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Connecting Philosophy to the Res Publica: Oratory in the Prefaces to Cicero's Philosophica

In this paper I will demonstrate that in the prefaces to the philosophica Cicero constructs oratory as a transitional space to serve as a link between philosophy and Roman public life. Of the many rhetorical strategies that Cicero uses to justify his project of writing philosophy in the eyes of an elite Roman audience, this deployment of oratory is crucial, because it is designed to combat the most significant aspects of Roman hostility to philosophy, namely, the unwillingness to accept intellectual activity as a primary negotium worthy of an elite man and the belief that practice of philosophy is incompatible with an active life of the citizen.

In the last decade, scholars have been moving away from seeing Cicero's philosophical works as uninspired compilations of Greek philosophical thought and toward trying to understand them on their own terms by focusing on the contemporary cultural and political context. Prefaces to the treatises, however, have received less attention than they deserve. The prefaces to Cicero's philosophical works written in the 40s function in part as an apologia; they are an attempt to justify his outlandish choice of occupation to replace the public career which contemporary political circumstances took away from him. To present philosophizing of any sort as an elite Roman's primary occupation is no easy task given the general Roman hostility to the discipline. Cicero's prefaces reveal the rhetorical strategies that he uses to gainsay the novelty of his project and create links between philosophy and traditional Roman values.

It is in this light that his recurrent references to oratory are to be understood. I will discuss the use of oratory in a selection of passages from the prefaces to the Paradoxa, De Natura Deorum I, and Tusculans I. As my analysis will show, the goal of all the references is to demonstrate that oratory as it has been practiced by Cicero and others to general approval is necessarily based on the knowledge and practice of philosophy. Such presentation transfers philosophy from the sphere of otium to that of negotium. This emphasis also changes Cicero's own authorial stance vis--vis his audience. Released from the risky position of introducing something new and potentially dangerous he presents himself as simply bringing to light something that is already a part of the tradition.

Furthermore, oratory is the perfect area of Roman life for the establishment of this particular connection because it is the most intellectual segment of Roman civic life, the only one that makes it into Cicero's own list of the various artes in the beginning of the Tusculans. The members of the elite studied rhetorical theory. And if they did so primarily with a view to practical application, oratory still stands out as the most theoretical branch of Roman civic practice. This theoretical aspect is what Cicero focuses on in his attempt to present philosophy to his audience. Apart from the passages in the prefaces that I will discuss in detail, where the link is made more or less explicit, the very style of the treatises, highly rhetorical by design, serves to suggest the connection to the reader. While the content of what Cicero is saying in these works may seem novel, his voice still sounds essentially the same. The continuity between Cicero the orator and

Cicero the philosopher is just as important to his attempt to convince his readers as the connection between the two disciplines. Throughout, he uses himself as a fulcrum, drawing on his previous reputation to justify the validity and the viability of his new task.

Through the rhetorical style that he uses in the treatises, through the emphasis on the theoretical similarity between rhetoric and philosophy, and through the presentation of the continuous presence of philosophy in his successful prior public career, Cicero creates a series of links between philosophy and standard political practice conducted through oratory. Philosophy is thus constructed not as a foreign and potentially subversive practice, but as a beneficial activity in accord with Roman public life.