

Gary A. Remer, *Ethics and the Orator: The Ciceronian Tradition of Political Morality*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. xii, 291 pp. ISBN: 9780226439167

The subjects of Remer's book are of central importance to the study of (western) rhetoric: the troubled relationship between rhetoric and morality, both in general and as approached by Aristotle, Cicero, and others; and the reception of Ciceronian ideas and their potential contemporary relevance. He proceeds in roughly chronological order. In a long introduction and a first chapter he sets the scene and favourably contrasts Cicero's approach to that of Aristotle, and in a second chapter then develops his most important claim: that Ciceronian rhetorical morality is based on the notion of *decorum*. Four chapters follow on later authors and issues, and their links with Cicero: Machiavelli, Lipsius, the notion of (the orator as) a political representative, and the relationship between rhetoric and "deliberative democracy." Here, I shall mainly concentrate on the introduction and chapters 1–2, as they make up almost half the book and are meant to define the issues addressed in the rest.

In these chapters, Remer argues for the value of Cicero's approach to the ethics of rhetoric, especially as compared to that of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. The latter's much-discussed inclusion of emotional persuasion (*pathos*) is of course particularly relevant. It is problematic in ethical terms, as it suggests that he endorses emotional manipulation. In addition, it seems to be inconsistent with the first chapter of the work (1.1), where Aristotle criticises contemporary writers on rhetoric for including emotional appeal in their "arts" (*technai*). Remer (42, *alib.*) accepts the now common solution, associated especially with Nussbaum (cf. 11–13 for nuances): Aristotle regards emotions as grounded in cognition, and recognises only emotional appeals that are based on argument; and this implies that the opportunities for manipulation are severely restricted, as emotions can again be removed by counter-arguments – that is, they are "responsive to cognitive modification" (36). I am on record as rejecting such views (*Ethos and Pathos from Aristotle to Cicero*, Amsterdam, Hakkert, 1989, 17–20; 72–4), and for all of their popularity, they still seem highly dubious to me. For one thing, the fit with what Aristotle in fact says in his first chapter is not particularly good. Moreover, according to Aristotle the whole point of the emotions in a rhetorical context is that they make people change their judgements (*Rhet.* 2.1, 1377b30–1378a6; 1378a20–23); an angry person, e.g., is thus likely in fact to be impervious to counter-arguments. However that may be, Remer accepts the common view as a plausible interpretation of Aristotle's ideas – ideas which, however, he proceeds to criticise. He points out, e.g., that Aristotle himself sometimes recognises non-cognitive emotional responses (36–7); that Aristotle also seems to suggest the use of false arguments (43–4); and that reality shows that emotions are often not responsive to cognitive modification (44–8, including a discussion of the "Willie Horton" case). These points, while not all new, are valuable. More fundamentally, however, he faults Aristotle for providing only moral rules external to rhetoric (48–9); that is,

in terms developed especially by Michael Leff (*Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1, 1998, 61–88), he regards Aristotle as offering a weak rather than a strong defence of rhetoric.

It is such a strong, intrinsic defence that Remer claims to find in Cicero. This, however, is highly problematic. Cicero, as is well known, saw arguments as generally less important than ethos, presenting the characters on one's own side favourably, and pathos, playing upon the audience's emotions (e.g., *De or.* 2.178). Remer fully acknowledges that Cicero, pragmatically, sees "rhetorical deception" as necessary in real life. He nonetheless attempts to mitigate this "manipulative" view of rhetorical persuasion. For instance, according to *De or.* 2.203 Antonius, in his defence of Norbanus, employed "commonplaces" (*loci*) to elicit emotions. Remer asserts that he thus elicited emotions through argumentation; but the term *locus* is also frequently used for non-argumentative emotional appeal (e.g., *Cic. Inv.* 1.100–109; *Rhet. Her.* 2.47–50). Also, he holds that Cicero's "authentic orator possesses no hidden agenda" (51); but, e.g., in an important passage Cicero has Antonius declare that "we must appear to aim at nothing but giving instruction, while the other two [ethos and pathos JW] must, just like blood in the body, flow throughout the whole of the speech" (*De or.* 2.310).

However, Remer's most central claim concerns *decorum*, which he sees as the bridge between Cicero's rhetoric and the morality of the orator (similarly to Kapust, *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, 2011, 92–112). If true, this would indeed provide a "strong defence." The main problem is that *decorum* ("seemliness, appropriateness") is a very general concept, so that we need more than the use of the same term to establish a link between its roles in the realm of moral philosophy and in that of rhetoric. Remer (like Kapust) does offer a lengthy discussion of the importance of *decorum* in Cicero's moral philosophy, particularly *De officiis* (63–82). His claim of a link with rhetoric, however (esp. 76–7), is not supported by argument. Indeed, in his rhetorical works Cicero does not use *decorum* in a moral sense, but, e.g., as a quality of style (*De or.* 3.210–12 is typical). We may of course legitimately extend the notion of "appropriateness" to cover cases like *De or.* 1.12, where Cicero writes that the orator should not deviate from common ideas (on which passage cf. Remer 54, 59, 77, 138, 148, *alib.*); but as the context shows, this is not about morality, but about being effective. That is, the "*decorum*" of such passages is not a moral but rather an instrumental one. There seem to be only a few Ciceronian passages that mention both rhetorical and moral *decorum*, such as *Orator* 70–2 (which Remer mentions only much later: 120–1; cf. Kapust 98). Tellingly, however, Cicero there in fact presents no more than an analogy between the two realms (cf. *Off.* 1.144). There is of course nothing against observing that the moral views of *De officiis*, being generally applicable, will also apply to the advocate (see Remer 78–9 for some good remarks), but in that case we again have a morality external to rhetoric.

A curious omission in this connection is Cicero's central point in *De oratore*: that the ideal orator needs to master philosophy (e.g., 3.142–3). This point is widely viewed as Cicero's way of ensuring that the ideal orator is a

good man and will therefore not abuse his rhetorical skills. Even if this view is flawed (as I believe: cf. J. M. May & J. Wisse, *Cicero, On the Ideal Orator*, Oxford 2001, 11–12), it needs addressing, but Remer omits to do so. All in all, his interpretation of Cicero lacks a sound, analytical basis.

In the two chapters about the Renaissance reception of Cicero's ideas Remer changes the emphasis from rhetoric to Cicero's pragmatic view that deception in the service of a higher goal is admissible – a view which he presents, rather unsystematically, in earlier chapters as well as in these two. The link with rhetoric is often tenuous: in chapter 3, on Machiavelli, it consists merely in the equation of “flexible politics” with “rhetorical politics” (91; cf. notes 2 and 8). This chapter is essentially a comparison of Ciceronian and Machiavellian political morality, and just as Cicero was preferred to Aristotle in chapter 1, here Remer is at pains to argue that Cicero's *decorum*-based approach is superior to Machiavelli's views (e.g., 89).

In the next, highly interesting chapter Remer questions what seems to be a generally accepted view about Lipsius' famous cento the *Politica* (1589): that in this period Cicero was seen and admired as rejecting all forms of deception, that Lipsius had accepted this “Ciceronianism” when he was younger, but that in the *Politica* he came to reject it (witness its advocacy of pragmatism and its admission that deceit was occasionally necessary). Remer argues that some of Lipsius' early works already advocated pragmatism and in fact ascribed it to Cicero (115–20), and that in the *Politica* Lipsius uses quotations from Cicero to support his own pragmatic (“prudential”) view (120–33). Some of Remer's arguments seem strong, meriting further consideration, but some of his points are vulnerable. One of these starts from the problematic idea that Lipsius presents an ambiguous Cicero, on the model of Cicero's own technique of arguing both sides of a case, *in utramque partem* (122–6). On this basis, Remer counts the Cicero quotations for and against Lipsius' own view, and notes that the former are more numerous. Careful interpretation of the way that Lipsius uses the quotations to build his own argument is a better strategy, but some of Remer's interpretations are based on misreadings. (On the interpretative problems, see the impressive edition by J. Waszink, Assen 2004, 58–79.) E.g., at *Pol.* 4.13, where Lipsius quotes Cicero's description of the rigid views of the Stoics in *Cael.* 41, Remer (127) wrongly assumes that Cicero is presented as endorsing these Stoic ideas. Waszink's view (*o.c.*, 91) that Lipsius is trying to undermine traditional Ciceronianism with quotations from Cicero is too easily dismissed (115) – partly because Remer simply identifies true “Ciceronianism” with his own interpretation of Cicero.

The link between the last two chapters and the theme of rhetorical morality is again tenuous. Chapter 5 argues that the notion of political representation is already present in Cicero, who, Remer believes, sees the orator-statesman as a representative of the people. This involves major distortions. E.g., the idea of leadership (reflected in terms like *rector* and *princeps*: 144) is simply assimilated to that of representation. Chapter 6 is an attack on current proponents of the notion of “deliberative democracy.” The Ciceronian

perspective employed here (esp. 182–97) is irrelevant: the use of deliberative oratory rather than conversation for political deliberation was a historical given in Roman society, not a reasoned choice on Cicero's part.

In the above, I have attempted to give a fair, integrated account of Remer's views, but discerning these has not always been easy because of the way in which they are presented. E.g., coherence is often lacking, perhaps partly because much of the book goes back to earlier journal publications (cf. xi); and many of the notes are over-long and deal with material of only tangential interest. There are also other general issues. Remer's claims are too often based on the authority of modern scholars rather than on presentation of ancient evidence and its analysis (e.g., 41: Garver instead of Aristotle). Simple mistakes are also rather too frequent (e.g., a misreading of *De or.* 1.7–8 (151); a misinterpretation of *movere* (170)). Finally, references to Cicero take the inelegant form, e.g., not of *De officiis* but of "Cicero 1999d." This is unfortunately not unusual, but predictably leads to numerous mistakes (e.g. (59), "Cicero 1958a, 137" (= *Cael.*) should have been "1958b" (= *Sest.*)). More importantly, it reflects and fosters Remer's method of indiscriminately drawing on all Ciceronian writings: not only are Cicero's views supposed to have been consistent throughout his life, but the speeches are treated as representing Cicero's views no less than the treatises and the letters.

In short, this book is problematic in too many ways to be a success, although it does offer many stimuli for further thought, and must count as a valiant attempt to tackle a set of important, difficult issues.

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