Cicero's Concept of Ethos and Some Implications for the Understanding of Roman Rhetoric

David A. Bobbitt
Louisiana State University

Although he said "character *may almost* be called the most effective means of persuasion"[1] [emphasis added], Aristotle considered the enthymeme the most important form of proof.[2] Because he felt the Sophistic handbooks had neglected logos, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* devotes more attention to logos than ethos.[3] In contrast, Cicero's mature rhetorical works, and Roman rhetorical theory in general, tended to value ethos over logos as a means of persuasion. Roman culture attached great importance to personal character. The classic Roman definition, attributed to Cato, of the orator as *bir bonus dicendi peritus,* "a good man skilled in speaking,"[4] emphasizes the *character* of the speaker. Kennedy notes the:

> . . . strong element of character portrayal in Roman oratory: a Greek orator tends to argue his audience into believing something; a Roman by his authority convinces the audience that something should be believed because he says so. . . .[5]

Just as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* represents the culmination of Greek rhetorical theory in its classical period, Cicero's mature rhetorical works and his oratorical career serve as the climax of the Roman rhetorical tradition in its republican period. To illustrate the importance the Romans attached to ethos and the role it played in practice, this essay explicates Cicero's concept of ethos by showing how it differed from Aristotle's, and briefly examines the role ethos played in Cicero's speeches. It concludes with some observations on the Roman concept of ethos and its possible significance for contemporary rhetorical scholars.

The Ciceronian Concept of Ethos

Quintilian felt that Latin had no term equivalent to the Greek "ethos," although it could be rendered *mores.*[6] Cicero never used the term "ethos" in his rhetorical treatises, but frequently identified certain character traits of the good orator, such as *dignitas* (virtuous conduct) and *auctoritas* (the forceful weight of personality).[7] Although Cicero's explicit treatment of ethos in *De Oratore* (2.182-184) is relatively brief, Cicero's rhetorical works

contain frequent references to the character of the speaker. For example, King lists references to seventeen desirable character traits of the perfect orator in Cicero's *Brutus*. These include such traits as industry, dignity, courtesy, wit, and grace.[8]

The central theme of *De Oratore* is in fact the character and training of the ideal orator. Cicero's treatment of ethos in *De Oratore* and his other mature rhetorical works resembles that of Aristotle's in some general respects, but differs when examined in detail. Cicero's *De Oratore* revives Aristotle's threefold division of proofs into ethos, pathos and logos after three centuries of neglect: "Thus for purposes of persuasion the art of speaking relies wholly upon three things: the proof of our allegations, the winning of our hearer's favour, and the rousing of their feeling to whatever impulse our case may require."[9] Cicero mentions these three functions repeatedly (*De Or.* 2.182, 2.310, 3.104; *Brut.* 185, 276; *Orat.* 69).

Cicero's theory of ethos is summarized in section 2.182-184 of *De Oratore*:

> A potent factor in success, then, is for the characters, principles, conduct and course of life, both of those who are to plead cases and of their clients, to be approved, and conversely those of their opponents condemned. . . . Now feelings are won over by a man's merit, achievements or reputable life, qualifications easier to embellish, if only they are real, than to fabricate where non-existent. But attributes useful in an advocate are a mild tone, a countenance expressive of modesty, gentle languages. . . . For vigorous language is not always wanted, but often such as as calm, gentle, mild: this is the kind that most commends the parties. By 'parties' I mean not only persons impeached, but all whose interests are being determined. . . . Moreover so much is done by good taste and style in speaking, that the speech seems to depict the speaker's character.

From the foregoing, and from other remarks made by Cicero in regard to the character of the speaker, several conclusions can be drawn concerning the differences between Aristotle's and Cicero's concepts of ethos.

First, Cicero's concept of ethos is broader than Aristotle's. For Aristotle ethos is based on the audience's perception of the speaker's intelligence, moral character, and good will as determined "by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak."[10] Thus for Aristotle, ethos is restricted to the confines of the speech itself, while for Cicero ethos goes beyond the speech proper to include the audience's perception of the speaker before the speech begins. Cicero recognized that much of the effectiveness of ethos lies in the authority and prestige the speaker has as a person. Cicero's concept of ethos includes a speaker's whole life and reputation. *De Oratore* stresses the need for the ideal orator to be a well-rounded man, to be well-read and to know philosophy in order to unite eloquence with wisdom.

The second difference results from Cicero's treatment of ethical proof as a milder form of emotional proof, although as both Sattler and Kennedy point out, he is not always consistent with this distinction.[11] Cicero himself

admits that the two proofs are difficult to keep separate. In the following passage he treats ethos and pathos as differing degrees of the same thing. Speaking of the style which "bears witness to the speaker's integrity" and that which is used to "transform men's feelings," he says:

> But these two styles, which we require to be respectively mild and emotional, have something in common, making them hard to keep apart. For from that mildness, which wins us the goodwill of our hearers, some inflow must reach this fiercest of passions, wherewith we inflame the same people, and again, out of this passion some little energy must often be kindled within that mildness. . . . *(2De Or.* 2.212).

Far from representing confusion or equivocation, however, this passage indicates that Cicero's notion of ethos is more sophisticated than that of Aristotle's, for Cicero recognizes that to a certain degree, a speaker's ethos cannot be separated from the ability to arouse emotion.

While Cicero based his notions of ethos and pathos on the Greek concepts, and recognized that ethos relates to character, he regarded it as working in the speech in a manner similar to that of a mild form of pathos. For Cicero ethos and pathos were often differing degrees of the same thing, and even for him it was not always clear where one left off and the other began.

The third difference between Aristotle and Cicero regarding ethos concerns the canons of rhetoric. Aristotle primarily developed ethos as a function of rhetorical invention, and only secondarily through style and delivery.[12] For Cicero, however, ethos is more closely associated with style, delivery and arrangement.[13] It is through style and delivery that fiery pathos is manifested, and thus so for its milder form, ethos. Cicero often associated ethos and pathos, and sometimes logos, with an appropriate style for each *(De Or.* 2.212, 2.310; *Orat.* 69), and gave advice on the proper style to use to commend the characters of the speaker and other parties involved in the case *(De Or.* 2.183-4). He also spoke of the value that arrangement and delivery can play in enhancing the ethos of the speaker *(Brut.* 276), and gave advice on how to integrate ethos and pathos into the structure of the speech *(De Or.* 2.213).

In sum, Cicero had a broader and more sophisticated concept of ethos than did Aristotle. Cicero observed that ethos functions not only in the speech proper, but is also a result of the reputation and personality that the rhetor brings to the speaking situation.. Furthermore, he recognized that ethos infuses all aspects of the speaker's craft, including style, delivery and arrangement, and that it cannot clearly be delineated from emotional appeal.

For the Romans ethos was a more significant aspect of the art of rhetoric than it was for the Greeks. Cicero's rhetorical theory is infused with concern for the character of the speaker and interest in how characters affects persuasiave appeal. This concern is the central theme of Roman rhetoric from Cato to Quintilian. Quintilian summed it up best when he

said of the orator: "But above all he must possess the quality which Cato places first and which is in the very nature of things the greatest and most important, that is, he must be a good man."[14]

Ethos in Practice

Cicero's use of ethos in practice is basically consistent with his theory, and his speeches rely heavily upon ethos, both his own and that of the other parties to the case. In his first great speech, *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino,* Cicero not only had to establish his ethos as a *novus homo,* but found it necessary to paint his client as a "paragon of the old Roman virtues," while discrediting Chrysogonus, the accuser.[15] Kennedy finds that in *Pro Quincto,* Cicero's use of ethos "for the antithesis between the characters of Quinctius and Naevius is one of the most powerful arguments of the speech."[16] In *Pro Caelio* Cicero argues that Caelius' character is inconsistent with the crime of which he is accused, and mounts a devastating attack upon the character of Clodia. Cicero's defense in *Pro Cluentio* is "in large part a matter of constructing a satisfactry ethos for the major characters,"[17] where he depicts Sassia and the elder Oppianicus as monsters in crime and convinces the jury that Cluentius was an honest and upright citizen.[18]

But perhaps the speech in which Cicero's use of ethos is most noteworthy is *Pro Murena,* which depends almost entirely upon ethos for its persuasive appeal. Before examining *Pro Murena,* a note is in order concerning the analysis of ethos in a text.

A difficulty in analyzing an orator's use of ethos is that ethos, as Cicero realized, infuses the whole speech and speaking situation in various and subtle ways. Evidence of persuasion through ethos, by its very nature, transcends the speech proper in ways that logos and pathos do not. Logos is "textual" persuasion. It exists within the text proper and can be identified in the arguments and evidence the speaker employs. Pathos is both textual and "extratextual." It is evidenced in the text through language, delivery and content, and is extratextual in that it exists in the interaction betwee speaker and audience. Like pathos, ethos is both textual and extratexual; but unlike pathos, which does not exist until the speaker brings it into being,[19] ethos is also "pretextual,"[20] in that it may exist in the minds of the audience before the speech begins through the audience's perception of the status and reputation of the orator. This pretextual status of the orator is a major form of ethos and of persuasion, but it is not entirely evident in the text itself. Thus the enormous prestige of the two major contenders in the Murena case, Cicero and Cato, is a factor important to Cicero's speech, but not completely intrinsic to the text.

While no doubt Cicero's reputation and consular prestige aided his case, we cannot know precisely how important Cicero's pretextual ethos was to his success in *Pro Murena.* Nonetheless, concern with the ethos of the parties involved in the case thoroughly permeates the speech. Cicero's

major rhetorical challenge was to defend the ethos of his client without seeming to impugn the characters of the highly-regarded Cato and Sulpicius. Additionally, since Murena was probably guilty, Cicero could rely very little on the facts of the case and had to depend instead on appeals to character and emotion.

Almost every issue involved in the case was turned into one of ethos by Cicero. In his *partitio* Cicero says he will divide his speech to answer the accusers according to their division of the case: (1) criticisms of Murena's "habits of life;" (2) his *contentio dignitas* with Sulpicius over the consulship; and (3) the charges of bribery.[21]

In regard to the first, it is an indication of the importance the Romans attached to a person's habits of life that Cicero says this is the charge that should be the weightiest of all, but instead is weak and trifling (335). Here Cicero defends Murena's military service under his father in Asia, and answers Cato's charge that Murena is a reveler (335-37).

The second charge, the *contentio dignitas* with Sulpicius, comprises a major portion of the speech (337-357). Cicero's arguments are here imbued with considerations of ethos, as he compares at length the family backgrounds, the careers, the accomplishments, and the personal characteristics of Murena and Sulpicius to prove that both are equally worthy of the consulship.

In the final section of the *confutatio* Cicero spends more time discussing Cato than the actual charges of bribery. Cato's enormous ethos plays a significant role here as Cicero must neutralize Cato's accusations without impugning his character. At one point Cicero even argues that it would be unfair to let Cato's dignity and reputation result in "any injury to Lucius Murena" (358). In addition, Cicero repeatedly relies upon the negative ethos of the insidious Catiline to bolster his case (354, 356, 368-70).

Cicero's *peroratio* is a classic example of his theory in practice, as he draws upon his own consular prestige and the specter of the Catilinarian conspiracy to mix ethos and pathos in a final appeal:

> [I]f my recommendation has any weight, if my solemn assertion has any authority . . . I the consul recommend him to you as consul, promising and undertaking that he will prove most desirous of tranquillity, most anxious to consult the interests of virtuous men, very brave in war, and an irreconcilable enemy to this conspiracy, which is at this moment seeking to undermine the republic. (373)

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of Cicero's theory and practice of ethos has demonstrated the major role that ethos played in Roman oratory. For the Romans, the character of the speaker was the essential aspect of rhetoric. While the Greeks were more likely than the Romans to be persuaded through reason, the Romans were more often persuaded by the perceived characters of the speakers and other parties involved in the case. For the

Romans emotional appeal was also a major factor, but this is tied very closely with ethos. A speaker's ability to move his audience emotionally is part of his ethos, and his ethos derives in part from his ability to move his listeners. Listeners cannot be moved emotionally by the words of someone they do not trust.

Not only was character more important to the Romans than to the Greeks, but character involved more to the Romans. For the Romans a person's character involved his whole way of life, including his *dignitas*, his *auctoritas* and his past accomplishments. The Romans believed that character is not developed, but is inherited or bestowed by nature and remained essentially unchanged in a man throughout his life.[22] Thus, to the Romans ethos was almost a type of logos; for if we know a man's character, we can draw conclusions about his behavior.[23] In addition, a person's character was dependent upon his family. Family ties played a powerful role in Roman history and culture,[24] and the Romans believed that character was passed on from generation to generation.[25] Therefore, to the Romans the accomplishments and reputation of one's ancestors were relevant forms of proof. To the Romans it was logical to assume, for example, that Cato the Younger was virtuous because it is known that his grandfather, Cato the Elder, was virtuous.

Furthermore, the Romans were of a practical bent, and ethos and pathos are practical forms of persuasion in that they are effective. Since the facts of a case usually could not be known with certainty by Roman jurors, they had to rely upon their perception of the trustworthiness of litigants and advocates. Cicero recognized the practical need to move the emotions of, and win the favor of, jurors, in order to be a successful pleader.

As May points out, "Oratory by its very nature, involves character. Verbal persuasion of any sort always implies the presentation of a persona by the speaker that can affect its audience for good or for ill."[26] It was the Romans, moreso than the Greeks, who recognized this and made it the central premise of their rhetorical system. It was in Cicero, the greatest of all Roman orators that "we find an artistic application of rhetorical ethos that far outstrips anything known in Greek oratory. . . ."[27] An examination of Cicero's speeches reveals that ethos was a major factor in almost every one.[28] The Roman concern with ethos grew out of the nature of Roman culture. The Roman cultural values that stressed family, authority, and the individual's responsibility to do one's duty, led to an emphasis in rhetoric on the character of the speaker. The Roman practical-mindedness led to an oratorical style that sought to move the emotions of, and win the favor of, the listeners as the most practical means to achieve persuasion.

While modern rhetorical theorists certainly acknowledge the importance of ethos in persuasion, it is often given little more than perfunctory mention in actual rhetorical analysis. This is probably because of the diffi-

culty of assessing the impact of ethos upon an audience. Due to its extratextual and pretextual nature and its similarity to pathos, ethos is often difficult to measure. However, a fully-developed modern theory of ethos would be quite useful to rhetorical critics, and the complexity and subtlety of Cicero's theory makes it a better starting point than does Aristotle's theory. Burke argues that we should conceive of rhetoric not simply as persuasion, but as identification.[29] Aristotle's theory of ethos comes closer to a theory of identification with its emphasis on the speaker's whole life and reputation, as well as the interaction of character with emotion. Halloran claims that in classical times the image of the ideal orator represented the cultural ideal, the widely-educated person who embodied the values and knowledge the culture held dear.[30] In *De Oratore* Cicero seemed to be presenting such a concept of speaker ethos. A Ciceronian/Burkean approach could rescue ethos from its dormancy as a rhetorical tool. Such an approach might reveal, for example, how much of the rhetorical appeal of a great orator like Martin Luther King, Jr. was the result of the cultural values with which he came to be identified.

Endnotes

[1] Aristotle, *Rhetoric,* trans. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 1356a13.

[2] See Aristotle, 1354a15, 1355a7.

[3] See Aristotle, 1354a12-19; and George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 88, 96.

[4] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria,* trans. H. E. Butler, vol. 4 (Loeb Classical Library, London: William Heinemann, 1921), XII, i, 1.

[5] George Kennedy, *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 42.

[6] Quintilian, vol. 2, VI,ii,9.

[7] Richard Leo Enos and Jeanne L. McClaran, "Audience and Image in Ciceronian Rome: Creation and Constraints of the *Vir Bonus* Personality," *Central States Speech Journal* 29 (1978): 102.

[8] Thomas R. King, "The Perfect Orator in *Brutus*," *The Southern Speech Journal* 33 (1967): 125.

[9] Cicero, *De Oratore,* trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, vol. 1 (Loeb Classical Library, London: William Heinemann, 1942), 2.115.

[10] Aristotle, 1378a6-8, 1356a9.

[11] William M. Sattler, "Conceptions of *Ethos* in Ancient Rhetoric," *Speech Monographs* 14 (1947): 64; Kennedy, *Rhetoric in the Roman World* 222-23.

[12] Sattler, 64.

[13] Sattler, 65; James M. May, *Trials of Character: The Eloquence of Ciceronian Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 5.

[14] Quintilian, vol. 4, XII,i,1.

[15] Friedrich Solmsen, "Cicero's First Speeches: A Rhetorical Analysis," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 69 (1938): 551.

[16] Kennedy, *Rhetoric in the Roman World* 143.

[17] Kennedy, *Rhetoric in the Roman World* 169-70.

[18] Gabriele S. Hoenigswald, "The Murder Charges in Cicero's *Pro Cluentio*," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 93 (1962): 123.

[19] While emotion may certainly exist in an audience prior to a speech, pathos as emotional proof, as one of the speaker's available tools of persuasion, does not exist until the speaker exploits and directs emotion to his or her purposes.

[20] The terms "extratextual" and "pretextual" come from Susan Sniader Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 124 and pp. 86-87. respectively.

[21] Cicero, *Pro Murena*, trans. C. D. Younge, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, vol. 2 (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), 335. Further references to this speech will appear in parentheses in the text.

[22] May, 6.

[23] Aristotle does make the point that a person's habits or qualities can be used as proof for past actions, but he treats this under forensic *topoi* (see *Rhetoric*, I, 10.)

[24] E. Courtney, "The Prosecution of Scaurus in 54 B.C.," *Philologus* 105 (1961): 151-54.

[25] May, 6.

[26] May, 162.

[27] May, 166.

[28] May, 169.

[29] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 19 ff.

[30] S. M. Halloran, "Tradition and Theory in Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 235.