Ethos in Cicero's First and Fourth Speeches against Lucius Sergius Catilina

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In this analysis of Marcus Tullius Cicero's political oratory, Robert Spurlin combines textual commentary and historical context to scrutinize the famed statesman's strategies for identifying his own *ethos* (or moral, persuasive character) with the will and quintessential virtues of the Roman Republic, meanwhile casting his opponent Catiline as Rome's moral antithesis. This essay was written for Rhetoric & Composition with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

E THICAL APPEALS ARE AMONG the most foundational approaches employed in rhetorical discourse and have been used with effect since the inception of that aged discipline. One ancient rhetor who made particularly extensive use of appeals to *ethos* was the Roman statesman and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero, who in the first and fourth of his speeches entitled *Against Lucius Sergius Catilina* used not only his own character, but also the *ethos* of the Senate of Rome — his audience — as well as the reputations of the Roman people broadly, Catilina himself, the Roman

gods, and the very "person" of the Roman Republic in order to induce Catilina to depart from Rome, and to turn the Senate solidly against his conspiracy to overthrow the Republic.

Before Cicero's use of *ethos* in his speeches against Catilina can be properly analyzed, however, those rhetorical concepts and approaches at work in his oratory must be surveyed at some length. First and foremost, there is that process of identification that necessarily undergirds any solid attempt at persuasion, and which itself suggests the presence of the related act of division — since it seems that on some subconscious level "we need the enemy in order to define ourselves" (Weaver 222). Additionally, those potent words that Richard Weaver dubs "god terms" and "devil terms," and which provide points of reference for the ranking of all other words and phrases within the rhetorical hierarchy, are likewise notably employed within Cicero's speeches (212, 222).

Besides extraneous appeals with some relation to *ethos*, there are also various remarkable facets of *ethos* itself that cannot be meaningfully separated from the broader concept thereof, such as the distinction between situated and invented *ethos*, the former preceding a given rhetorical performance while the latter is crafted during the course thereof (Crowley and Hawhee 146-69). Invented *ethos*, also referred to as "discursive" *ethos*, being as it is the direct product of a rhetor's craft, tends to feature more prominently than situated *ethos* within the modern field of rhetoric — but this is not the case within Cicero's rhetoric, or much ancient rhetoric besides (Maingueneau).

Whereas rhetoricians in recent times have often envisioned "a disciplinary hierarchy with rhetoric at the top," due to their belief in the subjectivity of meaning and the ability to shape meaning through language, Republican Romans such as Cicero, and Greeks of the Platonist school such as Aristotle, generally believed in what Richard Vatz in his "Myth of the Rhetorical Situation" terms "intrinsic importance" (158-61). "Intrinsic importance," as Vatz employs

the term, is value possessed by a situation, event, etc., which is independent of rhetorical framing — and a belief in value of this sort logically relegates of rhetoric to the status of a secondary or "parasitic" discipline, behind fields such as philosophy that seek out purportedly preexisting truths (158).

Believing as they generally did in the existence of intrinsic value, ancient Greek and Roman communities were able to establish internal monopolies of meaning, with commonly understood significations and value systems that delineated plainly what was good and what evil, what was commendable and what damnable, etc. Ancient rhetors such as Cicero and Aristotle, whether or not they personally subscribed to any such system of accepted valuation and signification, certainly recognized these systems' importance within the world of rhetoric. In his treatise *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle notes that "it is necessary for *pisteis* and speeches [as a whole] to be formed on the basis of common [beliefs]" (1.1.12).

These "common beliefs" need not be common to all, but they must be held in common among members of that particular audience with which a rhetor is dealing, lest the speaker's arsenal of available rhetorical appeals become quite quickly exhausted. Whether one means to make use of situated or discursive *ethos*, it is necessary to understand the values of one's audience, as the construction of a favorable situated *ethos* requires that a rhetor consistently act in those ways that their community perceives to be "good" and not in those ways which are considered "bad" or disreputable, while the intelligent construction of discursive *ethos* relies upon a rhetor's ability to select those characteristics and virtues that their audience is likely to laud, and to present themselves throughout the course of their rhetorical performance in such a way as to suggest their possession of those traits. One who seeks to construct for themselves a positive discursive *ethos* ought also to consider those ways in which they might better connect with the members of their audience — an issue that relates quite readily to the aforementioned processes of identification and division. In her article "Morality,

Trust, and Illusion: Ethos as Relationship," Melissa H. Weresh describes those traits that a rhetor should seek to display themselves "source-characteristic attributes" (such as intelligence, expertise or credibility, and goodwill), while those ways in which they might more fully identify and ingratiate themselves with their audience pertain to "source-relational attributes."

While many of those rhetorical terms which have been hereto surveyed are themselves modern inventions, those concepts for which they stand were in general understood by the ancients — as is quite clearly shown by the rhetoric of Cicero himself. Cicero had also to consider some as-yet-unmentioned factors that affected his use of *ethos*, the most remarkable of which were those several virtues to which Roman citizens were expected to adhere, and which consequently were essential to any Roman's efforts to gain a favorable situated *ethos* or to build a beneficial discursive one. The first of these was *pietas*, or the "keeping of faith" — specifically, remaining faithful to the gods; to one's family; and to one's fatherland, Rome (Kapust). Another important Roman virtue was *gravitas*, which demanded that one act in accordance with and respect for their station — and which in this way relates substantially to Cicero's own personal obsession with the consideration of "propriety", which he proclaimed to be "the universal rule" both in oratory and in life generally (*Orator* 46). A third important virtue in the eyes of the Romans was *virtus*, which was somewhat ambiguously and inconsistently characterized, but which came from the root "*vir*," meaning "man," and which often pertained to "courage" (especially martial courage) (Muntz). Finally, there was *mos maiorum*, which was the respect for tradition and concern for public matters that made up the "underpinnings" of Roman politics during much of the duration of the Republic (Tröster).

It is now possible to examine how Cicero makes use of this assortment of rhetorical and cultural concepts for the crafting and directing of ethical appeals within his speeches against Lucius Sergius

Catilina (henceforth referred to as Catiline). Recognizing the rhetorical importance of identification and division, Cicero sets out immediately in his first speech against Catiline to depict an absolute moral opposition between himself and those Senators who compose his audience, as the friends and protectors of Rome and her Republic; and Catiline, who had plotted the overthrow of that state. His efforts to divide these two parties show themselves initially through his use of pronouns, as he asks in the first line of his speech, "In the name of heaven, Catilina, how long do *you* propose to exploit *our* patience? Do *you* really suppose that *your* lunatic activities are going to escape *our* retaliation . . . ?" (76; emphasis added). This trend of grammatical opposition continues throughout Cicero's first speech against Catiline — the only one of those addresses made in the presence of Catiline himself — with Cicero only growing harsher in the tone wherewith he addresses his enemy, as he says, "[Y]ours was the death which the consul should have ordered long ago. The calamity which you have long been planning for each one of us ought to have rebounded on to yourself alone" (76). He thus leaves no room whatever for any single senator to come to Catiline's defense, lest they be taken as his treasonous accomplice and the common enemy of all other members of that august body.

Once he has sufficiently identified himself with the Senate, Cicero quickly expands his list of allies, declaring that Catiline and his co-conspirators "plan the destruction of the Roman people," and that Catiline himself "is determined to plunge the entire world into fire and slaughter" (78, 77). While working to identify himself with the Roman people more broadly, Cicero also sets out to build his own *ethos* — and at this time he draws heavily upon those Roman virtues previously mentioned. Cicero says,

> if the condition of occupying the consulship is that I should suffer
> the deepest anguish and sorrow and torment, I shall endure these

things intrepidly and even cheerfully, if only the authority and se-
curity of yourselves and the Roman people are safeguarded by my
labours. (129)

He is thus setting himself up as an exemplar of numerous Roman
virtues — most obviously, *gravitas* and *pietas*, as he links himself
with his office and the duties thereof, and asserts his willingness to
suffer for his fatherland (employing polysyndeton to inflate the list
of his sufferings). He also ties himself to the virtues of *mos maiorum*
and *virtus* when he notes that "at former epochs, in this country of
ours, brave men did not lack the courage to strike down a dangerous
Roman citizen more fiercely even than they struck down the bitter-
est of foreign foes" (77), thus associating himself with a sort of con-
flict even fiercer than traditional combat (and so permitting him to
be considered a possessor of *virtus* without being in an actually mar-
tial situation) and also linking his opposition to Catiline and his con-
spiracy with the tradition of Rome's forebears, in keeping with *mos
maiorum*.

Cicero elsewhere shores up his personal reputation by mention-
ing actions of his own (situated *ethos*) while simultaneously assert-
ing his source-characteristic attributes of goodwill, intelligence, and
competence. He says to Catiline that he knew of his subversive de-
signs "almost before [his] meeting" whereat they were concocted
was adjourned, and that

you are living now, surrounded by large numbers of my trusty
guards whose duty it is to ensure that you make no move against
the government. Although you may not know it, many eyes and
ears will be paying you their alert attention. They have been doing
so already. . . . The darkness of night no longer avails to conceal
your traitorous consultations. A private house does not suffice to
keep the voices of your conspiracy secret. (78-79)

By these claims he is setting himself up as so competent in his spy-
craft as to be nearly omniscient, thus boosting also his audience's

perception of his intelligence; and in stating explicitly that the duty of his guards is to ensure the security of the Roman government, he is further identifying himself with the Senators (who are both his audience and the most conspicuous organ of that government) and establishing his goodwill toward them. Thus, he checks off each of those items that Weresh lists as the most essential source-characteristic attributes.

Cicero likewise reinforces his own *ethos* by building his source-relational attributes, among the most central of which is "familiarity" (Weresh). He does this not only through his aforementioned self-association with key Roman virtues, but also through his constant references to happenings from Roman history, which parallel Weresh's discussion of the utility of "stories" in building a favorable relationship between rhetor and audience. One instance of this is his mention of the murders of the Gracchi and their associate Flaccus, as well as the later official Saturninus, each of whom had in turn sought to undermine the authority of the Senate. Cicero argues,

> seeing that our most eminent and distinguished citizens of earlier times, when they shed the blood of Saturninus and the Gracchi and Flaccus and many others, did not by any means stain their reputations but even enhanced them, I certainly had not the smallest reason to fear that the execution of this murderer of Roman citizens would cause me to be blamed by posterity. (91)

Here, he is not only demonstrating his familiarity with Roman history and tradition, but also employing a rhetorical strategy sometimes described as "inoculation" (Weresh 242). Kathryn M Stanchi states that a rhetor using this strategy "expose[s]" their audience "to a weakened version of arguments against the persuasive message, coupled with appropriate refutation of those opposing arguments," (qtd. in Weresh 242). This strategy is also identified as a further means of strengthening one's relationship with one's audience, as any who might argue against Cicero and his proposals before those

Senators to whom he has spoken will see their opponent immediately defended through the use of those historical examples they had previously been reminded of, which Cicero sets forth as sufficient precedent for the passage of a far harsher sentence against Catiline than that which he is actually proposing (mere banishment from Rome).

Cicero does not then allow his audience any respite from ethical appeals, but rather devotes a great deal of his time to deprecating Catiline's own character in more targeted ways than mere division from the rest of the Senate. Where he had made himself almost a model citizen, Cicero depicts Catiline as just the opposite — a particularly potent rhetorical approach, since in the Roman Republic "citizen" and "Rome" were likely the most powerful god terms conceivable, or what Richard Weaver calls "rhetorical absolutes" (212). It further follows that "un-Roman" or "anti-Roman" things would be the objects of that general repudiation that Weaver says is directed toward "devil terms" (222). Aware of this dichotomy, Cicero sets to work displaying those ways in which Catiline violates key Roman virtues, including most obviously *pietas*. Of this, Cicero says,

> think of the time when by the means of your former wife's death you ensured that your house should be vacated and free for a further marriage. You supplemented that ghastly deed by another so appalling that it is scarcely believable (that is, the suspected murder of his son). But I pass that incident over and gladly allow it to be veiled in silence, because I cannot bear people to say that such a horror could have been perpetrated in this country. (83)

He is here suggesting that Catiline was unfaithful not only to his family, but also to his fatherland, in engaging in conduct entirely unbefitting a Roman citizen — and in the course of this rhetorical attack, Cicero utilizes the figure of paralipsis by tacitly recalling Catiline's likely killing of his son, to which controversy the members of his audience are assured to have been privy.

Cicero reinforces his depiction of Catiline's lack of *pietas* by describing his engagement in cultlike behavior (quite outside of and in opposition to the sanctioned Roman state cult), saying, "I do not like to think of the rituals you must have performed in order to hallow and dedicate [your] blade for its appointed task: the task of being plunged into the body of a Roman consul" (84), which shows also Catiline to be lacking in *gravitas*, since he has no respect for the sacred office of the consulship. Returning to the subject of *pietas*, Cicero also accuses Catiline of worshipping the silver eagle of his military standard, saying,

> I know you have sent ahead your silver eagle, the one which you housed in a blasphemous shrine in your home...When you were about to set forth to commit murder, you used to bow down before this object; and upon its altar rested your god-forsaken hand before you lifted it to massacre Roman citizens. (88)

Cicero hereby again invokes the power of the god term of "Roman citizen" for use against Catiline.

Continuing to grow that coalition of commendable parties wherewith he is himself identified, and also sustaining his process of producing an entirely unfavorable discursive *ethos* for Catiline, Cicero elsewhere makes mention of "the immortal gods," to whom are owed "profound thanks" for the preservation of the Roman state in spite of Catiline, who he calls "this most ferocious and appalling and deadly menace to our country" (again employing polysyndeton) (81). With the Senate, the people, and the gods of Rome already thus set up in support of himself, and with Catiline's own *ethos* employed toward his own destruction, there is only one more entity whose ethical weight Cicero can call upon to bolster his cause: Rome herself.

In order to align all of Rome with himself, Cicero elects to use the figure of personification. Putting his own words into the mouth of Rome and addressing these to Catiline, he orders his adversary to

imagine the state's pleas for his departure, which he expects would run in part as follows:

> For years past . . . there has not been one single abomination or outrage for which anyone has been responsible apart from your-self. By your own agency you have slain many Roman citizens. You have harassed and plundered our allies. . . . Indeed, you have con-trived not merely to ignore our laws and courts altogether, but to beat them down and shatter them into fragments. . . . [N]ow that I am stricken through and through with terror, entirely because of yourself, now that every sound I hear inspires me with dread of Catilina, now that your evil spirit is behind every sort of conspiracy against my life, I can bear it no longer. (85)

What more potent ethical appeal could Cicero possibly mount against Catiline than the direct request of Rome herself? If Catiline should then refuse to depart as Cicero desires, he would show him-self utterly devoid of *pietas* — since, as Cicero says, Rome is "the common parent of us all," as well as their beloved fatherland (85). Further, he would likewise abandon all claim to *gravitas*, given that he is himself a Senator and has just heard the direct request of the Republic for his departure.

It is, then, no wonder that Cicero ultimately effected his desired end and saw to Catiline's departure. After offering his later fourth speech to the Senate, he also secured that sentence against Catiline's coconspirators, which it had been his aim to enact. Both of these ends were brought about through his masterful use of rhetoric, and of *ethos* especially. By aligning himself with the Senate and people of Rome, the gods, and the Republic herself through the use of iden-tification, and by dividing Catiline and his ilk from the whole re-mainder of Roman society, he made his appeals irresistible. By recalling his favorable situated *ethos* and constructing for himself the additional aid of a positive discursive *ethos* and a strong famili-arity with his audience, he won as well the hearts and the minds of his hearers. By assigning to himself those highest and most honored

of all Roman virtues, and by showing Catiline and his followers to be utterly devoid of the same, occasionally employing the most potent god terms and devil terms in his arsenal, he appealed to the Romans' system of intrinsic values and placed the conflict between those two parties solidly upon those moral grounds that were their favorite rhetorical battlefields. Ultimately, through the use of all of his accumulated rhetorical momentum, he secured an absolute victory over his hopeless adversaries. ► ►

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