
Joy Connolly:

The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome

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Given the title of this work, it is hardly surprising that the writings of Cicero as both orator and theorist supply its core. Yet even the most stalwart of Ciceronians will have likely never envisioned a situation that “establishes Cicero as a historical ally for theoretical work on the self done by feminist thinkers” (p. 149). In *The State of Speech*, Joy Connolly challenges, engages, and even (with provocative claims such as the one quoted) thrills the student of ancient Roman rhetoric as she provides a thoughtful reassessment of the relationship between speaker and audience in the formation of Roman civic identity. At the same time the work is meant to furnish a new historical perspective for those scholars engaged in more broad debates on what it means in our contemporary world to function as a full participant in a free society. The evaluation of theoretical works from Agambe to Arendt to Benhabib to Derrida to Pocock freely exchanges in these pages with close textual analyses of Cicero’s attempts to place rhetoric and oratory at the center of an ancient performative ethics that enacts the role not of the ideal orator, but of the ideal citizen.

The Introduction, “Rhetoric and Political Thought” (pp. 1-22), makes clear that Connolly intends to move away from recent New Historical readings that treat Roman rhetoric as a device for self-fashioning, focusing instead on how the rhetorical speaker continually works to create public knowledge concerning the role of civic participation. In doing so, she consciously situates herself in the long-standing debate between rhetoric and philosophy that has occupied rhetorical theorists at least since Plato’s *Gorgias*. Throughout the book, her pragmatic assessment of oratorical practice contrasts with the ways in which philosophers shape knowledge. In contrast with those Greek epistemological efforts that are detached from the lived world, Connolly stresses the activity of the body in “trained speech as a living and lived connector of citizen and community” (p. 22). The approach – which optimistically adopts as its ideal a well-meaning orator engaged with a sophisticated and consciously compliant audience – resuscitates the Ciceronian orator from less sympathetic treatments by pointing out ways in which his rhetorical toolbox can be used for ends that are mutually constructive for both speaker and audience, a finding that one may apply not only to antiquity, but to today.

The longest of the six chapters that follow is the first, “Founding the State of Speech” (pp. 23-76). Here Connolly begins with Hannah Arendt’s contention that Roman civilization endured because it “declared and constantly renewed itself in the recreation of the past, a past understood as the perpetual augmentation of a foundation that itself already fused innovation with tradition” (p. 23). Connolly’s decision to examine the centrality of rhetoric to this constant renewal explains the book’s punning title: the Roman Republic is a “state of speech” in that it is continually created and renewed by oratory in a forum visible to all. Connolly also wishes to complicate the views of those scholars who see this ‘state’ as controlled solely by manipulating and competing elite interests. Rather, she uses recent scholarship on ‘democratic’ elements of the Roman constitution and Antonio Gramsci’s views on the role of the non-hegemonic in

shaping ideology to assert that the distribution of power in Rome “cannot be understood as a matter of two identities and ideologies, one ruling, one ruled” (p. 42).¹ Throughout the book, assertions such as these are well supported, although contrary evidence tends to be underplayed. In this instance, for example, she does not consider the ways in which access to rhetorical education tends to be restricted to the urban elite, or the role that oratory can play in promoting both abstract and bodily manifestations of exclusively elite values. The chapter concludes with an excellent analysis of how Rome’s earliest extant rhetorical treatises (Cicero’s *De inventione* and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*) aim to construct justice through rational discourse rather than through the charismatic mode of presentation that had dominated politics during the middle Republic. I would have been interested to see whether Connolly would be willing to attribute this shift to the historical personage of L. Licinius Crassus, from whose teachings it is generally believed that both these treatises arise.

Chapter Two, “Naturalized Citizens” (pp. 77-117), “explores the interpenetration of nature and its supplements (in Derrida’s sense) in the discourse of citizenship” (p. 78; the principal “supplement” that Connolly has in mind is the art of rhetorical training). In her discussion, Connolly does not face directly the complex ambiguities that inhere in the Latin word *natura*. This slippery term, much like the English ‘nature’, can refer both to a transcendent power that determines behavior (‘Mother Nature’) and to an individual’s unique character (“that’s in his nature”). The link between these two contrasting meanings would seem to be the “supplement” of manmade *ars*, in particular education. I would very much like to have seen Connolly discuss this problematic in the context of her wide-ranging chapter. Nevertheless, the survey of the centrality of the nature/culture debate to the understanding of Roman history – a survey that ranges from Rome’s foundation myths to Cicero’s rhetorical practice – provides valuable background to her analysis of the relationship between civic performance and the role of orator as teacher.

The ambitious third chapter, “The Body Politic” (pp. 118-157), will surely stimulate debate. Here Connolly argues that Cicero’s conception of “charismatic bodies” (p. 118) locates virtue not in the adherence to absolute standards (particularly as figured in Plato’s *Gorgias*) but in a “performative ethics” (p. 129) that is produced by a speaker’s bodily engagement with the public community. As a bearer and product of human passion, this body is as vulnerable as its constituency to charges of weakness and effeminacy. Such a conception of intersubjectivity, so Connolly claims, aligns Ciceronian thought with feminist theorists of subjectivity. Although the prose in this chapter has a tendency to be tinged in purple, close readings often affirm the connections Connolly makes, particularly in her systematic contrast of Ciceronian theory with that of Greek predecessors (e.g., pp. 145-148).

In Chapter Four, “The Aesthetics of Virtue” (pp. 158-197), Connolly explores how the Romans’ embrace of the rule of law acts as a check on aristocratic competition. Key to this embrace is once again the role of the body, in this case as it embodies the concept of oratorical *decorum*, “primarily an aesthetic quality apperceived by vision and hearing” (p. 170). *Decorum*, in Connolly’s view, consists of behaviors to which the Romans willingly submit, not ones that coerce them into submission. By being both natural and learned, *decorum* provides another example of the tension between nature and artifice that was explored in Chapter Two. While I found this chapter the least cohesive of the book – attempts to attribute the workings of *decorum* to “love” (pp. 169-175) struck me as more rhetorically asserted than proven, and a section on

¹ Key to her discussion are the works of Fergus Millar, culminating with *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), and the scholarly reaction to Millar’s views, in particular Robert Morstein-Marx, *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Catullus (pp. 175-185) seemed an unmotivated digression – it nevertheless largely succeeds in its ambitious goal of demonstrating how Roman republicanism uses the performing body to reconcile the contrasting pairs of fame v. self-restraint, autonomy v. community, and nature v. culture.

Chapter Five, “Republican Theater” (pp. 198-236), continues studying the rhetorical body by tackling a topic much discussed in recent scholarship: the relationship between the allegedly truthful performance of the Roman orator and the artifice involved in the craft of acting. Connolly here maintains that the “gender panic” one finds repeatedly in ancient discussions of oratory and acting arise not, as is commonly maintained, from an essential unmanliness inherent in imitation, but from “anxiety about the stability and coherence of a political regime whose survival rests on the *artificium* of virtue” (p. 199). After reviewing evidence concerning oratory’s distinction between being and seeming, and Cicero’s concomitant anxiety about duplicity, Connolly maintains that forms of republican spectacle – from oratory to funerals to public executions – openly perform the participation of the citizen in the state and that the artificial control of the body that is associated with women (pp. 218-220) thereby threatens the dominant civic order. This subtle discussion, insofar as I understand it, pays attention to historical context to explain Roman gender anxiety, but it remains unclear to me how Connolly’s findings vitiate previous discussions of the relationship between masculinity and oratorical performance (none of which, to my knowledge, would claim simply that “women” are “the primary target of rhetorical criticism”, p. 223). The second part of the chapter offers an intriguing explanation for Cicero’s interest in the technicalities of style and delivery in his final rhetorical work (*Orator*) by tying this concern to the contemporary collapse of the rule of law, and it concludes by relating the passion of the orator to his ability to control the increasing caprice of his audience.

The sixth chapter looks at “Imperial Reenactments” (pp. 237-261), focusing in particular on the quality of rhetorical education after the Republic’s fall. It is in imperial declamation that Connolly first finds evidence for subversion in oratorical activity, with the texts collected by Seneca the Elder exploiting rhetoric’s potential to be “a mode of activism that could respond to the rapidly shifting grounds of the newly established autocracy” (p. 243). Such resistance does at first seem attractive – and Connolly cites external biographical facts about some of the declaimers that would support the notion – but a close reading of these texts in fact reveals that, far from being subversive, the themes found in declamation regularly underscore the stability of hierarchies already existing in Roman society.² Far more convincing is Connolly’s account of how one should reconsider the ways in which Michel Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité* locates the origins of the self-regulating ethical self in the younger Seneca. The features Foucault identifies as initially appearing in Seneca are, as Quintilian was to recognize, already present in Cicero, with his “strict scrutiny of bodily *hexis* and the eradication of behavioral elements incommensurate with conventional ideals of masculinity and Roman identity” (p. 258).

The Conclusion briefly considers “The Ciceronian Citizen in a Global World” (pp. 262-273). After tracing the influence that Ciceronian rhetoric was to have on Renaissance humanists, Connolly asks the question that the reader has been pondering throughout this densely argued and cautiously optimistic work: “Is it possible to envision Roman rhetoric as a model for contemporary political practice?” (p. 268). The answer, as the previous pages will have prepared us to accept, is yes. Although his vision of fully participatory citizenship excludes large segments of the community – slaves, women, foreigners – Connolly sees in Cicero’s conception of civility and the public performance of *decorum* a space not for personal self-consciousness but

² I discuss several recent works of scholarship relevant to this point in “Rhetorical Education and Social Reproduction in the Republic and Early Empire”, in William Dominik and Jon Hall (eds.), *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 74-82.

for communal freedom. By exhibiting self-control in public, the individual political agent demonstrates freedom from control by another and so alleviates public mistrust. The “pretense of equality” that results thereby “enables him to reinforce the group’s sense of communal identity and to persuade the group” (p. 272).

The preceding summary cannot do justice to the complexities of Connolly’s presentation, which offered for me an exemplary corrective to Crassus’s opinion that “if a man cannot learn something quickly, he will never be able to learn it at all” (*De oratore* 3.89, cited by Connolly in a different context at p. 119, n. 2).³ I have learned much from this book, and it is certain to continue to stimulate my thinking throughout this important election year in the United States. Perhaps because I am myself determined by the space and actors that immediately surround me, the reading of this book continually recalled a recent bestseller in the U.S. entitled *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*⁴ This analysis of contemporary politics attributes the conservative swing of the 1990s in working-class middle America to the ways in which the ruling elite of Republicans (in the non-Roman sense!) has centered its public rhetoric on the preservation of ‘morality’ and ‘American values’ while it simultaneously pursues economic policies that devastate the lives of this newly-won constituency. In Connolly’s Rome, by contrast, public rhetoric unites rather than divides the desires of speaker and audience. There seems to be little “the matter with Rome” so long as the judicious reasoning of oratory remains before a trained public eye. Her penultimate page offers the real teaser: “I read Cicero against the grain not to preserve a nostalgic vision of his past reality but to provoke and to appropriate, and to explore how his views on civility speak to our present” (p. 272). The need for a political community that depends upon mutual trust between leaders and led has received here an eloquent expression. The Romans were fortunate to have among them a Cicero who was able to create at least the illusion of that community.

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³ I cannot refrain from noting, however, that several dozen typographical errors and sentence fragments distract from complete enjoyment and, occasionally, understanding (e.g., “or summoned or into being” [p. 47]; “M. Junius Brutus” for “L. Junius Brutus” [p. 191]; “the of spirit” [p. 232]).

⁴ Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2004).