**Virtus et Oratio: Masculinity and Rhetoric in Early Imperial Rome**

By Bethany Good, Faculty Advisor: Dr. Maura Lafferty

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN

**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 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 ideal man and, even if it is possible, I do not wish for it to happen.

- 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 also gives 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.

- 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.

---

**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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Plus in oratione tali dignitatis quam fidelis est, Tiberioque in rebus quas non simulacule, seu natura, suspensa semper et obscura verba: tunc veno nilenti, ut sensus suo penitus abderet, in incertum et ambiguous magis implicatambatur.</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>
</table>

**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 also gives 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>Adhocratant seniores quibus oculos est vetera et praesentia contendere, primum ex ilis, qui rem pati essent. Neroem alienae facundiae eguisse.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>Mira in sermone, mira etiam in ore ipso vultique suavitas.</td>
<td>The sweetness in his conversation is amazing, even the sweetness in his very voice and countenance is amazing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, these authors all demonstrate different portraits of rhetoric in gender construction.

- Quintilian provides evidence that one who could speak well, 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.

---

**Bibliography**

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