), even though he was a career politician who never

wrote philosophy under his own name alone (his other philosophical work, the *Encheiridion*, is an abridgement of the *Discourses*. It contained a prefatory letter that is now lost).

In the second part of this paper I propose that these similarities of expression are not coincidental. Even though this direction of influence is perhaps not an expected one, I argue that Arrian is responding to Quintilian's claim (in 1 *Praef.* 10) that rhetoric provides sufficient ethical instruction for the ideal statesman. Arrian writes that Epictetus' philosophy powerfully guided his students' emotions (*pathe*), a key Stoic concept. This departure from the Stoic ideal of indifference (*apatheia*) can only be explained as a deliberate response in the old argument between philosophy and rhetoric. I show that Arrian, as suffect consul at Rome in 129–130 CE, had both the chance to read the preface to the *Institutio Oratoria*, and personal incentive to engage in this quasi-debate with the now dead Quintilian, a protégé of Domitian, the emperor who around 93 exiled Epictetus from Rome together with all other philosophers. At the same time, Arrian implies that a Greek who prefers philosophical education over rhetoric could still reach the heights of political power in the Roman Empire.

This paper shows that issues of authorship and authority were at the center of Arrian's literary program. He ingeniously reverses Quintilian's projected image to advance his own desired persona, a crossover between Roman consul and new Xenophon.

Bibliography

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