CHAPTER ONE

CICERO: HIS LIFE AND CAREER

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The three elements of the traditional rhetorical triad, *ingenium*, *ars*, *exercitatio*—essential ingredients for the attainment of eloquence in any age—are, have seldom, if ever, combined themselves as efficaciously as they did in the person of Marcus Tullius Cicero, the undisputed master of oratory in ancient Rome.\(^1\) Endowed with extraordinary natural ability, the beneficiary of an extremely broad and deep education in both rhetoric and philosophy, and a dedicated practitioner of the art, disciplined enough to burn the midnight oil in honing his skills to near perfection (cf., e.g., Brutus 312), Cicero stands as one of most successful and abidingly influential orators and rhetorical writers of any age. The man whose name was soon to become synonymous with eloquence itself (*non hominis nomen, sed eloquentiae; see Quintilian 10.1.112*) left to his fellow Romans and to posterity a corpus of speeches that are models of both effective oratorical persuasion and brilliantly lucid prose style. As a rhetorician, Cicero moved beyond merely regurgitating the precepts of the handbooks, insisting in his mature works that his ideal orator be equipped with all the noble arts, calling for a marriage between eloquence and wisdom (rhetoric and philosophy), and providing a pattern, even to this day, of what we sometimes call a ‘liberally educated person.’ The sixty­odd years of Cicero’s life and career coincide almost exactly with the final six decades of the Roman Republic. During most of that time, this ‘new man’ (*novus homo*), none of whose ancestors had ever

\(^{1}\) An exhaustive account of Cicero’s life and times would be out of place in a volume of this kind. The present essay attempts to give only a basic outline of Cicero’s life and career. For detailed analysis, the reader is directed to any of the many fine, comprehensive biographical studies on Cicero, several of which are listed in the bibliography below (21). The best ancient sources include Cicero’s own writings, especially his letters and the *Brutus*, as well as Plutarch’s *Life of Cicero*. The individual essays of this Companion provide valuable background on specific periods of Cicero’s life and his oratorical/rhetorical career.
attained any significant office at Rome, remained in the political arena, rubbing shoulders and butting heads with the likes of men such as Crassus, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Octavian. Perhaps most remarkable is the fact that in such an environment he was able to survive, indeed often thrive, by relying on a reputation and position in the state that he had attained and maintained almost exclusively by the force of his oratory. While others might appeal to the loyalty of their legions and play power politics backed by the force of arms, Cicero could wield only the weapon of his words. Ultimately, of course, the ‘toga’ did bow to arms. Perhaps this was the inevitable outcome; but in the process, the potency that the art of oratory offered to a master practitioner was eloquently illustrated and confirmed for subsequent generations.

Marcus Tullius Cicero was born on 3 January 106 B.C. at Arpinum, a town approximately 70 miles southeast of Rome. His family were members of the local elite and, though no kinsmen had ever held high office in Rome, they lived comfortably and had important connections in the city. When Marcus and his younger brother, Quintus, were still boys, Cicero’s father moved the family to the capital, apparently in order to secure for his sons the finest possible education. In that connection, Cicero tells us (De oratore 2.2) that he and his brother, along with two of their cousins, were received into the house of the famous orator and statesman, Lucius Licinius Crassus, who took an active interest in their education. In that environment, the young Cicero was able to interact not only with Crassus, but also his associates, most importantly Marcus Antonius, the other great orator of that generation, as well as L. Aelius Stilo, the famous Stoic teacher of grammar and rhetoric. These early contacts and connections proved invaluable to the young boy, and would have an abiding effect on the orator throughout his career (cf. De or. 2.1–9).

Much of Cicero’s youth was undoubtedly spent in the Roman Forum, the center of Rome’s political and forensic life. There Cicero could witness first-hand the oratory of Crassus, Antonius, and others who spoke before the courts and in public meetings. After the death of Crassus in 91 B.C., Cicero assumed the toga virilis, the ‘toga

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2 The reference is, of course, to Cicero’s (in)famous line of poetry, Ceadant arma togae, concedat laurea laudi (‘Let arms yield to the toga, let the laurel yield to praise’).
3 For a more detailed account of Cicero’s education, see Anthony Corbeil, “Rhetorical Education in Cicero’s Youth” (below, 23–48) with relevant bibliography.