Chapter 8

Elite Rhetoric and Self-Presentation: Metellus Numidicus Returns

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Introduction

How did Roman politicians perform in public when challenged on their reputations and careers? What were the parameters for this communication with the public and how did politicians navigate these parameters? In this chapter, I present a case from a Roman republican setting, which illustrates some of the tactics adopted to tackle a potentially career-damaging discharge. The case in question is the replacement of Q. Caecilius Metellus in 107 B.C. on the African command with his former subordinate officer, Gaius Marius, and Metellus’ return to Rome to face public criticism of his conduct as general.

I shall focus on the textual record of Metellus’ oratorical performances in the contio because they form part of the great political debate at the time, namely, the tribunician challenge of the senatorial dominance in foreign politics and senatorial corruption more generally, and therefore can throw further light on how this debate played out in the public sphere of the contio. Secondly, because these deliberative speeches exemplify some of the performative aspects of public oratory in Rome discussed in current scholarship.1 And finally, because the textual record of his oratory, albeit limited and fragmentary, illustrates well the parameters for communication available to Metellus and the ways in which he operated within a common set of values and expectations of how a Roman senator responded to public criticism.

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The main questions to be pursued are: how did Metellus perform in his public addresses in the aftermath of his discharge? What were the reasons behind his grant of a triumph in spite of not finishing the war and being replaced on the command? And, what does his handling of his discharge tell us about the boundaries of public oratorical performances in republican Rome and the unwritten rules of republican politics?

1 Setting the Stage

First, however, I shall briefly set the stage for Metellus’ performance, because it will allow a better understanding of the parameters under which Metellus spoke. Quintus Caecilius Metellus came from a privileged background in an elite family which had been highly successful for generations in both politics and military commands. He had lived up to the family history of success, obtaining and fulfilling both civic and military public offices. In 109 B.C., his election to the consulship led the way to his military command in the war against the Numidians in North Africa. In the same year, a special inquest into the conduct of Metellus’ predecessors in the war resulted in the conviction and exile of several high-ranking generals and senators. The conduct of the new commander was therefore under close scrutiny.

Metellus did well as commander, training his soldiers considerably better than his immediate predecessor, winning several battles, defeating the main enemy Jugurtha in two battles although not capturing him, and advancing into Numidian territory. So far, it seems that there was nothing to criticise but only to praise. The dramatic change came when Metellus’ officer, Gaius Marius, asked for leave to go to Rome and stand for the consulship of 107 B.C. When Metellus showed his reluctance—even ridicule at the thought if we are to believe the two major narrators of this event, Sallust and Plutarch—Marius started a campaign to both smear Metellus’ reputation and advance his own chances of election. Through the allegation that Metellus artificially prolonged the war in order to remain in command, Marius managed to position himself with the soldiers in the army, the Roman businessmen in Africa, and the tribunes of the plebs in Rome as the perfect candidate for the consulship and, as a consequence, also as the perfect candidate for the command in Africa because

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3 See sources in MRR.

4 Sall. Jug. 64; Plut. Mar. 8.3.