Cicero's Gladiator

Cicero evokes the gladiator as a metamorphical figure across many of his speeches and philosophical treatises. Overwhelmingly, these examples depict an extremely negative view of the gladiator, to whom he likens many of his opponents for the sake of invective. Though much fewer in occurrence, Cicero also presents a seemingly opposing view of the gladiator as the paradigm of *virtus*. In this paper, I argue that by portraying the gladiator in such two distinct lights, Cicero is not, in fact, wavering in his opinion of the men who fought and died in the arena. To the contrary, the adaptability of the gladiator as a metaphor is consistent with the figure's complex social identity.

In the words of Valerie Hope, "Men and women alike feared and mocked, were attracted to and were repulsed by the gladiator. The gladiator was despised for his servitude, his violence and his proximity to death, yet he was admired for his bravery and fighting skills" (Hope, 2000). The liminal space occupied by the gladiator in society gives room for Cicero to manipulate which aspect of the figure's identity is being drawn into focus to create the proper metaphor to suit his rhetorical needs.

Cicero is able to evoke the title for the sake of character assassination against his opponents by emphasizing the social stigma against the gladiator as *infamis* outside the arena. In his early speeches, the term can be considered synonymous with degrading language such a "thug" or "lowlife." In later speeches following Spartacus' rebellion, Cicero's usage of the term evolves to convey a heightened sense of danger, as he associates it with men whom he views to pose significant threats to the integrity of the Republic such as Marc Antony and Cataline.

At the same time, Cicero establishes the gladiator as an exemplum towards which others should strive by highlighting the spectator's perception of *virtus* shown by the gladiator in the arena. Such is the case in Book III of the *Philippics*, where the orator proposes to the Senate that if they truly have reached the downfall of the Republic, they should meet death honorably as "*gladiatores nobiles*" (Cic. *Phil.* 3.35.5). In these instances, the gladiator's proximity to *infamia* is eclipsed by the *gloria* of fighting the arena. By fighting and dying well, the gladiator becomes a symbol for exemplary conduct which Cicero can evoke to direct focus to some desired behavior.

At the surface level, these two metaphorical representations seem to be incongruous with each other. A more nuanced reading taking into account the multifaceted identity of the gladiator reveals, however, that this is not necessarily the case. Cicero employs the negative image when discussing individuals, the positive when outlining theorical behavior. These two do not exist in isolation from each other, but rather coexist as facets of Cicero's complicated view of the gladiator – as an individual, he is to be despised; as an object of spectacle, he may be revered if the show is pleasing to the spectator.

Bibliography

Hope, Valerie. "Fighting for Identity: The Funerary Commemoration of Italian Gladiators." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 44, no. 73 (2000): 93-113.