Introduction

Masculinity, or virtus, played a critical role in gender construction in ancient Rome. Many elements went into determining if a man had proper virtus and could thus be considered a vir, a true man.

This research seeks to explore how rhetorical abilities were viewed concerning the virtus of a Roman man. Men who could speak well were generally considered to have a higher level of virtus than those who were lacking in eloquence. These stereotypes can be seen in the writings of authors in early imperial Rome.

Method

To analyze the use of rhetorical abilities in relation to gender, three separate sources were considered.

• Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria offers an educational guide to training the perfect orator. His work is used to present the theory behind the hypothesis that rhetorical ability is related to the idea of virtus, or manliness.

• The Epistulae of Pliny include eulogies and recommendations that demonstrate how the theory was applied in the sphere of elite Roman men. He invites his readers’ judgment of men’s character by describing their rhetorical skill.

• Finally, Tacitus’ Annales provides evidence for the use of rhetorical abilities to portray the character of historical figures. His descriptions of some of the Roman emperors from Tiberius to Nero demonstrate how the stereotypes related to rhetorical skill are used to suggest whether they can be considered true men with proper virtus (manliness) or not.

Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria

Quintilian sets the stage for the theory of gendered rhetoric by focusing on the orator as a vir bonus, a good man, in his work on training the perfect orator. Below are selections from his work connecting his rhetorical ideals to gender views:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.3.11</td>
<td>Orator autem institutus illum potest est: qui esse nisi vir bonus non potest.</td>
<td>However, I train the perfect orator, who does not exist unless he is a good man.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These selections show that Quintilian relates being a well-spoken man equates to being a proper Roman man. In making this connection, Quintilian provides evidence that rhetorical skill is related to the idea of virtus, or manliness.

Pliny’s Epistulae

Pliny’s Epistulae is a collection of his letters edited for publication. Among his selection, he has included eulogies for friends, recommendations for offices, and some personal stories. Below are two selections demonstrating how he employs descriptions of rhetorical skill:

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<tr>
<td>2.XIII</td>
<td>Mira in sermone, mira etiam in ore quo vultique suavitas.</td>
<td>The sweetness in his conversation is amazing, even the sweetness in his very voice and countenance is amazing.</td>
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</table>

In the first, a recommendation of a friend for office, he mentions the high rhetorical skill level of the individual, promoting him as a good man. Further, when Pliny tells a story of Regulus, a man Pliny dislikes, he specifically mentions that he is a vir malus, a bad man, while describing his lack of rhetorical skills. This suggests that proper rhetorical abilities could add to a man’s virtus, manliness, just as a lack of ability could take away from it.

Tacitus’ Annales

Tacitus has used Tiberius’ own words and speech to suggest a lack of virtus. Tacitus describes Tiberius as the opposite of the vir bonus, Quintilian’s good orator.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Plus in oratione tali dignitate quam fidei earat. Tiberique estiam in rebus quas non occultaret, seu naturae sive aduersutuline, suspensa semper et obscura verba: tunc vero silent. ut senseris suos penitus abderet, in incertum et ambiguum magis implicabantur.</td>
<td>There was more grandeur than truth in such speech; and even when Tiberius was not hiding his affairs, whether because of his nature or because of his habit, his words were always ambiguous and obscure: now with the truth clear, in order that he might conceal his own buried motivations, he became even more unclear and obscure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In conclusion, these authors all demonstrate different portrayals of rhetoric in gender construction.

• Quintilian provides evidence that one who could speak with eloquence, an orator, was considered to be a vir bonus, a good man.

• Pliny describes various individuals’ rhetorical abilities when writing works such as eulogies and recommendations. He frequently uses descriptions of their rhetorical skills when portraying their character, attributing good rhetorical skills to praiseworthy men and attributing bad rhetorical skills to men not worthy of praise. Positive descriptions suggest a degree of virtus, or manliness.

• Tacitus portrays the Roman emperors from Tiberius to Nero. He frequently uses descriptions of their rhetorical abilities to indicate their moral character: those without proper speaking skills lack proper virtus.

Conclusion

On his column, Trajan is portrayed as an orator addressing his troops.

Bibliography

Note: All translations are my own. Texts listed provided the Latin text.

