

Catherine Steel:

Roman Oratory

(New surveys in the classics, 36)

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With *Roman Oratory*, Catherine Steel presents a clear, acute, and interesting picture of Roman oratory ranging from the early second century BCE to the late first century CE. It is no mean feat that she manages to do so within a space of only eighty pages, which are highly readable and useful for scholars and students alike.

In her introduction (pp. 1-2), Steel briefly states the scope of the book and its limitations: she focuses on “oratory as a spoken phenomenon, intimately related to politics and government at Rome” (p. 1). Speeches in historiography and most of those written during the period of the Second Sophistic are not considered, and Cicero must share his customary prominent position with speakers like Pliny the Younger and Tacitus.¹ Naturally, Steel also pays little attention to rhetorical theory. But her self-criticism that “there is less in the way of analysis of individual speeches than might be expected” (p. 1) deserves some qualification. There is in fact much more in the way of analysis of individual speeches than might be expected considering the slimness of the volume, and Steel is always astute and to the point.

The first chapter, “The Orator in Roman Society” (pp. 3-24), deals with various occasions of public speech, each treated diachronically and illustrated with relevant examples. In passing, it also provides a succinct introduction to Roman political history.

The *contio* – an umbrella term for gatherings of the Roman citizen body – is shown to be an important occasion, especially for the consolidation or undermining of legislation, even though no voting was involved. The magistrates made sure they were well prepared, for their speeches could make a significant contribution to their electoral campaigns. The phenomenon is illustrated by reference to several episodes from Cicero’s career, most notably his advocacy of the *lex Manilia* that was to grant Pompey the supreme command against Mithridates of Pontus, and his *Thanks to the People on his Return* (from exile). Other important gatherings were of course those of the Senate and of the courts of civil and criminal law. Steel gives a lucid account of how the latter served as a means of controlling senior magistrates in the exercise of their *imperium*, especially after Sulla’s reform of the law courts, and also of the way in which acting for the prosecution could endanger, while acting for the defence could further one’s career.

In addition, the chapter contains informative accounts of deliberative oratory outside Rome and the increase of epideictic oratory, the first example of which – apart from funeral orations and isolated extracts of invective – Steel considers to be Cicero’s *Pro Marcello*. Of special

¹ However, as Steel remarks, Cicero and the Second Sophistic have their own volumes in the Cambridge University Press series of New surveys in the classics: on the former see A. E. Douglas (vol. 2, 1979 [1968]), on the latter see T. Whitmarsh (vol. 35, 2005).

interest is the emphasis she places on the continuity of oratory's functions during the Roman Empire: although public meetings had largely ceased to be relevant, there were still plenty of opportunities for skilled speakers to make their mark in the Senate and the law courts.

The second chapter, "Channels of Communication" (pp. 25-44), considers how and why speeches made the transition from spoken to written form. Steel assumes with some caution that the written versions are reasonably faithful representations of their spoken counterparts. Cato the Elder was the first to write down his deliberative and forensic speeches, but of course the bulk of the surviving speeches was written by Cicero. Since orators did not *need* to write down their speeches – they spoke largely extempore or from memory and their clients did not need copies – they did so by choice, for purposes of pedagogy and self-advertisement. Accordingly, in the early years of his career Cicero published as many of his speeches as he could; the same goes for his deliberative oratory in the sixties BCE. But little is left from his forensic activities in the fifties, when he often had to act under the pressure of Caesar or Pompey. His *Philippics*, finally, marked the beginning of an era when written dissemination of speeches had become just as important as their oral delivery.

Little in the way of complete speeches survives from the Roman Empire, except for Pliny's *Panegyric* for Trajan. Steel explains the shortage as due to the nature of the occasions of their delivery, which were less momentous than in Republican times. She demonstrates how Pliny's letters supplemented and substituted for his speeches, granting him everlasting fame by a somewhat different means. At the same time, these letters are an important source of information about the occasions and prestige of public speech, and the calibre and constitution of the speakers.

The chapter ends with an illuminating account of communication with and by the emperor, which involves the rise of panegyric on the one hand, and the immortalisation in stone of the ruler's speeches on the other.

Chapter 3, "The Practising Orator" (pp. 45-61), concentrates on oratory as a "vehicle and focus for sustained critique of behaviour and values in Rome in general and of the elite in particular" (p. 45). It discusses the preeminent status of oratory as an aristocratic skill and a means for the elite to become visible in public. Yet, rather than uttering fundamentally opposing views, orators vied with one another to appear the most likely champions of the will of the people. Steel demonstrates how acting for the defence was more conducive to a good reputation than acting for the prosecution, adding that, due to the problem with *delatores* ('informers'), the function of the prosecutor came to symbolise the faults of the political system of the Empire.

Since language and looks were regarded as indicative of a speaker's moral constitution, self-presentation was a very important aspect of rhetoric, especially as regards *elocutio* and *actio*. Steel's account of this subject focuses mainly on Cicero. After discussing his quarrel with Piso (who, unfortunately for Cicero, was handsome), she gives a brief and useful account of his position in the debate about style, in which effeminate, florid asianism was combatted by masculine, arid atticists, stressing that this was in fact a conflict over morals. She concludes once more with the *Philippics*, arguing that in these speeches one of Cicero's main strongholds is his use of the figure of the orator to attack Antonius and to defend his own actions. It was Cicero's *Philippics* together with his subsequent tragic death that turned him into one of the symbolic defenders of Republican freedom, Steel concludes (p.60).

The fourth and final chapter, "The Orator's Education" (pp. 63-76), goes back in time to the mid-second century BCE to deal with rhetorical education, "since the expectations and norms imposed on the fully-fledged orator are the foundations which support the system of oratorical

education” (p. 63). After a brief survey of the position of theoretical rhetoric vs. practical oratory and its place in education, Steel turns to the figure of Cato the Elder as an anti-rhetorician and an advocate of simplicity as opposed to an intricate system of instruction – a point of view she sees recurring in Cicero’s *De Oratore* and Tacitus’ *Dialogus*. In addition, she shows how rhetoric’s Greek origins gradually ceased to arouse suspicion.

The feud between philosophy and rhetoric is surveyed by Steel in her account of the so-called philosophers’ embassy in 155, which was rapidly expelled from Rome by Cato the Elder who mistrusted the eloquent Greeks. Steel lucidly remarks that since young people were seen to gather around them in order to learn how to speak well, these philosophers themselves seem to have ignored the opposition between philosophy and rhetoric. Steel goes on to discuss the introduction to Cicero’s *De Inventione*, which is cited as one of several attempts to rescue rhetoric from its ancient critics by investing it with a moral component. Here, one might have wished for Steel to include some reference to similar attempts by Quintilian, who wanted to make a moral stand against the *delatores*.

The chapter concludes with a brief overview of declamation as a practical exercise and a popular pastime among established orators. Steel notes that the purposes of declamation were to teach students how to construct a case in support of any line of argument, how to use language effectively, and how to structure a speech. As a fourth purpose she might have added that declamation helped the students to explore and inculcate the Roman values which it was so important they be seen to propagate in ‘real’ oratory.

The book’s brief conclusion stresses again the central role of oratory in the workings of the Roman state. In order to illustrate this point, Steel refers to the rare Roman coin printed on the cover of her book, a coin that features the *rostra* on one side and personified *Libertas* on the other. Surprisingly, the excellent, up-to-date bibliography that completes the book does not list George A. Kennedy’s *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World 300 BC-300 AD* (Princeton University Press, 1972) and Janet Fairweather, *Seneca the Elder* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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