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CICERO'S *ARTES LIBERALES* AND THE LIBERAL ARTS*

When we talk about the development of the *artes liberales* today, the conversation very often goes back to ancient Rome. And rightly so: the first recorded use of the term appears in Cicero's *De inventione*, in a passage which assumes that the concept will at least be familiar to the reader. As befits the purpose of the work, Cicero aims to provide advice on the sort of material suitable for proving propositions in an argument – all of which, he adds, «are supported by attributes of persons or actions» (*inv.* 35, *confirmantur aut ex eo quod personis aut ex eo quod negotiis est attributum*). Thus, he suggests:

in victu considerare oportet, apud quem et quo more et cuius arbitratu sit educatus, quos habuerit artium liberalium magistros, quos vivendi praeceptores, quibus amicis utatur, quo in negotio, quaestu, artificio sit occupatus, quo modo rem familiarem administret, qua consuetudine domestica sit¹.

With reference to a man's way of life it is proper to consider among what men, and in what manner, and according to whose direction he has been brought up; what teachers of the liberal arts he has had; what admonitors to encourage him to a proper course of life; with what friends he is intimate; in what business, or employment, or gainful pursuit he is occupied; in what manner he manages his estate, and what are his domestic habits.

Little is given away about the contents of a liberal education, nor does Cicero's text presuppose a systematic means of delivering it. Yet it seems to be something which he has personally experienced², and which he expects of and admires in his contemporaries³.

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¹ Cic. *inv.* 35, trans. by Hubbell 1949.

² Cic. *fam.* 4, 4, 4, *nam etsi a prima aetate me omnis ars et doctrina liberalis.*

³ Atticus is described as a man *omni liberali doctrina politissimus* at Cic. *fam.* 13, 1, 5.

As a self-confessed Hellenophile, who spent some time studying in Athens, it is likely that Cicero has in mind something akin to the Greek notion of *enkyklios paideia*: that is, the wide-learning that was in some ways regarded as preparatory training for professional and political life.⁴ Even though the term itself does not appear in any source before the late first-century AD, it is clear from Quintilian that Greek education was seen as providing all-round instruction within a close system of subjects. In the opening sections of his 12-tome work *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian treats the elementary stages of education (learning to read and write, grammar and literature), before coming onto what he considers the staples – namely music, astronomy and geography – for the later study of rhetoric, by which: «the course of education described by the Greeks as *enkyklios paideia* will be brought to its full completion» (*inst.* 1, 10, 1, *ut efficiatur orbis ille doctrinae, quem Graeci encyclion paedian vocant*).

Further support for the development of a «canon» of Greek studies in the first century BC can be found in the evidence we have for the *Disciplinarum Libri* of Varro, a contemporary of Cicero's, who composed the first scheme of the liberal arts for a Roman audience. Although this work has not survived, we know from other texts that it included nine chapters, and that it probably included one each on grammar, logic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music, medicine and architecture⁵. As the curriculum evolved, medicine and architecture were removed on the ground that they were professional disciplines and not liberal studies. Thus, in Martianus Capella's treatise *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* – the earliest surviving and most influential encyclopaedia of the liberal arts⁶ – we find only seven *artes liberales*, who are personified and presented as handmaidens by the god (Mercury) to his new bride (Philology). Like Varro, to whom the work is indebted, the work is in nine books, but two describe the betrothal and the wedding ceremony of Philology and Mercury, while the remaining seven are dedicated to the handmaidens (the *artes*) as each is made to give a precis of her talents: Grammar,

⁴ Cf., e.g. Clarke 1971, 3; on the distinctions between the Roman *artes liberales* and the Greek *enkyklios paideia*, cf. Adler 2020, 39-41.

⁵ The idea that Varro's *Disciplinarum libri* was divided into nine books, each treating a separate discipline, comes from Vitruvius *arch.* 7, *praef.* 14 (which only mentions architecture) and was first argued for by Ritschl 1887. Although Hadot 1984, 187, questions Ritschl's reconstruction, the division has been defended recently by Shanzer 2005, esp. 84-88.

⁶ The work was probably composed between 410 and 439 AD, although other dates have been suggested; for an overview of the debate, cf. Stahl-Johnson-Burge 1971, 12-16.

Dialectic, Rhetoric, Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy, and Harmony⁷ – all the subjects that were later included in the medieval programme of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*.

The importance of Varro's *Disciplinarum Libri* as a source both for later Latin encyclopaedists and for Augustine's cycle of the liberal arts has long been acknowledged. In his 1890 study of the liberal arts, Parker stated the liberal arts «started from Greece [...] and they travelled to the universities in Varro's secret path»⁸ – a journey that took in Martianus Capella, Boethius, as well as Augustine, Cassiodorus and Isidore, among others⁹. But what, if any, was Cicero's influence in the formation of this curriculum? And can we make some room for Cicero on the path alongside Varro? After all, Varro's thinking about the *disciplinae* did not exist in a vacuum, and we might well expect some points of agreement or disagreement between the two leading intellectuals of their day¹⁰. In what follows, then, I look at the journey of Cicero's reception in the early development of the canon before turning to examine Cicero's vision for the content and purpose of the *artes liberales* in his own day¹¹. In particular, I will discuss the ways in which Cicero sought to broaden the curriculum of the *artes liberales*, making their study relevant to first century BC Rome, and then end with some reflections on the political context in which his ideas on education were produced.

⁷ In her review of Hadot 1984, Rawson 1987, 215 suggests it is possible that Martianus Capella's rejection of medicine and architecture was a response to Varro's list of *disciplinae*.

⁸ Parker 1890, 432. As the article goes on to explain, the "secret path" refers to the *Disciplinarum libri*. The term is a translation of the opening line (*Arcanum Varronis iter*) of Licentius' *Carmen ad Augustinum*; for discussion of the "path", also cf. Shanzer 2005, 80-81.

⁹ On Varro and the late Latin encyclopaedists, cf. Simon 1963; for Varro as a source for Augustine, cf. Cipriani 2000 and Shanzer 2005 (with a review of earlier literature at pp. 69-75).

¹⁰ As Wiseman 2009, 107-129, points out, the two men were often on opposite sides of the political spectrum, and there may have been some literary rivalry between them. Kronenberg 2009, 88-90, describes it as an «often uneasy relationship» and detects irony and parody in Varro's responses to Cicero's philosophical works.

¹¹ For a different approach, cf. Kimball 1986, who affords Cicero a key role in the history of the idea of liberal education. As part of his larger argument that there are two strands, or «accommodations» behind modern-day thinking of the tradition – one more philosophical and the other more oratorical – Kimball traces the accommodation of the *artes liberales* ideal from the sophists, through the school of Isocrates to Cicero, Varro, Quintilian and beyond to provide a framework for contemporary debate.

1. *From Cicero to Martianus Capella: The artes liberales and the Development of a “Canon”*

Cicero enjoyed a vibrant afterlife in late antiquity: his political and personal life, his fame as an orator and philosopher, his mastery of the Latin language and his thinking on topics such as law, death, the gods, Roman governance, and virtue were all part and parcel of the cultural literacy taught in Roman schools¹². Yet the immediate impact of his ideas on the *artes liberales* and education are less easy to trace. Augustine, for example, was particularly well-versed in the Latin classics and a substantial body of scholarship has already been devoted to Cicero’s influence on Augustine’s social and political thought, as well as the development of his philosophical views¹³. But even though he took inspiration from Cicero’s conviction that wisdom and eloquence ought to be united, Augustine adapted this principle to his own understanding of soteriology¹⁴. Moreover, his *De ordine*, which contains Augustine’s musings on the liberal arts in book 2, responds more to Cicero’s views on providence in *De natura deorum*, *De divinatione*, and *De fato* than the views on education expressed in Cicero’s rhetorical writings. When we turn to Martianus Capella, on the other hand, we can find telling evidence for the reception of Cicero’s works within the early liberal arts tradition. But even this work paints only a partial picture.

Naturally, Cicero’s works on rhetoric enjoyed an immense popularity, as did the speeches which had secured his reputation as an orator and statesman. Martianus Capella’s own story of the union of eloquence and learning delivers the same Ciceronian lesson that had appealed to Augustine: the study of the liberal arts provides the wisdom required to succeed in public life. And Cicero is the embodiment of that ideal¹⁵.

¹² For a comprehensive overview of Cicero’s reception in late Antiquity, cf. MacCormack 2013, with further bibliography; cf. also Gasti 2016, for a detailed discussion of the use (or “reuse”) of Cicero and his influence in later antique texts. On the reception of Cicero in Roman education, cf. also La Bua 2019, 31, who argues that Cicero’s whole policy of publication in his lifetime was part of his «self-fashioning as a Roman cultural and political authority».

¹³ For general works dedicated to Augustine’s debt to Cicero and the Latin Classics, cf. Testard 1958 and Hagendahl 1967; works which treat aspects of Cicero’s philosophical influence on Augustine include Görler 1992, Fuhrer 1993, Foley 1999, and Brittain 2011.

¹⁴ For the argument that Augustine adapted aspects of Cicero’s rhetorical theory to serve a new Christian theological vision in his *De doctrina*, cf. Clavier 2014.

¹⁵ On the transformation of Cicero into an allegory and a cultural myth in the hands of Martianus Capella, where he becomes «la personificazione dell’*Ars*», cf. Moretti 2010.

When Rhetoric enters the scene as the handmaiden for book 5 of *De nuptiis*, she is accompanied by a train of famous men, but foremost among them are Demosthenes and Cicero:

Ambo tamen novi profectique paupertatis sinu, et cum alterum Quirinalis eques, alium fabrilis procrearet industria, ita praeclues linguae excellentia floruerunt, ut post curiarum fata immeritasque mortes virtute astra conscenderent, immortalitate gloriae saecula superarent¹⁶.

Both were "new men" who rose to fame from humble beginnings, and although a Roman eques fathered one and a labouring workman the other, they grew to such fame though their oratorical prowess, that after their destinies in public life and their unwarranted deaths, they rose by their excellence to the stars, and now outlast the ages through their eternal glory.

That Martianus Capella had the works of Cicero to mind, if not also to hand, when he composed *De nuptiis* is beyond doubt. When Cicero makes his first appearance at 5, 431, he announces his arrival as a guest at the wedding with words lifted directly from the second Catilinarian: «O happy shall we be, fortunate will be the republic, illustrious will be the renown of my consulship» (Cic. *Catil.* 2, 10, *o nos beatos, o rem publicam fortunatam, o praeclaram laudem consulatus mei*). And when Rhetoric herself first begins to speak, she does so in a long and ornate period which simultaneously invites the reader to recall Cicero the orator. He is her star protégé: «Of all my followers, my Tullius shines out, because not only has he thundered forth with the grandeur of impressive speech in forum, senate and public assembly, but also in writing the rules of the subject has committed many books to use by future generations» (5, 436, *inter utrumque vero columen sectatorum praeniteat Tullius meus, qui non solum in foro, senatu rostrisque grandiloquae facultatis maiestate tonuerit, verum etiam ipsius artis praecepta commentus libros quamplures saeculorum usibus consecrarit*). It is to the words of the historical Cicero that her exposition will be indebted, she claims, in an allusion that makes a direct intertextual link to Cicero's *De inventione*: «My duty is to speak appropriately in order to persuade; my object is through speech to persuade the hearer of the subject proposed. I invoke the words of my Tullius, using whose examples I am going through all the branches of instruction in turn» (5, 439, *Officium vero meum est li-*

¹⁶ Martianus Capella 5, 4, 29; the text and translation used here, and for all subsequent references, is Stahl-Johnson-Burge 1977.

cere apposite ad persuadendum; finis persuadere id, quod est propositum, dictione. Quae quidem verba mei Ciceronis attestor, cuius etiam exemplis me per omnes insinuo praeceptionis ductus consequenter usuram)¹⁷.

As the rest of the book unfolds, Rhetoric remains true to her word. References are made to Cicero's speeches on behalf of Quinctius, Roscius of Ameria, Caecina, Milo, Murena, Caelius, Cluentius, Scaurus and King Deiotarus, as well as to the prosecution of Verres, the attack on Piso, *On the Agrarian Law*, the *Catilinarians* and *Philippics*. Occasionally his philosophical works get a mention (e.g. the *Hortensius* at 5, 441), while references to the theory of rhetoric show Martianus Capella's knowledge of *De inventione*, as well as the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*¹⁸. Allusions in the form of verbal echoes or the paraphrasing of ideas show Martianus Capella's debt to rhetorical works besides his earliest work. For example, when he describes the power of Rhetoric in the opening paragraphs of Book 5, the language echoes an equivalent passage in Cicero's *De oratore*. In Martianus Capella's version, Rhetoric is compared to a queen: «For like a queen with power over everything, she could drive any host of people wherever she wanted, and draw them back from where she wanted» (5, 427, *nam veluti potens rerum omnium regina et impellere quo vellet et unde vellet deducere*). Cicero, on the other hand, puts into the mouth of his character Crassus: «there is to my mind no more excellent thing than the power, by means of oratory, to get a hold on assemblies of men, win their good will, direct their inclinations wherever the speaker wishes, or divert them from whatever he wishes» (*de orat.* 1, 30, *neque vero mihi quicquam [...] praestabilius videtur, quam posse dicendo tenere hominum coetus mentis, adlicere voluntates, impellere quo velit, unde autem velit deducere*)¹⁹. However, outside *De nuptiis* 5 (the chapter dedicated to the art of rhetoric), although the diligent reader might continue to spot possible signs of Ciceronian influence, Cicero himself is nowhere to be found. His role has been to transmit and represent one branch of Greek learning only; there is no hint that Cicero himself may have had a vision for a wider system of liberal education.

¹⁷ For the intertextual allusions (highlighted in bold), compare the Latin with that of Cic. *inv.* 1, 6, *officium autem eius facultatis videtur esse dicere adposite ad persuasionem; finis persuadere dictione*.

¹⁸ Cf., in particular, Martianus Capella's discussion of the duties of the orator at 5, 442 (with notes *ad loc.* by Stahl-Johnson-Burge 1977, 162), which draws on both *De inventione* and *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

¹⁹ Text and translations from *De oratore* 1 and 2 are taken from Sutton-Rackham 1942.

Yet the evidence we have from Cicero suggests quite the reverse. To begin with, there is a clear sense across the spread of Cicero's works that he privileges certain subjects over others, and that he equates these with the *artes liberales*, or the *artes ingenuae* as he occasionally refers to them²⁰. Thus, he offers a list of some of the components of an arts curriculum at *De orat.* 1, 187, where he makes Crassus say:

Omnia fere, quae sunt conclusa nunc artibus, dispersa et dissipata quondam fuerunt; ut in musicis numeri et voces et modi; in geometria lineamenta, formae, intervalla, magnitudines; in astrologia caeli conversio, ortus, obitus motusque siderum; in grammaticis poetarum pertractatio, historiarum cognitio, verborum interpretatio, pronuntiandi quidam sonus; in hac denique ipsa ratione dicendi excogitare, ornare, disponere, meminisse, agere, ignota quondam omnibus et diffusa late videbantur.

Nearly all elements, now forming the content of arts, were once without order or correlation: in music, for example, rhythms, sounds and measures; in geometry, lines, figures, dimensions and magnitudes; in astronomy, the revolution of the sky, the rising, setting and movement of heavenly bodies; in literature, the study of poets, the learning of histories, the explanation of words and proper intonation in speaking them; and lastly in this very theory of oratory, invention, style, arrangement, memory and delivery, once seemed to all men things unknown and widely separate one from another.

Music, geometry, astronomy, literature and rhetoric are all identified here as *artes*, as they are elsewhere in Cicero's works²¹. Philosophy is left out, still it appears in personal reflections in his letters, where Cicero tells us that he enjoyed all the liberal arts from his earliest years, but philosophy most of all: *a prima aetate me omnis ars et doctrina liberalis, et maxime philosophia delectavit*²². That these studies were perceived as originally Greek finds sure expression at *De finibus* 3, 5, when Cicero discusses the coinage of new terms in Latin:

Quamquam ea verba quibus instituto veterum utimur pro Latinis, ut ipsa philosophia, ut rhetorica, dialectica, grammatica, geometria, musica,

²⁰ For the phrase *artes ingenuae*, cf. e.g. *de orat.* 1, 73; 3, 21.

²¹ For similar lists of *artes* in various contexts, cf. e.g. *Cic. fin.* 1, 72; 3, 4; *div.* 2, 122; *off.* 1, 19.

²² *Cic. fam.* 4, 4, 4 (SB 203). Philosophy is included within a discussion of the arts at *Tusc.* 1, 5-6.

quamquam Latine ea dici poterant, tamen quoniam usu percepta sunt nostra ducamus²³.

Words which the practice of past generations permits us to employ as Latin, e.g. the term “philosophy” itself, or “rhetoric”, “logic”, “grammar”, “geometry”, “music” we may consider as being our own; the ideas might it is true have been translated into Latin, but the Greek terms have been familiarized by use.

At first sight, then, it appears that Cicero recognised a curriculum of sorts for liberal arts studies, and that it included at least six key disciplines, all originally Greek; his immediate influence on Quintilian and the development of the canon cannot, then, be overlooked²⁴. And, when we reflect that, even as late as the time of the younger Seneca, the list of subjects that counted as *artes liberales* was still open for debate, this is no small contribution²⁵. Yet his musings elsewhere also suggest more flexibility and inclusiveness; in much the same way that we promote the classical subjects as still relevant for developing twenty-first century skills, Cicero needed to argue that a broad education based on the liberal arts prepared a man for life in first-century Rome.

2. Broadening the Appeal: The Liberal Arts for Life

Cicero famously extolled the value of literature – and especially Greek literature – in his speech *Pro Archia* where he credited his own skill as an orator to the training in the liberal arts he had received under the defendant’s instruction²⁶. As we have seen, this label probably conjured up an idea of disciplines that were originally associated with the Greek world, but there are hints that Cicero also included other aspects of learning under that banner. For example, in the third book of *De ora-*

²³ Cic. *fin.* 3, 5 (trans. Rackham 1914); cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1, 1-6, where Cicero discusses the adoption of Greek disciplines by Roman intelligentsia.

²⁴ Quintilian covers the subjects appropriate for the orator’s education in *inst.* 1. These include: (1) Literature (2) grammar (3) music (4) geometry (5) astronomy and (6) dialectic.

²⁵ Seneca exercises critical judgement over which studies he counts as “liberal” at *ep.* 88, 18, while Pliny’s *Natural History* includes painting and sculpture under his list of the *artes*. On Seneca’s own theory of education and his reaction to Cicero’s ideas on the liberal arts, cf. Keeline 2018, 216-221.

²⁶ Cic. *Arch.* 1. I say “famously” because a letter to the Tatler in 1720 even quotes from the *Pro Archia*, citing it as an advert for the pursuit of the liberal arts (*The Tatler* 140, 2 March 1710); cf. Fox 2013, 323. For more on this passage, see Görler 2020, 518-520.

tore, we find a slightly widened catalogue of the arts, when Cicero (through the character of Catulus) seeks to illustrate the ideal with reference to Hippias of Elis:

Gloriatus est cuncta paene audiente Graecia nihil esse ulla in arte rerum omnium quod ipse nesciret; nec solum has artis, quibus liberales doctrinae atque ingenuae continerentur, geometriam, musicam, litterarum cognitionem et poetarum atque illa, quae de naturis rerum, quae de hominum moribus, quae de rebus publicis dicerentur, se tenere sed anulum, quem haberet, pallium, quo amictus, soccos, quibus indutus esset, [se] sua manu confecisse²⁷.

He [Hippias] often boasted, in the hearing of almost all Greece, that there was no subject in any art or science of which he was ignorant; as he understood not only those arts in which all liberal and refined learning is comprised, geometry, music, grammar, and poetry, and whatever is said on the natures of things, the customs of men, and the science of government, but that he had himself made, with his own hand, the ring which he wore, and the cloak and shoes which he had on.

Leaving aside the distinction made here between academic and practical pursuits, what we see is a blend between traditional subjects and innovative topics *de hominum moribus* and *de rebus publicis*, «the customs of men and the science of government» – both topics which would have appealed to the budding orator and statesman.

It is important to place this passage within the “persuasive design” of *De oratore*²⁸. For this is a dialogue in which the two main interlocutors, Crassus and Antonius, present competing arguments over the importance of the arts within the education of the orator, while the reactions of their audience, the minor characters, are designed to steer the reader’s own view on the matter. Crassus, who argues in support of a wide-educational programme and who is endorsed by Catulus, is often assumed to be voicing the opinions of Cicero himself, while Antonius is thought to represent his brother, Quintus, to whom the work is dedicated²⁹. As scholars have often noted, this simple alignment of the dia-

²⁷ Cic. *de orat.* 3, 127; text and translation for references to *De oratore* 3 are taken from Rackham 1942. Some of the points I make about the broadening of the curriculum in this section have been anticipated by Adler 2020, which was only published after this paper was prepared for the Ciceronian Congress at Warsaw (December 2019).

²⁸ On this aspect, cf. Hall 1994.

²⁹ In the prologue to the dialogue, Cicero speaks in his own person and admits holding the view that «eloquence is dependent upon the trained skill of highly educated

logues' *personae* and their real-life counterparts may be misleading³⁰; rather the dialogue form invites the reader to consider different points of view, while making clear Cicero's own agreement with Crassus³¹. Yet what is significant is that the debate is staged at all. For, in the terms used to frame modern ideas on the topic, Crassus advocates a well-rounded system of learning, whereas Antonius presents the argument for a strictly professional education³².

To focus on the benefits of a wide education, one of the most distinctive features of the agenda Crassus sets out is the seamless merging of Greek art into Roman practical life. First, he establishes the rules for early rhetorical education following the Greek model (*de orat.* 1, 147-157), before moving his orator «out of the sheltered training ground of the home» and into the spaces typically occupied by active male citizens: «the line of battle, the dust, the uproar, the camp and the fighting line of public debate» (*de orat.* 1, 157, *ex hac domestica exercitatione et umbratili: medium in agmen, in pulverem, in clamorem, in castra atque in aciem forenses*). The imagery of contest is important here because it looks ahead to more Roman concerns and it helps combat the reader's cultural prejudices surrounding Greek learning³³. But first Crassus prescribes an endless cycle of instruction in the arts:

men», whereas Quintus, to whom the work is dedicated considers «that it must be separated from the refinements of learning and made to depend on a sort of natural talent and on practice» (*de orat.* 1, 5, *quod ego eruditissimorum hominum artibus eloquentiam contineri statuam, tu autem illam ab elegantia doctrinae segregandam putes et in quodam ingeni atque exercitationis genere ponendam*). Cf. *de orat.* 3, 13, where Cicero draws an explicit comparison between himself and Crassus. Achard 1987, 322 ff, lists several correspondences between Cicero and his character, while Gunderson 2000, 209-210, notes that the tradition of seeing Crassus as Cicero's mouthpiece goes back to Quint. 10, 3, 1; 10, 5, 2. For the suggestion that Cicero uses Antonius to present a fully developed account of Quintus' view, cf. Gaines 2013, 44-45.

³⁰ As Dugan 2005, 92-93, rightly points out, a focus on the similarities between Cicero and Crassus is an over-simplification: following Zoll 1962, 85-86, he notes that some of the minor characters also express aspects of Cicero's self.

³¹ Hall 1994 suggests the dialogue form is used by Cicero to enhance the credibility of his views. For a rather different argument, cf. Leeman-Pinkster 1981, 11-12, who argue that book 1 of *De oratore* is a *disputatio in utramque partem*, through which Cicero establishes both premises as plausible. However, as Wisse 2002b, followed by May 2007, points out, the perceptive reader will recognise the technique of arguing *in utramque partem* and still interpret the dialogue as an expression of Cicero's ideas.

³² For modern treatments along these lines, cf. Morson-Shapiro 2017, Hartley 2018.

³³ For the careful positioning of Crassus between admiration of the Greeks, on the one hand, and Roman feelings of superiority, on the other, cf. Wisse 2002b, 336-337.

Legendi etiam poetae, cognoscendae historiae, omnium bonarum artium doctores atque scriptores eligendi et pervolutandi et exercitationis causa laudandi, interpretandi, corrigendi, vituperandi, refellendi³⁴.

We must also read the poets, acquaint ourselves with histories, study and peruse the masters and authors in every excellent art, and by way of practice, praise, expound, emend, criticize and confute them.

In the way that Crassus sets out this approach, his description comes close to modern reconstructions of the Greek educational system. Raffaella Cribiore has shown that ancient education proceeded in three broad phases, from basic literacy to rhetorical training, and that it followed a model that was not so much linear as a «vertical ascent to be climbed in circles» (hence the expression *enkyklios paideia*)³⁵. According to this system, as the student's learning progressed, familiar authors and exercises would be revisited, alongside new material, with a different purpose and greater depth. Indeed, the vocabulary Crassus uses to describe this enhanced level of engagement – *laudandi, interpretandi, corrigendi, vituperandi, refellendi* – corresponds identically with Greek exercises in *encomion, exegesis, anaskeue* and *kataskeue*, as well as *psogos*³⁶. However, as Crassus continues, distinctly Roman concerns come to the fore:

Disputandumque de omni re in contrarias partis et, quicquid erit in qua re, quod probabile videri possit, eliciendum atque dicendum; perdiscendum ius civile, cognoscendae leges, percipienda omnis antiquitas, senatoria consuetudo, disciplina rei publicae, iura sociorum, foedera, pactiones, causa imperi cognoscenda est³⁷.

[W]e must argue every question on both sides, and bring out on every topic whatever points can be deemed plausible; besides this, we must become learned in the common law and familiar with the statutes, and must contemplate all the olden time, and investigate the ways of the senate, political philosophy, the rights of the allies, the treaties and conventions, and the policy of empire.

It is these topics – civil law, senatorial custom, government and imperial policy – which provide a curriculum for the two new arts that, as we

³⁴ Cic. *de orat.* 1, 58.

³⁵ Cribiore 2001, cf. esp. 129.

³⁶ On this list, cf. Quint. 4, 18-19, 20-21, and 5, 1; cf. Fantham 2004, 88-89.

³⁷ Cic. *de orat.* 1, 159.

saw above, Cicero has added into the catalogue of liberal studies: *de hominum moribus* and *de rebus publicis*. That the reader of *De oratore* is meant to pause and reflect on the import of his educational programme might be suggested by the reaction of those around Crassus in the dialogue: «When Crassus had finished, a general silence ensued» (*de orat.* 1, 160, *haec cum Crassus dixisset, silentium est consecutum*). The switch in focalisation leaves no room for doubt: Crassus' recommendations were meant to be ground-breaking.

But is it possible that Crassus' doctrine was also intended to rebut a prejudice against the liberal arts which is often encountered in our own day: that they do not serve any specific vocational training? For this is the primary challenge presented to Crassus' vision by Antonius: that the orator – like a soldier, statesman, or philosopher – is a specialist in his field. He is a man who uses language which is pleasant to hear and arguments which are suited to convince in the courts and public debate, but he does not need to be familiar with all the branches of learning (*de orat.* 1, 216). He need only know enough, Antonius argues, so that his speech may be «sprinkled and adorned with a kind of charming variety in many details» (1, 218). Being in touch with the feelings of his audience is hence more important than knowledge of philosophy (1, 223-233) or even law (1, 234-245)³⁸. Antonius comments that special points of knowledge can always be looked up (1, 246-250) or even borrowed (1, 256); the important thing is for the orator to practice his delivery and speak in a manner calculated to convince (1, 260).

This commodification of oratory is central to the argument Antonius presents in Book 1 and it effectively reduces the art of speaking to a system which any orator can be taught. Yet Antonius' objection is short-lived in the context of the dialogue: he rejects his own argument when he admits he did not mean what he said at *De oratore* 2, 40, while Crassus has the last word on the knowledge of the orator in the third book³⁹. But we may remember that Crassus' acknowledged purpose for his wide educational programme was not simply to acquire knowledge of all these fields, but to «praise, expound, emend, criticize and confute them». What is important, then, is the training of the mind, the ability to think critical-

³⁸ On the controversial nature of Crassus' recommendations here, cf. Wisse 2002b, 389-397.

³⁹ For discussion, cf. Wisse 2002a, 379-381; cf. Hall 1994, 213-216, who also notes Cicero's efforts to paint Antonius as well-educated himself. On the victory of Crassus in Book 3, cf. Hall 1994, 220-221.

ly and to argue *in utramque partem*: «We must argue every question on both sides and bring out on every topic whatever points can be deemed plausible» (*de orat.* 1, 158). The acquisition of both knowledge and critical thinking skills is a claim which we frequently encounter today in defence of the Humanities or Liberal Arts⁴⁰. And indeed, we see this ability at play in the way Cicero makes his characters speak on both sides of the issue⁴¹. However, it also has a more specific role to play in the training of the orator. Philosophy, Cicero expounded in a similar passage of *Orator*, was vital for the presentation of a whole array of sensitive subjects:

Nihil enim de religione, nihil de morte, nihil de pietate, nihil de caritate patriae, nihil de bonis rebus aut malis, nihil de virtutibus aut vitiis, nihil de officio, nihil de dolore, nihil de voluptate, nihil de perturbationibus animi et erroribus, quae saepe cadunt in causas et ieiunius aguntur, nihil, inquam, sine ea scientia quam dixi graviter ample copiose dici et explicari potest⁴².

For philosophy is essential to a full, copious and impressive discussion, as well as the exposition of the subjects which so often come up in speeches and are usually treated meagrely, whether they concern religion, death, piety, patriotism, good and evil, virtues and vices, duty, pain, pleasure, or mental disturbances and errors.

In short: the orator needs philosophical knowledge in dealing with general questions and in playing upon the audience's emotions. As a result, we can add emotional intelligence and empathetic imagining to the list of skills acquired through a study of the liberal arts⁴³. Moreover, in this treatise (*Orator*), presented as a letter and not a dialogue, Cicero repeats his belief that the orator should be fully acquainted with the statutes and civil law, as well as history⁴⁴. This crossover of ideas between Cicero's works bears eloquent testimony to the concerns of the historical Cicero, expressed through the character of Crassus in Book 3 of *De ora-*

⁴⁰ On this point, cf. Wolfe 1995, 462.

⁴¹ On Cicero's general appreciation of this technique in *De oratore*, cf. Leeman-Pinkster 1981, 68; Wisse 2002a, 831, adds that Cicero makes Antonius "mirror" his recommendations for an ideal orator in this respect.

⁴² *Cic. orat.* 119 (trans. Hendrickson 1939).

⁴³ For a working through of this idea, cf. Wintrol 2014, who examines how this aspect of Cicero's liberal education in turn enabled him to create a «rich interior life», especially in his period of turmoil after the death of Tullia. Wintrol's argument is that the study of the liberal arts helps prepare students for all aspects of their future lives, including personal sufferings.

⁴⁴ Cf. e.g. *orat.* 120.

tore that the art of rhetoric cannot be reduced to a few technical handbooks⁴⁵: «the prize must go to the orator who possesses learning» (*de orat.* 3, 143, *docto oratori palma danda est*). In so doing Cicero was making his own contribution to the historic quarrel between the philosophers and rhetoricians – that is the artificial split between wisdom and eloquence – which persisted in his own day, and which he aimed to reconcile⁴⁶. Yet in his insistence on a reunification, Cicero’s championing of the liberal arts endowed them with both purpose and practicality.

3. *Liberal Arts for All?*

When Cicero set out his ideas for a new improved curriculum of the *artes*, combining Greek learning with subjects relevant for an aspiring Roman orator and statesman, he drew inspiration both from the context of the dramatic date of *De oratore* in 91 BC and from his own day. On the one hand, the dialogue is set on the brink of the political crisis that soon led to the war with the Italian allies and the ensuing conflicts between Marius and Sulla. In so doing, it looks forward to the political calamities surrounding the date of the dialogue’s composition in 55 BC and the formation of the so-called “first triumvirate” in the years leading up to it. On the other hand, it provides an explanation for the crisis of leadership which connects the themes of a well-rounded education, the ideal orator, and Cicero’s wider visions for a functioning *res publica*.

Just one year before the dramatic date of the dialogue, in 92 BC, the real Crassus, as one of Rome’s censors, had issued a decree aiming to prohibit, or at least discourage, the teaching of rhetoric in Latin⁴⁷. His motive, according to Cicero, was to maintain its rigour; «these new teachers», he makes Crassus say, «had no capacity to teach anything except audacity» (*de orat.* 3, 93, *hos vero novos magistros nihil intellegbam posse docere nisi ut auderent*). Although the character of Crassus does not dismiss the idea of teaching rhetorical subjects in Latin *per se*,

⁴⁵ For this idea, cf. e.g. Cic. *de orat.* 3, 121.

⁴⁶ References to this quarrel appear at Cic. *de orat.* 1, 35-57; 1, 81-93 and 2, 154-161. For the history and key points of this quarrel, cf. Wisse 2002a, 361-364; cf. also the overview at Mankin 2011, 35-38.

⁴⁷ On the background of this decree within the history of rhetoric at Rome, cf. Kennedy 1994, 115-117; on the censors’ edict within the political currents and cultural milieu of the 90s BC, cf. Gruen, 1990, 179-191.

still the use of Greek was perceived as the educational gold standard⁴⁸. What is more, in the text of the decree saved for us by Suetonius, we know that the censors had also objected to the new style of education because it kept boys «sitting idly in schools all day» (Suet. *gramm.* 25, *dies totos desiderere*) – a practice which contrasted with the custom of the *maiores* and the premium they placed on real-life training and exposure to the forum⁴⁹. Thus, the recommendations of Crassus in *De oratore* speak to both these concerns. The emphasis on study as a preparation for public life keeps Crassus' educational programme centred on the practical activities of the forum. At the same time, counter to a seemingly new trend of «rhetoricians for hire»⁵⁰, the aim was to protect the integrity of the art and to prevent it from degenerating into a form of eloquence without wisdom.

This “message” of *De oratore* becomes clear in a different way through Cicero's treatment of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, who are among the few political figures to come under direct reproach in the dialogue⁵¹. These two brothers «were accomplished speakers and equipped for oratory with every advantage of nature or training». Nevertheless, they «wreaked havoc upon the *res publica* by the use of this eloquence» (*de orat.* 1, 38, *diserti, et omnibus vel naturae, vel doctrinae praesidiis ad dicendum parati [...] eloquentia rempublicam dissipaverunt*). In the context of the dialogue, Scaevola – an interlocutor in the first book of *De oratore* – uses the Gracchi as an example with which to counter Crassus' praise of eloquence. Moreover, by contrasting their talents with the political wisdom of their father – «a man of character and discretion, but no speaker» (*de orat.* 1, 38, *homo prudens et gravis, haudquaquam eloquens*) – he presents the brothers' misapplication of their learning as a warning against the danger that eloquence can bring. Plutarch suggests that their education, received at the hands of the rhetorician Diophanes of Mytilene and the philosopher Blossius of Cumae, had

⁴⁸ Compare the letter of Cicero to M. Titinnius, preserved for us by Suetonius, which records that when the young Cicero expressed his own desire to study at the school of the first Latin teacher of rhetoric, Lucius Plotius Gallus, he was dissuaded on «the advice of some very learned men, who believed that one's mind could better be trained by exercises in Greek» (Suet. *gramm.* 26, *doctissimorum hominum auctoritate, qui existimabant Graecis exercitationibus ali melius ingenia posse*).

⁴⁹ Cf. Suet. *gramm.* 25, 1 with Kaster 1995, *comm. ad loc.*

⁵⁰ This idea of «rhetoricians for hire» can be traced in several sources, cf. esp. Cicero's attacks on Marcus Antonius the triumvir's use of hired help at Cic. *Phil.* 2, 8-9; 42-43; 84; Suetonius also cites Marcus Caelius Rufus' jibe that Plotius was a «barley-bread rhetorician» (*gramm.* 26, 2, *hordearium rhetorem*).

⁵¹ For further discussion of this point, cf. Fantham 2004, 305-311.

instilled the Hellenistic ideas which influenced their public activity⁵². In other words: their immersion in Greek studies had not been tempered by the kind of understanding *de hominum moribus* and *de rebus publicis* which Cicero advocates in *De oratore*. When the *res publica* started to fall apart after their tribunates and deaths, Crassus, Antonius and their colleagues had tried to hold it together⁵³.

Similar concerns dominated in the years leading up to and surrounding the composition of *De oratore*⁵⁴. Although Cicero does not draw any explicit comparisons between past and present situations, there are several common features, such as disruptive tribunes, echoes of populist eloquence, and a divided senate. Indeed, when we reflect that for several years Roman politics had been dominated by the triumvirate of Pompey, Caesar and Crassus; that Pompey was regarded by Cicero as the senior partner in the alliance; and that Pompey had such little knowledge *de rebus publicis* that Varro had composed a handbook of senatorial practice for the great general⁵⁵, we can begin to understand Cicero's concerns about cheating the educational system. For the acquisition of knowledge, as we have seen, was not the end goal of Cicero's vision; rather it was the service to which it was put and the training of the mind it required. As Jerzy Axer has pointed out before me, knowledge is «subordinated to a supreme objective that forms the core of republican ethics. This is human freedom of self-fulfilment, aspiring to expand one's *dignitas* and *auctoritas* (importance and prestige) while upholding the good of the community of which one is a member» (*bonum reipublicae*)⁵⁶. Cicero thus has in mind something much greater than the education of individuals when he sets out his curriculum for the *artes liberales*; here we might notice the difference in approach I earlier alluded to between Cicero and the later work of Varro⁵⁷. For Cicero's reflections are more widely concerned with «a civic ideal whose dynamic constitution reflects the constitution of the republic»⁵⁸. In this way, the study of the *artes* is linked to

⁵² Plut. *Ti. Gracc.* 8, 4-5.

⁵³ This detail comes at the end of Cic. *de orat.* 1, 38.

⁵⁴ The dialogue itself took little over a year to complete and was published towards the end of 55 BC (Cic. *Att.* 4, 13, 2; cf. *fam.* 1, 9, 23); evidence on the composition of *De oratore* is collected in Mankin 2011, 327-328.

⁵⁵ For Varro's "handbook", a *commentarium* [...] *quem appellavit ipse εισαγωγικόν*, cf. Gell. 14, 7, 1.

⁵⁶ Cf. Detweiler-Axer 2012, 240.

⁵⁷ Cf. n. 5, above; Varro's *disciplinae* were focused purely on the individual arts.

⁵⁸ Connolly 2007 terms this ideal «the state of speech»; quotation from Connolly 2007, 3.

the health of the body politic, while the orator plays a key role in sustaining and shaping the *res publica*.

For the modern reader, however, there is something deeply troubling about *De oratore*. After all, Crassus had shut the doors on the attempts of teachers like Plotius, whose removal of entry criteria such as knowledge of Greek and even fees arguably made the art of oratory more accessible to young men from less well-to-do backgrounds. By implication, the study of the liberal arts has become an exclusive pursuit: a necessary pre-requisite in the training of young Roman *élite* men. Yet insofar as they were viewed as the essential components of a good education, the liberal arts also offered a path to self-improvement. For if the study of the arts had enabled a new man like Cicero to advance his standing – a promise also held out by Martianus Capella's *Rhetoric*, when she reflects on the comparatively humble beginnings of Cicero and Demosthenes⁵⁹ – then we might detect a connection between education in the liberal arts and social mobility that is at the core of thinking about personal advancement today: namely, that education offers the primary means by which individuals can transcend the socioeconomic positions of their families⁶⁰.

And so, when we ponder the question of the liberal arts, we should not forget to include Cicero's wider musings outside his works on oratory and rhetoric. For an alternative testament to the value of the arts comes in the form of the letters of Cicero, and especially those of the sixteenth book of *Ad familiares*, all of which concern his slave turned freedman Tiro. Although Book 16 is, in the words of Mary Beard, «practically invisible» in modern chronological editions, the manuscript order reveals some striking principles of arrangement as it follows Tiro's changed fortunes from a sickly slave to a scholar, literary critic and political commentator⁶¹. On the one hand, then, it is a collection of letters about slavery and Tiro's later experiences as a freedman⁶². Yet we may also detect a further narrative arc insofar as Tiro owes his metamorphosis in the collection to his immersion in the liberal arts. Throughout the collection, Cicero characterises him as a man of *humanitas*, *suavitas*, and manifold *utilitas*, one who possesses *ingenium*,

⁵⁹ For the full passage, cf. n. 16 above.

⁶⁰ For further discussion and statistics on this point, cf. Wolniak et al. 2008.

⁶¹ Beard 2002, 130-143; quotation from p. 131.

⁶² Beard 2002, 141, further suggests that we read the collection as a reflection of contemporary politics «the sickness of Rome on and against the sickness of Tiro».

prudentia and *temperantia*; Aulus Gellius adds that Tiro «had been liberally educated from his earliest years», and that «Cicero found in him an assistant, and in a sense a partner, in his literary work»⁶³. In Cicero's quintessential definition, the study of the *artes liberales* was the form of learning suitable for a free man (*de orat.* 1, 17, *eruditio libero digna*) and there is no doubt from *Ad familiares* that Tiro possessed the «arts» of a free man. Even though his status as freedman prevented him from embarking on a career at the top, still he had the intellectual capacity to be a politically engaged citizen of Rome⁶⁴.

The study of the *artes liberales* did not open equal opportunities for all, just as Cicero's *res publica* did not hold the interests of all classes in equal balance. However, Cicero's writings clearly betray the sense of their value across the social spectrum. As we have seen throughout this discussion, Cicero believed that such an education needed to be serviceable, with an up-to-date curriculum combining traditional learning and skills for life. The study of the *artes liberales* could provide the next generation with the knowledge to succeed, as well as the ability to question previous behaviours. While a strong educational background provided some with the ability to lead, it also produced citizens who were self-governing and politically engaged. This is precisely the view promoted by thinkers like Martha Nussbaum today: the Humanities and Liberal Arts are vital because they promote critical thinking and an empathetic understanding of others⁶⁵. It would be pushing the evidence too far, of course, to see Cicero as a forerunner for the paradigm of human development to which Nussbaum ascribes. But for his own time, class, and with his own prejudices, Cicero's vision for education was nonetheless revolutionary.

⁶³ Gell. 6, 3, 8, *sane quidem fuit ingenio homo eleganti et haudquaquam rerum litterarumque veterum indoctus, eoque ab ineunte aetate liberaliter instituto adminiculatore et quasi administro in studiis litterarum Cicero usus est.*

⁶⁴ On the power and status of freedmen in the Roman Republic, cf. e.g. Mouritsen 2011, 66-80. For discussion of Cic. *de orat.* 1, 17, see Görler 2020, 514-515.

⁶⁵ Nussbaum 2010; for the combination of critical thinking and empathetic imagining as part of what Nussbaum calls «the spirit of the Humanities», cf. esp. 7, 19, 141.

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