

Elaine Fantham:

The Roman World of Cicero's De Oratore

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 (hardback) and 2006 (paperback)

364 pages (bibliography; indices)

ISBN: 0-19-920773-9 (paperback)

Price: £25.00 (paperback)

Since her important *Comparative Studies in Republican Latin Imagery* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), Elaine Fantham has published widely on Roman Republican oratory and rhetoric. This new monograph on *The Roman World of Cicero's 'De Oratore'* demonstrates her expertise in the field, and it is an admirable piece of immensely learned, wide-ranging scholarship, with which few could compete. The book grew out of Fantham's graduate teaching (p. v) and will be warmly welcomed by everybody who is interested in the historical and cultural background against which the dialogue is set.

Fantham modestly claims to be content with "helping this work to be enjoyed in its historical and cultural context" (p. vi) and defines her intention as follows: "I would like modern readers of this book to come away with a picture of that world as close to Cicero's own as possible" (p. v.). Fantham achieves her declared aim by assembling a great deal of background information on most of the names, places, institutions, and events mentioned in *De oratore* (or in her own comments on it). Written in a fluent, easily accessible, and sometimes entertaining style, the book gives a clear and reliable synthesis of 'what we know'. Instead of engaging heavily with scholarly discussion, Fantham prefers to comment directly on the text. Many parts of her study, therefore, are brilliant examples of what in ancient rhetorical terms would be called a 'paraphrase' – an exegetical readaptation of the text, highlighting its central parts by explanation and illuminating comment.

The book contains thirteen chapters of roughly twenty pages each, a very short bibliography, and indices that are unfortunately quite fragmentary. The selective list of titles in the bibliography (titles that are, with few exceptions, written in English) is not meant to provide a full picture of current scholarship (pp. 329-337). Some chapters have subsections, which are not included in the table of contents. The subjects of the chapters mainly follow the path opened by a linear reading of *De oratore*, backed up by thematic units (e.g., on Cicero's biography or the law). As some repetitions indicate, the chapters are also designed to be read independently.

Chapter 1 ("Cicero at 50", pp. 1-25; subsections: "Retrospect: Cicero's Perspective in De-feat", pp. 1-9; "The frustration of Cicero's Policy and his Decision to Turn to Writing", pp. 9-15; "Cicero's own Critical Judgements of *De Oratore*", pp. 15-18; "Proem, Preface, and Outline", pp. 18-25) introduces the reader to Cicero's biography, mentions the testimonies on *De oratore* in Cicero's own works, and comments on the preface of the work itself.

Chapter 2 ("The Public Careers of L. Licinius Crassus and M. Antonius", pp. 26-48; no subsections) gathers biographical information on the *dramatis personae* from the text itself and draws on the sometimes scarce independent sources for their lives and opinions. Since Fantham seems to sense a connotation of 'wrongdoing' in the very idea of fictionalizing a character (see below), she underlines the sincerity of Cicero's picture as one following the public fame these *maiores* enjoyed during the 50s BC.

Chapter 3 ("Constructing the Dialogue: The Challenge of Plato", pp. 49-77; no subsections) falls into two parts, the first showing the influence Plato's two main works concerned with rhetoric (*Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*) exerted on Cicero's *De oratore*, the second sketching the setting of *De oratore* as their successor, including remarks on the dramatic composition of the conversation and on the figures involved.

Chapter 4 (“The Future Orator: Talent, Training, and the Choice of Model”, pp. 78-101; no subsections) discusses the claims made in the *De oratore* about education, the role of talent, art, and imitation, and relates the model put forward by Crassus to the historical background in Rome. Fantham delays treatment of Crassus’ speech on law (1.166-200) to Chapter 5 and adds comments on Antonius’ reply, which rounds off book 1 (1.209-62; cf. p. 89). The long history behind Crassus’ account of *ars*, *ingenium*, and *exercitatio* and the proposal of rhetorical exercises leads back to Isocratean ideas and can be related to Cicero’s own remarks in the preface to *De oratore* (1.14-16; see, e.g., pp. 82-85). By comparing the tradition down to Quintilian (see the helpful list of *progymnasmata*, p. 87) Fantham is able to show that the recommendation of reading non-technical literature in order to improve one’s abilities (*De oratore* 1.158) is an important feature added by Cicero (p. 88, n. 25).

Chapter 5 (“The Orator and the Law”, pp. 102-130; subsections: “Civil Procedure and the Beginning of Jurisprudence”, pp. 108-114; “The Hazards and Complexities of Civil Litigation”, pp. 114-121; “The *Iudicia Publica* and the *Quaestiones Perpetuae*”, pp. 121-130) offers an overview of the passages concerning law in *De oratore* and gives extensive information about the legal and judicial institutions of republican Rome. Cicero’s own education is treated again (pp. 105-107), this time dwelling on his studies in civil law. Fantham concentrates on the role law played in public life, on political dimensions of judicial matters, and on the orator’s duties when defending friends and allies. Cases presented in the course of the dialogue are discussed, and Fantham observes a subordination of “highly politicized criminal law” to civil law in *De oratore* (pp. 129-130). She convincingly argues for a clear distinction between the motives of prosecutors and those of defending *patroni* (p. 130), observing that the latter were always willing to defend even political antagonists because “they saw it as their function to preserve established and respectable citizens as members of Roman society” (p. 130).

Chapter 6 (“Oratory and Literature: The Spoken and the Written Word”, pp. 131-160; subsections: “The Use of Poetry in Rhetorical Teaching”, pp. 138-146; “Antonius’ Conception of the Orator’s Generic Range”, pp. 146-152; “The Uses of Poetry and History: Self-Celebration and Self-Defence”, pp. 152-160) provides interesting observations on the Roman (republican) notions of ‘literature’ as related to rhetoric, historiography, and poetry. Antonius’ account of Greek historiography excludes Polybius because he is concerned with writers who withheld themselves from public service (p. 150). Fantham offers basic information on the development of poetic writing in Rome, concentrating on the self-defensive functions of memoirs in particular (either poetic or prose) and commenting on the famous letter to Lucceius on historiography (pp. 157-158). She tackles the problem of citing poetical texts as evidenced in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and Cicero’s *De inventione*, contrasting the practice with *De oratore* (pp. 141-146). Epideictic oratory may be problematic when defined as a genre that lacks occasions in Roman public life (p. 135), but instead of suppressing it, Cicero incorporated it as a mode of speaking into those categories that are of overall importance (a good example being the oration *De imperio Pompei*).

Chapter 7 (“Rediscovering Aristotelian Invention”, pp. 161-185; subsections: “The *Rhetoric*”, pp. 164-168; “From the *Rhetoric* to *De Oratore*”, pp. 168-177; “Disposing of *Dispositio*”, pp. 177-181; “Marshalling One’s Arguments: The Three *Genera*”, pp. 181-185) discusses elements of proof making (as one of the two main pillars on which the discipline of rhetoric is based) and relates what Antonius in *De oratore* 2 has to say about Aristotelian concepts. After cautiously pointing to Jonathan Barnes’ claim that Cicero knew all three volumes of the *Rhetoric* (pp. 163-164), Fantham presents an outline of the Aristotelian work, followed by an account of what Antonius in *De oratore* expounds concerning proof making and rousing emotions. In the case of *dispositio* she concludes that there are no clear traces of familiarity with the Aristotelian section on the subject (p. 184). Just as in the chapter on Plato-Cicero, so in this one on Aristotle-Cicero Fantham may have limited herself too strictly to looking for direct influence, when it might have been more rewarding to look for intermediary sources.

Chapter 8 (“Wit and Humour as the Orator’s Combat Weapons”, pp. 186-208; no subsections) deals with Strabo’s ‘theory of humour’ in *De oratore* 2, and offers sensitive observations on some cases in Ciceronian oratory to illustrate the claims (pp. 199-208), concentrating on means of rousing laughter and good humour in the audience.

Chapter 9 (“Political Persuasion: Senate and *Contio*”, pp. 209-236; subsections: “Cicero’s *De Provinciis Consularibus*: A Tour de Force and a Volte-Face”, pp. 214-219; “Facing the People”, pp. 219-227; “Thanking the People”, pp. 227-231; “Violence Displaces Eloquence: *Silet Lingua Inter Arma*, pp. 231-236) illustrates theoretical reflections on the impact of speaking before different audiences (as presented in *De oratore*) by some case studies of Ciceronian oratory. Again, long passages give background information on the historical events and changing conditions of oratory in the late Republic, and offer interesting readings of related texts (such as Dio 39.34-35 on Cato and the violence accompanying his speech, pp. 232-233).

Chapter 10 (“Style and Substance: Cicero’s Rethinking of *Elocutio*”, pp. 237-266; subsections: “The First Challenge to the Greek Philosophical Adversaries of Rhetoric”, pp. 247-253; “The Aesthetics of Style and the Ideals of Theophrastus”, pp. 253-257; “The Second Challenge to the Greek Philosophical Tradition”, pp. 257-266) deals with the central concepts put forward by Crassus in *De oratore* 3, among them the highly complex model of the history of rhetoric and philosophy (pp. 247-253) and the treatment of general questions as an important criterion in distinguishing true rhetoric from reduced versions to be found in some handbooks (pp. 258-266).

Chapter 11 (“*Res Pervolgatae*: Words and their Manipulation in Standard Rhetorical Theory”, pp. 267-286; no subsections) presents what Cicero’s Crassus (esp. in *De oratore* 3.149-212) explains about the use of individual words, their arrangement, and the nature of figures of thought and language. Fantham compares Ciceronian doctrine with passages from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and comments well on the theories of metaphor and its tradition (pp. 272-273).

Chapter 12 (“Into Action: The Orator as Public Figure”, pp. 287-304; subsection: “Into the Forum: The Orator’s Debut”, pp. 298-304) discusses the remaining duties of the orator (*memoria* and *actio*). With her concluding remarks on the historical debuts of the characters presented in the dialogue (and of its author Cicero), Fantham refers back to her opening chapter on Cicero’s political career.

Chapter 13 (“Epilogue: The Statesman and the State in *De Oratore* and After”, pp. 305-328; subsections: “*De Oratore* and *De Re Publica*: Idealizing Leadership of the Orator-Statesman”, pp. 311-319; “A Retrospect on *De Oratore* and its Generation: Tacitus’ *Dialogus*”, pp. 319-328) traces Ciceronian claims of “leadership for the orator, rather than for the aristocrat” (p. 313) within his various writings and points to Tacitus’ representation of the Ciceronian world.

In what follows I offer some observations on single passages, before trying to express some of the difficulties I had with the methodological principles and focuses of this impressive study.

To illustrate the richness of Fantham’s study and the astonishing amount of matters considered, I first provide, *exempli gratia*, a short overview of the contents of Chapter 4 (on oratorical training as described by Crassus in *De oratore* 1.113 onwards): Here, Fantham first discusses the possibility of Greek rhetors as teachers of Romans in the lifetime of Crassus (pp. 79-81); then points to the tradition behind the triad of rhetorical theory, natural talent, and practical exercise (p. 82); the relationship of rhetoric with acting and the theatre (pp. 82-83); Cicero’s relationship with Roscius (pp. 83-84); the Isocratean heritage with regard to the issue of training, presented in the dialogue’s introduction (p. 85); the exercises discussed by Crassus (pp. 85-89); Antonius’ lost treatise on rhetoric (p. 90); the decree against the Latin teachers and its possible denotations (pp. 90-92); the quality of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (p. 92); the problem of ‘ghost-writing’ down to Ciceronian times and Aelius Stilo as a possible example (pp. 92-93); Cicero’s own education and the account thereof in *Brutus* (pp. 93-96); the ‘typicality’ of this education compared with that of Caesar (pp. 96-97); Suetonius on the exercises in

rhetorical training (p. 97); a side note on similar exercises in British schools a few years ago (pp. 97-98); imitation in Isocrates and in *De oratore* (p. 98); Antonius' remarks on the subject in 2.89 (p. 99) and its differences from Isocrates (pp. 99-100); the question of choosing the right models as treated by Cicero in *Brutus* 313-314 (p. 100); and, in conclusion, the Ciceronian-Isocratean idea of flexibility with regard to the choice of model and the selection of stylistic features, and the need to include imitation even in the mature stadium of Roman orators in our accounts of rhetorical training (p. 101).

It becomes clear even from this short overview that Fantham displays a wide knowledge and rarely fails to incorporate background information on people or things mentioned (e.g., on the actor Roscius, pp. 83-84; see also her remarks on the jurist Pomponius, pp. 109-110; or on Sulpicius, pp. 126-127). She goes off on numerous sidetracks, and the sheer amount of background information tends to distract the reader, notably when problems of major or minor impact are treated almost in equal length and connected subjects return several times in different contexts. I did not always find it easy to handle the book, especially as the indices (authors/works/passages, pp. 339-344; persons, pp. 345-349; and terms, pp. 350-354) are too selective always to be useful, and the titles of subsections give only partial information on what is discussed in the text.

Fantham's principle of explaining *De oratore* by referring to testimonies outside the text also highlights two interesting features, one of the text itself, one of our treatment of it. Since *De oratore* is the work of an orator about rhetoric, we may safely expect Cicero to interrelate content and form in order to enhance, develop, or express one by means of the other. Cicero may have liked the readers of *De oratore* to be tempted to follow each of the numerous references that lead away from the text (into history, different fields of knowledge, cultural and literary histories, etc.). The interconnection of rhetoric, its literary representation, and almost all fields of cultural knowledge mirrors Cicero's idea of the universal, expansive character of rhetoric. Cicero re-enacted this idea by entangling the content and form of *De oratore*, and it is repeated by the character of Fantham's study. Fantham occasionally echoes this seductive character of Cicero's text in her introductory remarks when taking into account matters that are 'also of interest' (e.g.: "To understand the criticisms of contemporary orators [...] we first need an outline of the civil procedures available in the time of Cicero's dialogue [...]. It will also be helpful to follow this outline with a discussion of the legal experts [...]", p. 108; and "Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is so innovative and rich in ideas that it will be best to provide an outline before returning to Antonius and Cicero", p. 164).

Sometimes it is difficult to decide which audience Fantham has in mind. It does not seem to be one with a basic knowledge of Greece and Rome, and surely not one familiar with basic ideas about literary texts, since she quite often stresses the need to distinguish between the historical and the Ciceronian figures of, say, Crassus or Antonius, and explicitly points to the (evident?) fact that the world depicted in *De oratore* may be influenced by Cicero's own experiences (see, e.g., p. v). Throughout the study, Fantham herself remains astonishingly reluctant to recognize the *dramatis personae* as part of a complex interrelation between content and form, *res* and *verba* (cf. her cautious language: "One should certainly ask how far he idealized these men, or adjusted their political stance to his own values", p. 27; "We must inevitably assume that some of the principles and experiences ascribed to his mentor [i.e. Crassus] were Cicero's own [...]", p. 79; "Cicero puts Roscius' sayings into the mouth of Crassus, but he is surely drawing on his own acquaintance with the actor", p. 84; and, finally, on the central piece of Ciceronian rhetorical theory in book 3: "it is most unlikely that Crassus had sufficient interest in or grasp of Greek intellectual history to have formed such views", p. 249).

Fantham offers fine observations on the differences between ancient and modern concepts of 'literature' and its relation to rhetoric, among them the important remark on what it meant if Romans qualified a poetic text as being influenced by rhetoric: "Given the primacy of oratory at Rome it was a compliment to suggest this" (p. 134). I am not sure that *litterae* primarily meant poetry for Cicero and his contemporaries (p. 133), since even if prose was available mainly in

Greek (p. 137), this would not necessarily have prevented the Romans from having an idea of literary prose as such. The fact that Cicero makes his interlocutors in *De oratore* affirm the Greek prominence in literary prose writing may also have been meant to remind his readers of the originality and relevance of the Roman prose work they were holding in their hands.

Given Fantham's interest in matters of literature it seems astonishing that, while the idea of *De oratore* as a literary masterpiece shapes Fantham's study throughout, it does not play a significant role as a subject of discussion, except for some side notes such as the one on the triptychal composition of the dialogue (p. 77). Fantham stresses the impact of *ethos* on the depiction of the dialogue's characters. It seems promising to follow her suggestions and to look for features that relate the characters to the rhetorical concepts Cicero discusses: Fantham's observation that Scaevola is meant to play the role of a Stoic, thus provoking Crassus' reply (p. 74), may be supplemented by understanding him as a representative of an outdated model of learning, which Crassus rejects by proposing the Hellenistic, 'modern' (and Ciceronian) model of systematic ordering of knowledge. When discussing Anthony Woodman's reading of *De oratore* 2.51-64, Fantham claims that "following Cicero's text sequentially provides a different, more generous, interpretation of Cicero's underlying purpose" (p. 148). But in Cicero's *De oratore* (as in the *Partitiones*) sequential reading may be difficult since the rhetorical system itself is not based on linear structure. Its inner form may be compared to a cabinet with an endless number of drawers, which themselves contain smaller drawers, these even smaller ones, and so on. To show this complex structure of his subject, Cicero uses similar compositional devices such as repetition combined with variation, separation of connected items, indicating a topic in one passage while returning to it later on, etc. The dialogue's composition not only represents but also enacts systematic principles that linear reading may be inclined to miss, and it seems due to a sometimes fragmented reading that historians of rhetoric were often misled by the idea of a standing still in the discipline. The dialogue, I think, may be safely read as an *agon*, which is performed by the characters representing differing approaches to rhetorical theory, and which culminates in Crassus' speech in book 3.¹

Cicero conceived of his dialogue as a constant process of correcting and complementing the presentation of subject matter, with the full picture being partly delivered by Crassus in *De oratore* 3, partly having to be constructed by the reader himself. Therefore, there are many subjects that require parallel reading of separate passages, such as Antonius' remarks on general and specific questions (cf. Fantham, pp. 168-176) with the (quite different) ones offered by Crassus. Fantham stresses the importance of Crassus' claim that civil law should be reorganized in order to match the idea of an art (*De oratore* 1.187-190), which is defined "as applying philosophical method to assemble and organize accumulated material" (p. 112). In fact, Crassus applies this interest in method by redefining the position of specific and general questions within the rhetorical system, and, I think, we could relate this attention to the organization of knowledge and its methodological principles to Ciceronian rhetorical thinking in general.

¹ I have proposed some of these ideas in my *Cicero rhetor* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), esp. pp. 262-283. Some observations may also be found there that lead me to disagree with Fantham in using the term "catechism" either for the *Partitiones* or for *De oratore* 1.137-146 (cf. Fantham, p. 86: "rapid, almost dismissive, survey of the standard rhetorical catechism in 1.137-146"). As for *De or.* 1.109, I do not think that Cicero's Crassus is meant to be denying rhetoric "the state of art" (Fantham p. 81), because Crassus only refers to the genesis of rhetoric and the chronological order (theory came after practice), and he does not dismiss teaching, but, on the contrary, stresses its necessity, thus himself disagreeing with those who dismiss learning as incompatible with social dignity (note Crassus' framing expressions "non negabo me didicisse [...] non illiberale"). Polemics is a standard feature of rhetorical writing, so I do not easily understand why Cicero should be seen as someone particularly engaged in a fight against socially and intellectually inferior, politically insignificant teachers and their handbooks (compare Fantham, pp. 258-266).

Fantham's interest in explaining the text by explaining the historical context is motivated by a (sympathetic) apologetic attitude for an author who "is still manifestly an honest observer who also tries to maintain some standards of integrity in his actions". The interpretative principles Fantham here applies are based upon a threefold premise: (1) history explains the text; (2) Cicero as an author is to be defended by showing him as faithful observer and guide through his world; and (3) his ideals may be an inspiration for us today. Given the scarcity of information available from outside the dialogue, it is a difficult enterprise to separate 'true' from 'fictional' features of the dialogue's characters, but this enterprise becomes methodologically problematic if we (implicitly) classify the 'fictional' as inferior to (modern constructions of) the 'historical'. The idea that an author should be rescued from the label of being an inventor is based on the idea that he does best when remaining faithful to reliable traditions and 'idealizing' facts and persons only within a limited scale. But 'inventing' and 'constructing' cannot bear negative connotations, because literary imagination develops a world of its own right. My principal concern here is not Fantham's optimistic premise of being able to divide the two worlds of history and fiction, but the tendency to privilege the first above the second in order to explain the literary text. Concentrating on an interpretative approach that breaks the dialogue into single bits of textual information that are related to isolated bits of historical information, helps us to understand fragments but tends to neglect the impact of the 'fictional' on the text's message as a whole. This may be compared to the practice of someone who explains a mosaic by disassembling it and tries to find out where each of the *tesserae* may have come from.

The clear-cut opposition Fantham delineates in the epilogue between her own (sympathetic, historical) method and "fine scholars" who for instance apply sociological theories in order to "treat [Cicero's] work as a quest for power" (p. 327), should perhaps be replaced by a more complementary approach that does not exclude a political (power-related) impact of Cicero's works. Fantham admits that "Cicero's contemporaries were open to many modes of turning themselves into history" (p. 159), and this should be taken into consideration by acknowledging literary constructions as a means of promoting ideas of the author himself. The various Ciceronian characters discuss Roman culture with a sharp eye to its weaknesses, and this reader would have liked to learn more about the ways Cicero proposes in *De oratore* to reanimate, abolish, challenge, or modify cultural traditions and beliefs – and, by doing so, constantly shapes an image of his own *persona* as writer as well as politician.

Fantham's book is thought-provoking and dense, and an important contribution to our understanding of the *De oratore*. She has opened up a broad range of questions that future scholars will gratefully take up, starting from this book as a standard reference for what we know today about the historical context of *De oratore*.

Alexander Arweiler
Institut für Klassische Philologie
Westfälische-Wilhelms-Universität
Domplatz 20-22
48143 Münster
GERMANY
arweiler@uni-muenster.de

Alexander Arweiler is Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Münster. His research interests include Ciceronian rhetoric and oratory, and the impact of rhetoric on literary theory and aesthetics. He is currently working on a study of narratological concepts in Cicero and Quintilian.