

Virtus et Oratio: Masculinity and Rhetoric in Early Imperial Rome

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Introduction

Manliness, 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 greater level of *virtus* than those who were lacking in eloquence. These stereotypes can be seen in the writings of authors in early imperial Rome.



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Roman men were often portrayed in the act of speaking in statuary honoring them. Here Trajan's raised right hand indicates that he is giving a speech. Pliny, Quintilian, and Tacitus were all writing at the time of Trajan.

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 construction of gender for men.
- 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:

Section	Latin	English
1.Prooemium.9	<i>Oratorem autem instituimus illum perfectum, qui esse nisi vir bonus non potest.</i>	However, I train the perfect orator, who does not exist unless he is a good man.
1.2.3	<i>Neque enim esse oratorem nisi bonum virum iudico et fieri, etiam si potest, nolo.</i>	I hold that there cannot be an orator unless he is a good man and, even if it is possible, I do not wish for it to happen.

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:

Section	Latin	English
2.XIII	<i>Mira in sermone, mira etiam in ore ipso vultuque suavitas.</i>	The sweetness in his conversation is amazing, even the sweetness in his very voice and countenance is amazing.
4.VII	<i>Itaque Herennius Senecio mirifice Catonis illud de oratore in hunc e contrario vertit: "Orator est vir malus dicendi imperitus."</i>	And thus Herennius Senecio turned Cato's admirable quote concerning orators to the reverse concerning Regulus: "An orator is a bad man unskilled in speaking."

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 skills could add to a man's *virtus*, manliness, just as a lack of ability could take away from it.

Tacitus' *Annales*

Tacitus' *Annales* is a chronicle of the Roman emperors from Tiberius to Nero. Tacitus does not just recount the events that happened under each emperor, but he give also his readers an understanding of the moral character of each emperor. One of the ways in which he achieves this goal is by describing their rhetorical skills. A selection describing the emperor Tiberius is seen below.

Section	Latin	English
1.11	<i>Plus in oratione tali dignitatis quam fidei erat; Tiberioque etiam in rebus quas non occuleret, seu natura sive adsuetudine, suspensa semper et obscura verba: tunc vero nitenti, ut sensus suos penitus abderet, in incertum et ambiguum magis implicabantur.</i>	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.

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.

Tacitus portrays the emperor Nero as lacking in proper *virtus*.

Section	Latin	English
13.3	<i>Adnotabant seniores quibus otiosum est vetera et praesentia contendere, primum ex iis, qui rerum potiti essent, Neronem alienae facundiae eguisse.</i>	The elders, who had the leisure to compare old and new things, noted that Nero was the first of the emperors to need of another's eloquence.

Here, Nero has used a speech written by Seneca at his adopted father's funeral, while the custom was for the man's son to write and perform an original eulogy. Nero instead has used Seneca's words. The elders look down on this, comparing him to past emperors who all had some degree of eloquence and thus had more *virtus*, or manliness, than Nero.

Conclusion

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*.



By Barbara McMcanus, 1982, via Vroma

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.

- Pliny. *Epistulae*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961.
- Quintilian. *Institutio Oratoria*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001.
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