


Author's Response

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doi:10.1017/S0034670523000517

Style is an entry point into politics writ large. This is particularly true in the case of Cicero, whose insights into rhetorical style are, as Connolly observes, inextricable from his republican and agonistic politics. Despite our substantial agreement on these points, I focus on one place where I think Connolly's reconstruction of my argument should be qualified—because doing so can offer the beginning of a response to her concluding challenge.

Connolly writes that Cicero “criticizes Attic oratory, the plain-speaking kind associated with Julius Caesar, because only the complexity of the high style can reflect the diverse variety of views and values and bases of knowledge the audience represents” (95). But as I read Cicero, he does not criticize the “low” or plain style in itself, which he both employs in his own oratory and theorizes as a constitutive part of eloquence. Rather, Cicero's criticism is reserved for the *exclusively* plain style. The problem with Atticism, for Cicero, is monotonous plainness. The complexity he values is not only the syntactic and figural complexity of the high style, but the holistic complexity of the ideal orator who moves across registers.

The choice to speak plainly tells the audience little in a world in which all speech is plain. For style to do the political work that Connolly emphasizes—accommodating the audience's plurality—it has to be the object of meaningful choice from a range of alternatives. Because the politics that Cicero associates with Caesar is stylistically impoverished, it is also, to that extent, static and predictable, less capable of generating creative responses to conflict.

But there are other limits to rhetorical creativity—and a particularly salient one for us, as Connolly argues, has to do with the distribution of rhetorical risk. If the pursuit of eloquence is inherently risky, that risk falls disproportionately on women and racialized people. As a result, too many people in public life are constrained to work within a sharply limited symbolic vocabulary—one in which access to the full Ciceronian range, from rage to invective and even to histrionics, is effectively restricted.

This is, I agree, a problem that deserves our engagement—not just our acknowledgment. One way of engaging it is an immanent critique of classical rhetoric. Such a critique would look to a tradition that valorizes rhetorical risk

against a backdrop of social stratification and ask: How much of this risk is real, and how much is merely notional? I return to that question in my response to Shanks. A second way of engagement would point out how Cicero, despite this critique, still offers some conceptual resources to point out the damage done by gendered and racialized limits on style. Those limits do much the same damage in our time as Cicero saw Atticism doing in his: impoverishing politics in both style and substance.

Nederman asks where in my book is the Cicero who attempted to reconcile eloquence and wisdom? Where is Cicero the Philosopher? Yet I wrote this book with the conviction that the person we most need to hear from at this moment is Cicero the Politician—the observer of, and participant in, political crisis. Cicero seems to have been aware of his movement between these two roles. In *Orator*, as Nederman observes, Cicero attributes his formation as an orator to his philosophical education. But in *Brutus* (311–16) he offers a much more granular story: daily declamation exercises, attendance at public trials, management of the voice and lungs, practices of imitation and mentoring that initiate the would-be orator into a rhetorical culture. In a larger sense, we can find these rival personae throughout his work. The former is concerned with healing the rift between philosophy and rhetoric, the latter with how to act in a world in which that rift has very plainly not been healed.

Nederman and I have very different readings of Cicero's story of the foundation of society by the prototypical man of eloquence—but it is here, I would argue, that Cicero's political voice can be heard quite clearly. This story is undermined by context that is deliberately imported by Cicero. In his own voice, as author of the prefaces to each book, he tells us that the urbane conversation narrated in *De oratore* is immediately followed by the outbreak of war in Italy—and that nearly all of its participants would go on to die as a result of political violence. Crassus, in whose mouth Cicero puts the story, returns to Rome and attempts to forestall the immediate crisis with a last-ditch address to the Senate. He gives a magnificent performance—and then immediately takes ill and dies (3.1–6).

On the level of philosophy, it is true for Cicero that the union of wisdom and eloquence establishes political order. On the level of politics, he gives us a politician, Crassus, who is described as embodying that union of wisdom and eloquence, who attempts to restore political order through the power of his speech—and who keels over as a result. The implications of this contrast are a reason I depart from more traditional readings of *De oratore*, which see it as Cicero's attempt to bridge the philosophy-rhetoric divide, and read it instead hoping to catch the voice of Cicero the Politician—someone attuned to the practices and the experience of oratory.

From this perspective, Cicero has some quite powerful things to say about rhetoric under conditions of crisis, and about the danger of destructive, demagogic speech. One is a warning addressed to the would-be demagogue: successful demagoguery—speech that entirely dominates the audience—loses much of what makes oratory valuable to the orator. It leaves no room for

the ongoing confrontation with uncertainty, and the cultivation of courage in response to the unruly audience, that are so important to Cicero's account. Cicero the Philosopher can tell us why demagoguery is wrong. Cicero the Politician can tell us why demagoguery is self-negating.

But, as Shanks points out, most of the figures in my book "were at best ambivalent if not intensely skeptical about democracy" (107). As a result, she is right that my commitment to reading them for democratic purposes is necessarily informed by more recent democratic theory. In considering the sources of that commitment, I agree with Shanks that my book points to an "unexpected affinity between agonistic democracy and the demands of decorum" (108). Just as the agonistic strand of democratic theory is concerned with channeling contention, passion, and enmity in constructive—or at least, less destructive—ways, the rhetorical tradition descending from Cicero stresses a similar goal. Because of who has traditionally written rhetorical and political theory, the story of this contention has often been written from the point of view of the elite rather than the public. But what interests me is the contention itself, and the factors that would motivate someone like Cicero to want to *contend* with the public rather than to dominate or command it. Conversely, Cicero describes a rhetorical public that, in many ways, is more to be feared and reckoned with than publics in our own time. We can, if we choose, read him with an eye toward becoming a more difficult audience.

As Shanks notes, though, there are arguably more direct paths to a democratic rhetoric than the circuitous route via Cicero. In the search for "more democratic tendencies embedded in the rhetorical tradition" (108). She proposes that closer study of handbook writers and other rhetorical technicians—those comparatively unsung figures who worked to popularize rhetoric—might help us cultivate democratic practices today.

I hope to act on this suggestion to consider democratic resources within the rhetorical tradition in my current research project, which focuses on the appropriations of classical rhetoric in Black political thought, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ One of my claims is that figures like Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois should be regarded not only as inheritors, but as subverters and transformers of the classical rhetorical tradition. I plan to argue that the Ciceronian invocations of the harms, risks, and vulnerabilities of oratory—which are at least somewhat notional for Cicero—become much more vivid and literal when voiced from the racial and social margins. I start from the decidedly technical writers (such as Caleb Bingham, Adams Sherman Hill, and Barrett Wendell) via whom Douglass and Du Bois made contact with the rhetorical tradition.

¹Rob Goodman, "Slavery and Oratory: Frederick Douglass in the History of Rhetoric," *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 4 (2023): 1202–14; Goodman, "The Rhetorical Roots of Du Bois's Double Consciousness," *History of Political Thought* 44, no. 3 (2023): 577–604.

In Douglass's self-fashioning of the hybrid role of "orator-slave," or in Du Bois's transposition of "double consciousness" from the circumscribed world of elite rhetorical training to the experience of racial oppression, we can observe claims to be more classical than the classics—an immanent critique of the Ciceronian tradition that we who want to renew the tradition's relevance should do our best to draw out.

Landauer focuses on my claim that we can understand eloquence as an emergent property of certain rhetorical relationships. He asks whether it is not, in fact, more plausible to locate eloquence in "the power of the ideal that the orator invokes" (101). If eloquence were a property of speaker-audience relationships, we would not be able to perceive the eloquence of "long-dead orators" (101) who are no longer active claimants on our attention and judgment. But historical orators are not really eloquent for us in the way that they may have been for their immediate listeners. When read at a historical distance, their words lack the capacity to surprise us, the ability to meaningfully fail, and the connection to active political uncertainty that comes from attempting an answer to the question, What is to be done? We can, of course, imaginatively recreate those qualities when we enter into a sympathetic reading of an orator like Douglass, placing ourselves in the shoes of his original listeners, or imaginatively transposing him to the present. But in either case, we have recreated a relationship to the speaker, in which his eloquence can make itself felt through its demands on us.

Conversely, situating eloquence in the ideals invoked by the speaker, or in "the representation claimed by the orator", poses some problems. We can imagine ideals that we endorse expressed in a way that leaves us cold, or ideals that we find abhorrent expressed eloquently. It also seems that situating eloquence there, as Schmitt does, pushes rhetoric in the direction of monologue by limiting the audience's role to the endorsement (or not) of the speaker's representative claims. Schmitt's aspiration to a noncontestatory rhetoric is evident in his discussion of Bishop Bossuet. Bossuet's speech is "representative discourse, rather than discussion and debate. It moves in antitheses. But these are not contradictions; they are the various and sundry elements molded into a *complexio*."² What is telling here is that the "antitheses" of contentious rhetoric are still present, though in a vestigial form: they have left the external world, where they make themselves felt in struggles among speakers and audiences, to take up residence in the mind of the orator who is supposed to harmonize them.

So one way of conceiving the difference between Schmitt's rhetorical ideal and the one I defend is to say that the former locates eloquence in representative claims, while I locate it in rhetorical relationships. Another way of expressing the difference is to say that Schmitt wants struggle and contention to be internal to the orator, whereas Cicero wants them to take place in public

²Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 23.

view. My claim is that the speech produced by the latter ideal deserves to be called “eloquent” more than that produced by the former, but I recognize that this is, at least in part, a question of taste. More importantly, Schmitt’s notion of eloquence—even though, as Landauer notes, it can make use of such ideals as freedom and equality—reinforces rather than challenges asymmetries of power between those who tend to speak and those who tend to listen. At its best, I believe, the Ciceronian tradition does the opposite.