CHAPTER TWO
RHETORICAL EDUCATION IN CICERO'S YOUTH

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I begin with a remark datable to the late second or early first century B.C.E. that offers a frank assessment of one aspect of Roman education: 'Our people are like Syrian slaves; the better they know Greek, the worse they get'. This witticism is attributed to a man about whom very little is known. He appears to have been active in municipal politics in Arpinum and it is likely that his contacts with powerful men in Rome allowed him to send his son to the capital city for an education. The speaker's grandson, on the contrary, is the person about whom we know more than any other figure in Roman antiquity: the orator and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero. By the standards of the grandfather, the more famous Cicero, who quotes this witticism in his treatise On the Orator, was to become one of the worst Romans of the Republican age. This tension between the elder Cicero's alleged disdain for Greek learning and the younger's undeniable achievement in making that learning a part of Roman culture marks not just a progression within the family of the Tullii Cicerones; the decades separating the adulthood of the two men mark a period during which Romans were continually confronted with the question of how to integrate Greek influence into their own culture.

It does not really matter for my discussion whether Cicero's grandfather really did make his remark; nor does it much matter whether he would have believed it if he had. Similar forms of anti-Hellenic sentiment occur throughout Roman literature, both before and after the elder Cicero offered his own concise contribution. Most significantly,

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1 De or. 2.265; nos tro homines similis esse Syrorum venalium: ut quisque optime Graece sciret, ita esse nequissimum.
Lucius Licinius Crassus and Marcus Antonius, the two principal interlocutors of the same treatise *On the Orator*, are depicted as trying to avoid the kind of criticism that this witticism reveals, as they carefully conceal the ways in which Greek learning has contributed to the success of their careers. Cicero relates that Crassus, although feigning no more than superficial familiarity with the Greek language, in fact knew Greek so well that it seemed his native tongue; similarly, Antonius’s pretense of not knowing Greek rhetorical theory proves a sham upon closer examination (2.1–5). Cicero’s comment when composing the treatise in the 50s B.C.E. makes it clear that such disingenuous behavior would no longer serve a purpose; moreover, he declines even to conjecture what the original purpose could have been that inspired these denials. Refusing to speculate, he closes discussion with the following enigmatic remark: ‘whatever their object may have been, it surely no longer pertains to our own time.’

The issue of how Greek learning should be used can, by Cicero’s adulthood, be dismissed as irrelevant.

The progression in *On the Orator* from the grandfather to Antonius and Crassus to young Cicero marks a path from disdain to denial to dismissal. This transition renders especially interesting the narrative context within which Cicero portrays these attitudes toward Greek learning. In 92 B.C.E., this same Crassus was one of two censors to pass an edict denouncing a group calling themselves the ‘Latin rhetoricians’; the censors, apparently, disapproved of these teachers for not fully engaging their students in the intricacies of the Greek rhetorical tradition. The Greek education of Cicero’s Crassus and the activities of the historical Crassus seem at odds with one another. Furthermore, the dramatic date of the dialogue *On the Orator*, September of 91 B.C.E., covers a period when the teen-age Cicero is fully immersed in learning rhetoric from Greek treatises and teachers and declaiming in the Greek language—all with the approval of Crassus. To describe ‘Rhetorical Education in Cicero’s Youth’ entails, it is clear, not simply reconstructing a probable curriculum, but disentangling intermingled ideologies. I propose, therefore, to examine this

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3 *De or. 2.5: quorum consilium quale fuerit, nihil sane ad hoc tempus.*