

Wisdom Up in Flames

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In his encyclopedic masterwork *Li livres dou Tresor* (*The Books of Treasure*), the mid-thirteenth-century Florentine civil servant and rhetorician Brunetto Latini proclaimed “the very wise Marcus Tullius Cicero” to be “the finest orator in the world and the master of rhetoric.”¹ How might this remark by a medieval professional civic administrator (even one with pronounced Ciceronian proclivities) pertain to Goodman’s book? I take as my inspiration for the ensuing comments Latini’s phrase in *Tresor*—“The very wise Marcus Tullius Cicero”—in relation to the final word of Goodman’s subtitle: “Conditions.” As I began to peruse *Words on Fire*, I expected to encounter discussion of “wisdom” and of related ideas such as “reason,” “natural law,” and “justice” rather often. After all, these factors constitute indispensable features of Cicero’s political theory. I was thus greatly surprised to discover that Goodman mentions them only belatedly and briefly (65–66).

One might ask why neglecting such concepts matters, given Goodman’s primary concentration on technical aspects of how Ciceronian rhetoric functions, and in particular the dynamic between the orator and his audience. But in Cicero’s view, the possession of wisdom, conceived as the use of human rational faculties in order to establish our duties to our fellow men (that is, justice), comprises a vital and essential condition for oratory properly understood. Oratorical skills are only of value if directed toward the good of the community as a whole. Indeed, a leading theme throughout Cicero’s body of writings was the necessity of joining speech (in the sense of eloquent oratory) to reason or wisdom.² In *De inventione* 1.2–3, he describes his purposes in positing the linguistic and rational foundations of human association.

At a certain time, a great and wise man discovered a natural property [of speech] contained within the souls of human beings and a great source of opportunity afforded thereby, if one could draw it out and render it better

¹Brunetto Latini, *The Book of the Treasure* (*Li livres dou Tresor*), trans. Paul Barrette and Spurgeon Baldwin (New York: Garland, 1993), 1.36.5.

²All citations of Cicero are to the Loeb Classical Library editions, although I have occasionally modified the translations.

through education. . . . He transformed them from wild beasts and savages into tame and gentle creatures on account of heeding speech and reason more diligently. It does not seem to me, at least, that a wisdom either silent or lacking speech could have accomplished the sudden conversion of men from their habits and the conveyance of them into different modes of life.

Society could never have arisen without the primitive orator, capable of activating a latent power within all men. A crucial precondition for social relations, then, is the existence of a man both wise and eloquent. Goodman, however, dismisses this “fable” as the naive regurgitation of “an old *topos* in the rhetorical literature”—true enough—repeated “uncritically” by “the young Cicero” (27). Yet the “old Cicero,” so to speak, continued to cling to *De inventione’s* metaphorical account that true eloquence cannot be detached from wisdom. Goodman acknowledges that “Cicero returned to this fable in *De oratore*,” a mature dialogue (27). However, Goodman employs an alchemical appeal to context to explain away its almost exact wording drawn from a work composed decades earlier (27–31).

Let us grant Goodman’s contextualizing hypothesis in the case of *De oratore*. But it was not only in his oratorical writings that Cicero proposed that wisdom and eloquent speech together provide the origins of social order. In the *Tusculanarum disputationum* 1.62, composed around the same time as *Orator*, he praised the capacity for language possessed by “the man who first united the scattered human units into a body and summoned them to the fellowship of social life,” as a result of which the material and moral blessings of civilization were attained (also see 5.1). In his final treatise, *De officiis*, Cicero observed that “nature likewise by the power of reason associates man with man in the common bonds of speech and life” (1.12). There would be no organized systems of society and politics in the absence of both the rational and linguistic faculties with which human beings are endowed. Cicero demonstrated no particular concern about prioritizing reason or language as the primary source of such human association. In *De finibus* 2.45, he emphasizes the former; in *De natura deorum* 2.148, the latter. Of greatest relevance to Goodman’s argument, Cicero states in *Brutus* 59, “as reason is the glory of man, so the lamp of reason is eloquence.” Cicero thus elides reason and speech, or virtually equates them. They are complementary; rationality without speech and the reverse are empty and worthless for him.³

I do not intend to imply that there is no tension between rationality and language, eloquence and wisdom. Cicero realized the challenges presented by his characterization of persuasive speech as central to the foundation of social relations on account of the supposed conceptual incongruity of

³An appraisal of the union between philosophy and oratory according to Cicero is provided by Giuseppe Ballacci, *Political Theory between Philosophy and Rhetoric* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 51–83.

wisdom and rhetoric.⁴ The wise man seeks to discover truths which were necessarily esoteric or inaccessible to the untutored masses; philosophy requires strict adherence to the principles of logic and rational argumentation. By contrast, because rhetoric teaches effectiveness in appealing to public opinion and commonly held belief, it might seem to be regulated by standards other than those of pure truth-seeking. Yet this conclusion would surely be inaccurate, even in the case of *Orator*, the introduction to which asserts that the study of rhetoric “does not derive from discussions of oratory, but from the heart of philosophy” (11). Admitting such, Cicero says, “will arouse criticism, or at least cause astonishment.” Yet he insists that to the extent he is speaking about himself, “whatever ability I possess as an orator comes not from the workshops of the rhetoricians, but from the spacious grounds of the Academy” (11–12), that is, the philosophy of New Academic antidogmatism to which he subscribed for most of his life.

Cicero charges the orator to discover what is truly good for his fellow creatures (in the manner of the philosopher) as well as to communicate it to them in a forceful and convincing manner so that they may put it to use. His writings consistently ascribe to the successors of the primeval orator a special duty toward the maintenance and defense of the principles of communal life. The “young Cicero” declares in *De inventione* 1.5 that “eloquence is to be studied . . . all the more vigorously, lest evil men are the most powerful to the detriment of good men and the common disaster of everyone. . . . For this [eloquence] attains the greatest advantage for the republic if wisdom, the director [*moderatrix*] of all matters, is present.” Decades later, he proclaims in *De oratore* 1.34 that “the guidance [*moderatione*] and wisdom of the perfect orator preserves not only his own dignity, but also the well-being of most individuals and of the whole republic.” Old or young, the Ciceronian position remained unwavering that precisely the combination of eloquence and wisdom characteristic of the orator assures that he will speak on behalf of the interests of the entire community. Inherent in the subject matter of oratory, then, is a regard for one’s fellow citizens, which imposes an overarching duty to disseminate the lessons of philosophy about justice and the common good in the service of public welfare.

All of this leads back to the point with which I commenced. In *Tresor’s* first chapter, Latini tells us that “the body of this book is compiled out of wisdom [*sapiense*],” which consists of three component treasures: the theoretical knowledge taught by philosophy (broadly speaking); the principles of moral conduct; and the science of speaking well, that is, “how a man should speak according to proper rhetoric.”⁵ Each form of wisdom builds upon the preceding one, until one reaches the pinnacle of eloquent expression,

⁴This issue is addressed by Daniel Kapust, “Cicero on Decorum and the Morality of Rhetoric,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, no. 1 (2011): 92–112 and Gary Remer, *Ethics and the Orator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁵Latini, *Tresor*, 1.1.1–4.

“for if there were no speech, there would be no city, nor would there be any establishment of justice or of human company.”⁶ Hence, instruction in rhetorical art and usage “is nothing other than wisdom” and “when wisdom is then added to speech, who would say that anything but good would be produced?”⁷ Latini captures here the spirit of Cicero’s teaching about rhetoric, namely, that it requires not merely the acquisition of technique, but also the careful study of the philosophical foundations that make genuine eloquence valuable. It is true enough that the words of an orator lacking wisdom would indeed inflame—and what a conflagration it would be!

⁶Ibid., 3.1.2.

⁷Ibid., 3.1.5–6.