CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CICERO’S ORATORICAL AND RHETORICAL LEGACY

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Even when Cicero’s writings and political role have been studied only by the few—a situation found again today in the waning of the Renaissance—his name has often been widely recognized as that of a great orator. The noun Ciceron, -onis, was defined in Lewis and Short’s New Latin Dictionary of 1879 as ‘the greatest of the Roman orators and writers,’ a lexicographer’s dictum that can be made more acceptable by introduction of the word ‘prose’ before ‘writers.’ Cicero occupies a unique role in history. He is the only Roman writer mentioned by Greek critics; medieval manuscripts of his works outnumber those of any other classical Latin writer; incunabula editions of his works number over three hundred, about twice those of Virgil; his orations have been school texts continually for two thousand years; and though statistics are lacking, it is likely that citations of Cicero have outnumbered those from any other Roman source, at least until the nineteenth century.

Cicero has perhaps also been the most controversial of major Roman writers. Some of this controversy originated with his political enemies; it was probably encouraged by Tiro’s publication of Cicero’s sometimes-too-candid letters, and was perpetuated in the historical writings of Asinius Pollio, Cassius Dio, and others. Though he was often accused of vanity, and sometimes of other weaknesses

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1 The earliest Greek known to have commented on Cicero’s eloquence was Caecilius of Caleacte, a rhetorician of the Augustan period; his writings (all in Greek) included a comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero that is criticized as inept by Plutarch, Demosthenes, ch. 3; cf. also Plutarch’s Comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero, the fine synecrisis of the two in the ‘Longinian’ treatise On Sublimity 12.4, and the unexpected mention of Cicero in Sopatros’ Hypomnmena (ed. by Christian Walz, Rhetores Graeci [Stuttgartiae et Tubingae: J. G. Cotta 1832–1836] vol. 5: 7–8).

2 Tiro also wrote a biography of Cicero in four books, which was doubtless laudatory and was one of Plutarch’s sources for his life of Cicero (89.2). For what is known of Tiro’s work, see Historicorum Romanorum Reliquiae, ed. by H. Peter, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Teubner 1906) no. ii: 5–6.
of character, Cicero's historical role, especially at the time of the Catilinarian conspiracy and in the final confrontation with Mark Antony, has generally been admired. He found influential defenders in high places at an early time. The emperor Augustus, who had had a hand in Cicero's proscription, later described him as 'a learned man and lover of his country' (Plutarch, Cicero 49.3), a pronouncement consistent with Augustan propaganda of 'the restoration of the republic'; and the emperor Claudius wrote a defense of Cicero in response to a work by Asinius Gallus in which the orator had been unfavorably compared to Gallus' father, Pollio (Suetonius, Claudius 41). In modern times, the effort of the great German historian, Theodor Mommsen, to discredit and dishonor Cicero in his Römische Geschichte of 1856, while exalting Julius Caesar to heroic status, has not, in the long run, succeeded. Over the course of the centuries, however, the controversy more frequently concerned 'Ciceronianism,' a matter of rhetorical, stylistic, and linguistic imitation rather than ideology and politics.

The first modern account of Cicero's legacy was Rafael Sabbadini's La Storia del Ciceronianismo of 1885; better known has been Tadeusz Zielinski's Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte (1897; 1908). About the same time J. E. Sandys was publishing his splendid History of Classical Scholarship in three volumes, containing hundreds of references to Cicero from throughout western history. Among older discussions in English is that by John C. Rolfe, whose short book, Cicero and His Influence, appeared in the series 'Our Debt to Greece and Rome' in 1923. Rolfe cites numerous striking statements in praise of Cicero

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3 In the translation of William P. Dickson, Mommsen's statement reads "... Marcus Cicero, a notorious political trimmer accustomed to flirt at times with the democrats, at times with Pompey, at times (from a somewhat greater distance) with the aristocracy, and to lend his services as an advocate to every influential man under impeachment without distinction of person or party..." Cf. the abridged edition of Mommsen's History of Rome, ed. by D. A. Saunders and J. H. Collins (New York: Meridian Books 1956): 278–79.

4 Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner 1897; 2nd, revised ed., 1908. Zielinski's book, which remains an important authority, is divided into two parts: a general assessment and (pp. 341–448) Anmerkungen und Exkurse, which provide quotations, references, and bibliographies on which the main text depends. Zielinski was professor of Latin at the University of St Petersburg in Russia and is known also for an important study of Ciceronian prose rhythm.


6 Originally published in 1923; the commonly available 1963 edition (New York: