SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

YEARBOOK OF THE ISRAEL SOCIETY
FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

VOLUME XXXIX **2020**

The appearance of this volume has been made possible by the support of

Bar-Ilan University
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
The Open University
Tel Aviv University
University of Haifa

PUBLISHED BY
THE ISRAEL SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
http://www.israel-classics.org

Manuscripts in the form of e-mail attachments should be sent to one of these e-mail addresses: scripta.classica.israelica@gmail.com or isaacb@tauex.tau.ac.il. For reviews, contact Daniela.Dueck@biu.ac.il. Please visit our website for submission guidelines. All submissions are refereed by outside readers.

Books for review should be sent to the Book Review Editor at the following address: The Editors, *Scripta Classica Israelica*, c/o Department of Classics, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 5290002, Israel.

Price $50

Camera-ready copy produced by the editorial staff of *Scripta Classica Israelica*
Printed in Israel by Magnes Press, Jerusalem

SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

YEARBOOK OF THE ISRAEL SOCIETY
FOR THE
PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

VOLUME XXXIX **2020**

CONTENTS

Cicero's Economy of Praise*

Robert A. Kaster

Abstract: This paper argues that the rhetorical uses of praise are at least as culturally interesting as the use of invective, which has received much more scholarly attention. After brief comments on "Cicero's conceit" — the title of Walter Allen's classic article on the subject, which held (correctly, I believe) that Cicero's self-regard did not exceed the generous bounds allowed by his contemporaries — the paper uses Cicero's defense of Publius Sestius (*Pro Sestio*, March 56 BCE) to demonstrate the variety and tactical precision with which Cicero used both praise of himself and — perhaps more interestingly — praise of others to advance his and his client's interests. The paper concludes by suggesting some of the ways in which further study of the "economy of praise" — the ways in which praise circulated as a form of currency among members of the Roman elite — could further illuminate late Republican culture and society.

Keywords: praise; invective; conceit; Cicero; *Pro Sestio*; rhetorical strategy; hyperbole; deception; *dignitas*

> Cicero was the most influential man in the city, but he made himself the object of hostility ... by constantly praising himself and boasting
>
> — Plutarch *Cicero* 24.1

> ... his very consulship, praised not with cause but without end
>
> — Seneca *De brevitate vitae* 5.2

It has been a pleasure to be with you at these meetings, and it is an honor to have been given the opportunity to speak to you. I have decided to use that opportunity to turn over

* This is the lightly revised text of the keynote lecture delivered at the meeting of the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classial Studies on 30 May 2019. I warmly thank the Society's members for the invitation, and David Schaps, then president, for extending the invitation on the Society's behalf; I am also very grateful to Lisa Maurice, Donna Shalev, and their colleagues at Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, respectively, and to Benjamin Isaac, the editor of *SCI*. In what follows all translations are my own; unless otherwise specified, all references are to the works of Cicero.

a new leaf, or perhaps more accurately to begin to backtrack from a detour in my work that began more than ten years ago.

At that time, after finishing my commentary on Cicero's defense of Publius Sestius,[1] I thought that I had identified, in the speech's trafficking in praise, a subject that could be treated more broadly: the uses of praise in late Roman Republican culture. After all, invective, the dark and snarling twin of praise, had long received a fair amount of attention: why not give praise a chance?[2]

Of course, that did mean that I would have to start by confronting the most conspicuous manifestation of late Roman Republican praise, the praise that Cicero lavishes on himself. Cicero's apparent conceit is not a very pretty sight to most modern eyes; those who steel themselves to gaze upon it soon discover the classic study published sixty-five years ago by Walter Allen under the title, precisely, of "Cicero's Conceit".[3] There Allen gathered much evidence of the phenomenon and made it, if not madly attractive, then at least culturally intelligible. It is not at all my aim to take issue with Allen's treatment, but I do want to suggest that there is something more to say about Cicero's self-praise, and especially about his use of praise more generally, which was not part of Allen's topic. To focus my argument I use the *pro Sestio*, the most elaborate and most interesting of the so-called *post reditum* speeches, in which Cicero takes the opportunity both to look back in time — to give his version of Roman politics leading to the exile he suffered in 58-57 — and to survey the current political scene, in the long excursus on the so-called *Populares* and *Optimates*.

The speech's scope makes it useful because it is a virtual laboratory of Ciceronian invective and praise. In it Cicero elaborately and memorably caricatures the major villians — Publius Clodius Pulcher and the consuls of 58, Piso and Gabinius — and a couple of minor knaves, Gellius and Vatinius, while abusing a handful of others in passing. More important for my purpose here, he bestows praise on over two dozen contemporaries in remarks that range from brief honorific notices to full-dress encomia. It is also the speech in which his self-aggrandizement seems to reach heights it had not scaled before and would certainly never reach again.

To start, then, I will quickly summarize the main lines of Allen's essay on "Cicero's conceit", for orientation, and then fill out the picture a bit by considering the way Cicero's self-aggrandizement works in *pro Sestio*. In the second half of my discussion, I will show how Cicero's self-agrandizement in this speech is inseparable from the praise of others, in the two senses of that phrase: both the praise that Cicero bestows on others and, no less important, the praise that others bestow on him.

From among the important points that Allen made, I can briefly recapitulate four that are particularly relevant to my own argument. First, though Roman elite culture nurtured among its members a degree of vanity that is both frankly expressed and quite breathtaking by modern middle-class standards — even modern academic standards —

---

1 R. A. Kaster, *Cicero*: *Speech on Behalf of Publius Sestius*.Clarendon Ancient History Series (Oxford 2006).

2 On these subjects see most recently the essays in *Praise and Blame in Roman Republican Rhetoric*, edited by C. Smith and R. Corvino (Swansea 2011).

3 W. Allen, Jr., "Cicero's Conceit", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 85 (1954) 121-44.

the same culture placed limits on the amount of self-praise that could be tolerated. Second, there is no evidence that contemporaries generally regarded Cicero as conspicuously exceeding those limits, no evidence that any but his enemies found much occasion to criticize his self-praise, no evidence — where his forensic speeches are concerned — that his self-praise was counterproductive (for example, in alienating juries), and no reason to suppose that he would have persisted in it had it been counterproductive. Third, and despite appearances to the contrary, Cicero repeatedly shows himself to be sensitive to the question how far self-praise was socially acceptable. Finally, when he finds himself in circumstances where self-praise seems needed, he typically frames the necessity in terms of maintaining his *dignitas*: that is, he must speak in ways honorific to himself because he is compelled to respond to *iniuriae* that have detracted from his *dignitas*, or because the worth of deeds that have gained him praise would otherwise be in doubt. Here the tensions inherent in self-praise are helpful in illuminating hierarchies of value within the culture, as the imperative of maintaining your *dignitas* trumps the imperative of moderating the way you talk about yourself.

I believe that Allen got all of this essentially and very helpfully right; yet if we turn to the *pro Sestio* we find that there is a dimension of "Cicero's conceit" on which his discussion does not really touch. It is an important dimension, and one not limited to this speech; to appreciate it, we must consider first the speech's setting and its argument. On February 10 of 56 a charge of *vis*, or public violence, was brought against Publius Sestius, who as tribune in 57 had supported Cicero's recall from exile. Indeed, it is Sestius, along with his fellow-tribune Titus Annius Milo and the consul Publius Lentulus Spinther, whom Cicero repeatedly credits with being chiefly responsible for that recall: hence the sense of obligation he expresses at the speech's start, when he says (*Sest*. 2),

> I once thought ... that I would be obliged to use my voice in thanking those who have most earned my gratitude (*qui de me optime meriti sunt*) … but ... I am now forced to use it in warding off the perils launched against them (*in eorum periculis depellendis*).

In Sestius' case it was an obligation Cicero was able to fulfill independent of his sentiments, for his correspondence shows that he was at the time rather put out with the man, whom he described as a "peevish fellow", *morosus homo*.[4] But of course none of that shows on the surface of the speech that he delivered, roughly one month after the charge was first brought, late in the second week of March.

Speaking last as was his custom, after speeches by Gaius Licinius Calvus, Marcus Crassus, and Quintus Hortensius, Cicero felt free to range rather widely, delivering what he calls in the exordium an "unmethodical and general defense" (*Sest*. 5 *confusa atque universa defensio*). And indeed, it is extraordinarily difficult to infer from this speech exactly what specific acts the charge against Sestius comprised: though Cicero spends 6600 words describing the events of 58, up to and following his departure into exile, and another 2100 words on the events of 57, when Sestius was tribune, he uses exactly 125 words to describe a single act of Sestius as tribune — and that happens to concern an

4 See *QFr*. 2.3.5, 2.4.1.

episode in which Sestius himself was the victim of a violent attack.[5] To the extent that this strategy resulted in a certain obfuscation of the charges, that was no doubt a welcome side-effect; but it was surely only a side-effect, for the main aim of Cicero's strategy was far bolder.

Any charge of *vis* was a political charge, not just in the sense that it was often brought by one political faction as a move against another — as was certainly true in Sestius' case — but in the more fundamental sense that it alleged a political crime, a crime against the interests of the community as a whole: any charge of *vis* alleged that the relevant acts were not only criminally wrong but were fundamentally *contra rem publicam*.[6] Consequently, the charge invited a political defense, which is exactly what Cicero mounts, with a stunning simplicity and directness: he contends that the events leading to his exile amounted to an overthrow of the *res publica*, and that the events leading to his recall amounted to its restoration. That is why he spends so many thousands of words on the events of 58, and why he really does not need to address any of Sestius' specific acts: if the attacks upon himself undermined the commonwealth, if his expulsion laid it low, if his restoration revived it, then by definition no action on Sestius' part to secure his return could be "against the public interest".

That the commonwealth's interests differed in no important way from his own is the central thought that Cicero uses to undermine the foundation of the prosecution's case. Hence his attempt to identify himself with the *res publica* and vice versa, an attempt that begins at the speech's outset and never lets up:

> Fortune herself established that Publius Sestius should hold the tribunate in *the civil community's gravest crisis, when the commonwealth, overturned and battered, lay in ruins*[7] (that is, when Cicero himself was in exile);
>
> I must set out in detail *the shipwreck that the commonwealth suffered* in the previous year [viz., 58, the year of Cicero's exile]: for you will find that *everything Sestius later said, did, and intended was aimed at picking up the pieces and restoring the well-being of us all*;[8]
>
> [The consuls of 58] openly made a pact with [Clodius] that they could have their pick of the provinces ... *provided that they first hand over the commonwealth, battered and bound, to the tribune; moreover, they said that the deal, once struck, could be sealed with my blood*;[9]

---

5 *Sest*. 79, on Sestius' attempt as tribune to halt an assembly by reporting unfavorable omens to the presiding consul.

6 On the charge, see A. Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome*, 2nd ed (Oxford 1999), 110-24; A. Riggsby, *Crime and Community in Ciceronian Rome* (Austin, TX, 1999), 79-84. For a tentative reconstruction of the prosecution's case, see M. C. Alexander, *The Case for the Prosecution in the Ciceronian Era* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2002), 213-17.

7 *Sest.* 5 ... *in gravissimis temporibus civitatis atque in ruinis eversae atque adflictae rei publicae*.

8 *Sest.* 15 ... *rei publicae naufragium, in quo conligendo ac reficienda salute communi omnia reperientur P. Sesti facta, dicta, consilia versata*.

9 *Sest.* 24 ... *si ipsi prius tribuno plebis adflictam et constrictam rem publicam tradidissent: id autem foedus meo sanguine ictum sanciri posse dicebant*.

and so on, and on.[10]

But wait now, you might say: what sort of argument is this? The exile of one man was equivalent to the Republic's overthrow? The restoration of that one man was equivalent to its resurrection? Surely there could be no more striking example of self-aggrandizement, of egomania raised, pathologically, to the level of political principle. Well, yes, that is how it appears at first sight. Yet however *outré* the argument might seem, several points need to be made to complete the picture. First, and on a practical level, it apparently worked, or at a minimum did not hurt, for Sestius was acquitted unanimously by the panel of seventy-five men judges (*QFr.* 2.4.1). Second, and much more important, the argument is not quite what it seems to be at first sight. Consider the following:

> What greater distinction could anyone find in all history than this, that all patriots, on their own and in concert, and the entire senate, as a matter of public policy, took on the dress of mourning for one of their fellow-citizens?;[11]
>
> The commonwealth had a crucial stake in my staying alive … and I was for that reason commended to the protection of foreign peoples by letters sent by the consuls in accord with the senate's resolution;[12]
>
> ... I whom Quintus Catulus and many others in the senate had called 'father of the fatherland';[13]
>
> For did the senate ever commend any citizen, save me, to the protection of foreign nations ... ever express formal thanks … for any citizen's well-being, save mine? In my case alone did the conscript fathers decree that provincial governors … should safeguard my life and well-being. In my case alone … did the consuls send letters … to call together … all who desired the commonwealth's safety: what the senate never decreed when the commonwealth as a whole faced danger it thought it must decree to preserve my well-being alone;[14]
>
> [Pompey] ... bore witness, in a prepared statement of his views, to the fact that I alone had saved the fatherland ... a packed meeting of the senate so fully aligned itself with his statement that only a single enemy of the people dissented, and that very fact was entrusted to the public records, so that generations to come would ever remember it ... the senate decreed … that no one was to bring to bear any cause for delay [in securing my

---

10 Compare, e.g., *Sest.* 27, 31-33, 49-50, 53-54, 60, 71, 73, 83-84, 87, 112, 128-29, 144-45, 147.

11 *Sest.* 27 *... pro uno cive et bonos omnis privato consensu et universum senatum publico consilio mutasse vestem*? (late February 58).

12 *Sest*. 50 *ego ... periculo rei publicae vivebam ... ob eam causam consularibus litteris de senatus sententia exteris nationibus commendabar* (May/June 57).

13 *Sest*. 121 *me ... quem Q. Catulus, quem multi alii ... in senatu patrem patriae nominarant* (on Catulus, after the suppression of Catiline, cf. *Pis*. 6).

14 *Sest.* 128 *quem enim umquam senatus civem nisi me ... commendavit, cuius umquam propter salutem nisi meam senatus publice ... gratias egit*? *de me uno patres conscripti decreverunt... . in una mea causa ... factum est ut litteris consularibus ex senatus consulto ... omnes qui rem publicam salvam vellent convocarentur. quod numquam senatus in universae rei publicae periculo decrevit, id in unius mea salute conservanda decernendum putavit* (May/June 57).

> return], and that if anyone did otherwise, he would patently be seeking to overturn the commonwealth.[15]

There are several important points to be made about these passages. First, they show that Cicero's premise in the speech, identifying himself and his interests with the *res publica* and the public interest, did not involve self-aggrandizement at all, if by that is meant inflating one's worth beyond some generally recognized assessment: the generally recognized assessment was exactly that his well-being was identical with the commonwealth's. Nor did his premise involve boasting, if that means engaging in self-praise and making claims about one's own abilities or status. Cicero was neither praising himself nor making claims of his own; he was *reporting* what others had said of him in praise, for the most part as matters of the formal public record — something that I believe is generally true when he makes such statements about himself; and what others had said of him in praise quite precisely identified him and his interests with the *res publica* and the public interest, thereby providing him with the basis for his defense.

Second, everything that he reports seems to be true as a matter of fact. We know that the senate's decrees were stored in the *aerarium*, where they could be checked "by generations to come", as Cicero says. We know that the senate and people had previously assumed mourning dress to mark some public catastrophe, and we know they would do so in the future;[16] but it appears that they had in fact never done so in response to an individual's misfortune — and by doing so they indeed signaled that the individual's misfortune was tantamount to a public catastrophe. (It was probably for this very reason that the hostile consuls of 58 ordered the senate to resume normal dress — *Sest*. 32 — an act for which Cicero could not forgive them.) In fact, Cicero seems to be rather scrupulous in reporting all this testimony: notice that whereas he is unsurprisingly keen to notice gestures made by senatorial decree and to record honors uniquely bestowed on him, he says only that "Quintus Catulus and many others in the senate" applied the honorific phrase *pater patriae* to him, that is, after the suppression of the Catilinarians; he does not say that it was decreed or that he was the first to be so called — and we happen to know that that title was not bestowed by senatorial decree until the senate gave it to Caesar after Munda, and we also know that Cicero himself, for one, had previously applied the honorific to Marius, when he was defending Gaius Rabirius earlier in 63.[17]

Very well, you might say: so he is not simply making it all up and thumping his chest to inflate his worth — but really, must he? Isn't it all rather, well, unbecoming? Of course I am not suggesting that Cicero found it burdensome or distasteful to identify himself with the *res publica*. But, in a word, no, it was not unbecoming, indeed quite the opposite: not to have deployed this testimony as he does would have been ethically strange, for two very Roman reasons. First, he was, as he says at the outset of the

---

15 *Sest*. 129 *de scripto sententia dicta mihi uni testimonium patriae conservatae dedit ... sententiam ita frequentissimus senatus secutus est ut unus dissentiret hostis, idque ipsum tabulis publicis mandaretur ad memoriam posteri temporis sempiternam ... decretum in curia ... si quis aliter fecisset, eum plane eversorem rei publicae fore* (July 57).

16 See Kaster 2006, 177-78.

17 Caesar: Livy *Perioch*. 116, Suet. *Iul*. 76.1, 85.1, Flor. 2.13.34, cf. *Phil*. 2.31, 13.23, 35, *Off*. 3.83. Marius: *Rab. Perd*. 27.

speech, "obliged to use his voice" not only "in thanking those who [had] most earned [his] gratitude" but also in "warding off the perils launched against them": satisfying such obligations stood very near the top of the Roman hierarchy of moral needs; to have at hand the means to do the job in a way that could extinguish the danger at its source, by overturning its premise, and then to refuse to use those means — well, at very best that would seem to engage in overly nice concerns about oneself, when concerns about oneself were not the main item on the agenda.

But — and this is the second reason — there is in any case no ground to suppose that there *was* cause for Cicero to be concerned about himself in any case. The acts of praise that he records — the quasi-ritual gestures of public mourning, the decrees, the letters, and so on — were, very simply, the just reward of the patriot: it was — to use the language Cicero himself uses in the *pro Sestio* — the good opinion that good men spread abroad about one, the only thing that can truly be called glory (*Sest.* 139 *bonam famam bonorum, quae sola vere gloria nominari potest*). In the system of Roman values — a system that, where glory was concerned, Cicero did not question until the very end of his life[18] — this was the only compensation a good citizen decently sought for his service to the community. Such a citizen would of course continue to render that service even if the compensation was not forthcoming; but once glory was gained, not to be glad of it, and not to encourage others to share your gladness by spreading it abroad — that would be quite un-Roman. By speaking of that praise, Cicero was just wearing the public character that he was entitled to wear, assembled from all the things that good men said of him.

Now, it is no doubt true that the good men in question could not have intended their praise to be used for the purpose that Cicero uses it here, to defend a man who surely was guilty, if not of public violence according to the letter of the law, then certainly of contributing to the general level of political violence, a point that Cicero himself in effect concedes. It is no less certainly true that the praise of others reported here could not have been the transparent, unanimous, and spontaneous thing that Cicero represents it as being. For example, he neglects to mention that when the people and the senate adopted mourning in his support, they were following his own lead, for he had assumed mourning after Clodius promulgated the first of the laws aimed against him — a move that Cicero himself later came to regard as a gross tactical error, as his correspondence from exile shows.[19] And surely whatever was going through Pompey's mind on that day in July 57 when he read from a prepared statement to declare Cicero the commonwealth's unique savior, it cannot have been simple. For one thing, when something like that very claim was communicated to Pompey by Cicero himself early in 62, it had put a lasting frost on their relations;[20] for another, Pompey himself was the man who had most flagrantly betrayed Cicero during his crisis in 58.[21] But such

---

18 See A. A. Long, "Cicero's Politics in *De Officiis*", in *Justice and Generosity*: *Studies in Hellenistic Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. A. Laks (Cambridge 1995), 213-40, esp. 229-33.

19 See *Att*. 3.15.5.

20 *Sull.* 67, *Schol. Bob.* 167.23-29 Stangl, with *Fam*.5.7.3, *Att*. 1.14.3.

21 See Kaster 2006, 13-14, with *QFr*. 1.4.4, 2.3.3, *Att.* 10.4.3, *Pis*. 77, *Plut. Cic*. 31.2, Cass. Dio 38.17.3.

considerations do not much matter in the Roman of economy of praise. In this economy, praise is a commodity, a thing of value traded back and forth. Any given act of praise is like money put into circulation: it becomes transferable, like the cash I might pay you for services rendered, and the recipient is free to use it as suits his needs.

Within this economy of praise a stereotypical view of Cicero would suppose that he was above all a consumer, avidly accumulating and parting with little; but that is not at all the case. As I have already noted, his defense of Sestius teems with praise bestowed on others besides himself and the defendant. To illustrate the variousness of this praise, and some of the workings of the economy of praise just remarked, I want in the final part of this discussion to consider Cicero the producer of praise, and the praise he bestows on others.

I can summarize these laudatory occasions in tabular form, from the most straightforward and obvious types and uses to those that are more complex and interesting, both rhetorically and socially:

a. "Courtesy" notices, applied in the speech to 24 different individuals; some examples:

> *Sest*. 3 "Quintus Hortensius, a most distinguished and eloquent gentleman" (*clarissimo viro atque eloquentissim*o)
>
> *Sest*. 12 "Marcus Cato, then tribune of the plebs and an extraordinarily brave patriot" (*tribuno plebis, fortissimo atque optimo civi*)
>
> *Sest*. 12 "Marcus Petreius' exceptionally patriotic spirit, the surpassing manliness he displayed for the common good" (*excellens animus amore rei publicae, ... praestans in re publica virtus*)
>
> *Sest*. 26 "Lucius Ninnius, a man of unbelievable loyalty, largeness of spirit, and firm resolve" (*vir incredibili fide, magnitudine animi, constantia*, similarly *Sest*. 68)
>
> *Sest*. 58 "<Lucius> Lucullus, a man and general of the highest caliber" (*summo viro atque imperatore*)
>
> *Sest*. 130 "that extraordinary gentleman [viz., Metellus Nepos], a true Metellus indeed" (*vir egregius ac vere Metellus*)
>
> *Sest*. 131 "the house of those most excellent and cultivated men, the Laenii — Marcus Laenius Flaccus, his father, and his brother" (*optimorum et doctissimorum virorum*)

b. More extensive characterizations:

> *Sest*. 6-7 Publius Sestius' father and his father-in-law Lucius Scipio: see at n. 25 below
>
> *Sest*. 29 "Lucius Lamia, who not ... only held me in singularly high esteem (*unice diligebat*) ... but was also eager even to meet death on behalf of the commonwealth (*pro re publica vel mortem oppetere cupiebat*) ... a Roman knight ... a most honored and virtuous man ... a superb citizen and patriot ... [who] together with the senate and all other patriots was then mourning the misfortune of a friend and of the commonwealth (*equitem Romanum ... ornatissimum atque optimum virum ... amicissimum rei publicae civem, ... illo ipso tempore una cum senatu et cum bonis omnibus casum amici reique publicae lugentem*)."
>
> *Sest*. 67 "this most excellent and heroic man (*optimi ac fortissimi viri*) ... Gnaeus Pompeius ... who had mastered with a victor's manliness citizens utterly steeped in crime,

> the fiercest enemies, vast tribes, kings, peoples strange and wild, innumerable pirates, slaves, too, in massed array, who ended all wars on land and sea and extended the bounds of the Roman people's dominion to the ends of the earth (*sceleratissimos civis, qui acerrimos hostis, qui maximas nationes, qui reges, qui gentis feras atque inauditas, qui praedonum infinitam manum, qui etiam servitia virtute victoriaque domuisset, qui omnibus bellis terra marique compressis imperium populi Romani orbis terrarum terminis definisset*)"

c. Full-fledged *laudationes*:

> *Sest*. 60-63, on "the splendid distinction (*splendor*) … seriousness of character, uprightness, largeness of spirit (*gravitas, integritas, magnitudo animi*)" — in a word, "manliness" (*virtus*) of Marcus Cato

> *Sest*. 86-89, on "the immortal manliness … largeness of spirit, gravity, and loyalty" (*immortalis virtus ... magnitudo animi, gravitas, fides*) of the "godlike" (*divinus*) Milo

Simplest, most numerous, and surely most familiar are the brief and highly formalized appositive phrases such as we find in the notice of Quintus Hortensius, "a most distinguished and eloquent gentleman", where an epithet denoting social prestige — *clarissimus, honestissimus, egregius* — is typically joined with one or more terms denoting a specific, valued trait, like eloquence. These are the expected clichés of praise, much like the clichés of abuse that animate invective and allow us to predict that the target of abuse will be declared a base-born wastrel and coward who spent a dissolute youth as a prostitute before becoming a bankrupt cutpurse. But before we dismiss them as mere clichés, we should pause a moment to consider some of the real work that clichés accomplish.

We can notice, first, that though the number of people praised is not small, the range of qualities for which they are praised is quite narrow. Except for the Laenii — members of a provincial family of Brundisium, who sheltered Cicero on his flight into exile, praised as *doctissimi* — the qualities cluster very densely around *fortitudo* and *fides* and related excellences on the order of *constantia, gravitas,* and *magnitudo animi,* along with *virtus* in the strongly gendered sense of "manliness". They are the core virtues of Roman public life, the virtues of the *boni,* the 'good men' who uphold the common good, the patriots. They are predictable and stereotypical, and they are useful in praise and valued in practice precisely because they are predictable and stereotyped: just because they are unsurprising and non-idiosyncratic they can be shared to a superlative degree by any number of men, and those men can uphold the common good just because they share them. To put the point another way, we probably should not expect to hear Pompey praised as "the most nimble mind of his generation", not just because mental agility was not conspicuous among his notable traits, but because the Romans did not especially value a nimble mind as a political virtue — and because the form of the expression "most X of his generation" is too distinctive, too individualizing. It is the great merit of the Latin superlative, for this purpose, that it is non-exclusive: only one man can be called "the most gallant man of his generation" but any number of men can be *fortissimi*. (In this respect the praise bestowed on Cicero, for example as "the unique savior of the commonwealth", appears all the more extraordinary.) The praise that Cicero bestows in these phrases distinguishes the recipient, but only by placing him in a category of men who are distinguished to an equally superlative degree in respect of

bravery, loyalty, and the like. The categories taken all together define the *boni*, the real patriots.

Of course it is a favored stance of Cicero, especially in the speeches after his exile, that all good men stand together on the same side — which is to say, on his side — united against an outcast band of renegades and desperadoes. Accordingly, just because they identify the qualities of the *boni*, these brief "courtesy notices" serve at the same time as markers denoting the people who — at least for the present occasion — can be regarded as *mei*, the "people on my side". Here the phrases serve two main purposes. First, and more straightforwardly, they are a form of currency, used to underwrite a system of retributive justice: they constitute payback, the return I make to those who have helped me, just as invective is the return — the unwanted gift — I give to those who have harmed me. One example of this payback is the praise of the Laenii, the family of Brundisium already mentioned, whose cultivation receives notice; another example is the praise twice bestowed in the course of the speech on Lucius Ninnius, who as tribune in 58 had done what he could to support Cicero in the prelude to his exile.

More subtly, the phrases of praise are a means of maintaining a certain public face when referring to persons with whom one's relations might be problematic. Hortensius, that "most distinguished and eloquent gentleman", was in fact one of the aristocrats who Cicero believed had acted out of spite and envy to betray him at his moment of crisis, to let him down during his exile, and to obstruct him even after his return:[22] only after Hortensius supported him for election to the college of augurs, three years after this speech, could Cicero speak of him with genuine warmth. But of course this was not the occasion to let any of those resentments show, when Hortensius was part of the team defending Sestius. Even more problematic were Cicero's relations with Pompey and Crassus, both of whom were present at the trial, Crassus as another advocate for the defense, Pompey as a character witness for Sestius: "conflicted" does not begin to describe Cicero's attitude toward Pompey, who had ruthlessly failed him in 58; as for Crassus, just a few weeks before this speech Cicero had learned — from Pompey — that the magnate was funding the archvillain Clodius in his ongoing villainies (*QFr*. 2.3.4). But of course both receive the expected tokens of courtesy.

Still, the case of Pompey and Crassus provides a reminder that even the merest clichés of courtesy can have real force, if not through their presence then by their omission. In the one passage where Cicero cannot avoid referring to the three dynasts — Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar — all together, he does so in these terms (*Sest*. 39):

> Gnaeus Pompeius, a most distinguished man and most friendly disposed to me now, as he was (to the extent possible) then;[23] Marcus Crassus, the bravest of men, with whom I enjoyed every degree of friendship ...; and Gaius Caesar, whom I had never given just cause to be estranged from me (*qui a me nullo meo merito alienus esse debebat*) ...

The omission of even a specious superlative makes the reference to Caesar — who was not present — every bit as chilly as the March day on which the speech was

---

22 See especially *Att*. 3.9.2, with *QFr*. 1.3.8, *Fam*. 1.9.13, and Shackleton Bailey's comments on *Att*. 3.8.4.

23 "Then" refers to the crisis of exile; "to the extent possible" (*quoad licuit*) both glances at Pompey's betrayal (cf. n. 21) and offers a back-handed exculpation, insofar as it implies that Pompey's heart was in the right place, whatever constraint kept him from following through.

delivered. That chill is made only more biting in the one apparently laudatory phrase that Cicero applies to Caesar in the speech (*Sest*. 132), when he refers to him as "a gentle person to whom bloodshed is alien" (*mitem hominem et a caede abhorrentem*). Given that Caesar had for two years been slaughtering Gauls by the tens of thousands, we might suspect irony. But Cicero is no doubt thinking only of Roman blood, and the irony lies elsewhere, for he is alluding to Caesar's position opposing the execution of the Catilinarians in December 63: it was of course those executions that armed Clodius in his attack on Cicero, and Caesar had restated his position in a public meeting called by Clodius just days before Cicero fled in March 58 — a fact that Cicero suppresses in this speech, though he surely did not forget it.[24]

We can round off this survey by looking briefly at two other passages where Cicero uses praise for more substantial argumentative purposes than merely positioning himself vis-à-vis another person in passing. The first occurs early in the speech, when Cicero is providing the obligatory sketch of the defendant's early life, to show that the virtues Sestius displayed as tribune had deep roots. He wishes to show, in particular, that the devotion Sestius displayed in supporting Cicero himself is of a piece with the admirable devotion Sestius earlier displayed in relataion to several authoritative older men — his own father and the fathers of his first and second wives. He must therefore bring the older men onstage, which he does in these terms:[25]

> Publius Sestius' father, judges, was (as most of you recall) a wise, pure, and strict man who came in first in the elections for tribune of the plebs — in a field that included some of the most notable men at a very favorable time for our community [that is, the 90s BCE] — but was thereafter less keen to enjoy further office than to be seen worthy of it ... . Gaius Albanius, a most honorable and respected man ... [T]hat most excellent and unfortunate man, Lucius Scipio, ... who had been cast out when the commonwealth was tossed on turbulent seas — a man then prostrate in a foreign land who would rightly have followed in the footsteps of his ancestors ...

If Cicero seems to be working especially hard in the first and last cases, that is because he is, with good reason. The "excellent and unfortunate" Lucius Scipio was Lucius Cornelius Scipio Asiagenus, an adherent of Marius who became consul in 83, and a thoroughly unpleasant piece of work even by the terrible standards of the 80s: deeply treacherous, twice deserted by his army, he fled to Marseille either just before or just after being proscribed — though of course Cicero's euphemisms and clichés disclose none of this.[26] As for the elder Sestius, he is introduced in terms that make him a paragon even among defendants' fathers, who generally are made to seem candidates for sainthood: whereas 'strict' (*severus*) is what any father should be, the only individuals Cicero elsewhere describes as both 'wise' (*sapiens*) and morally 'pure'

---

24 Cf. Plut. *Cic*. 30.4, Cass. Dio 38.17.1-2.

25 *Sest*. 6-7 *parente P. Sestius natus est, iudices, homine, ut plerique meministis, et sapiente et sancto et severo; qui cum tribunus plebis primus inter homines nobilissimos temporibus optimis factus esset, reliquis honoribus non tam uti voluit quam dignus videri*. ... *honestissimi et spectatissimi viri, C. Albani*. ... *optimi et calamitosissimi viri ..., L. Scipionis ... fluctibus rei publicae expulsum, in alienis terris iacentem, quem in maiorum suorum vestigiis stare oportebat*.

26 Cf. *MRR* 2.62, with Appian *BCiv*. 1.96, Plut. *Pomp*. 7.3, Oros. 5.21.3.

(*sanctus*) are the Optimate leader Quintus Catulus (*Planc*. 12), and Socrates (*De or*. 1.231). When Cicero assures the majority of the judges that they recall the good man's election to a tribunate sometime in the halcyon days of the 90s, he is merely planting a useful idea in their minds, for most of them almost certainly were too young to recall it in fact. When he says that the elder Sestius "was thereafter less keen to enjoy further office than to be seen worthy of it", he means that the man either withdrew from further service to the commonwealth or was defeated when he stood for further office: were he an opponent, Cicero would of course attack him for the former trait or demean him for the latter.

In these sketches Cicero toils to spin hay into gold, using praise for rhetorically conventional ends in ways that are — unsurprisingly — economical with the truth. My last example involves a passage that is much more ambitious and revealing in several ways: the praise of the "godlike" Milo and the "immortal manliness" he displayed while tribune in 57, one of the two full-fledged encomia that Cicero incorporates in the speech. (The other encomium, of Cato, would be just as interesting to examine, if time permitted.) The passage occurs at the climax of what passes for Cicero's formal defense, just before he turns from his narrative of past events to consider present circumstances, in the excursus on *Optimates* and *Populares* that engrosses the last third of the speech.

Cicero's premise for the encomium, briefly, is this: in January of 57 a terrible riot had bloodied the forum when Clodius' thugs violently disrupted a vote aimed at Cicero's recall, and in the days and weeks that followed the same thugs ran amok in the city; when, in the course of their frenzy, they attacked Milo's house, Milo had shown proper restraint, at first seeking only to bring a charge of public violence against Clodius for attacking the home of a magistrate; and it was only after he was blocked from bringing the charge — when, as Cicero puts it, "the courts were uprooted" (*iudicia sublata*) — that Milo assembled an armed force of his own, to meet force with force for the sake of the common good.[27] In so doing, as Cicero says, Milo demonstrated that

> it is ever right to resist by law and legal procedure the crimes of reckless men ...; but if the laws are impotent, ... if the commonwealth has been overwhelmed by arms and is held fast by a violent and reckless cabal, then life and liberty must of necessity be defended with a bulwark of force.[28]

There are two points to be made about this encomium. First, it is the single most deceptive passage in the speech — not a small claim in itself; second, the deception is useful to Cicero in two quite different ways. As commonly in Cicero's speeches, the deception lies not so much in what he says as in what he fails to say: it does indeed appear that Milo was prevented from bringing a charge against Clodius; but the immediate cause of that frustration was almost certainly an action taken by Cicero's own allies in the senate, who had declared a *iustitium*, a cessation of legal processes and all other public business, as a kind of general strike to protest the riot in January — a measure that Cicero happened to mention in the parallel narrative he gave when thanking the senate immediately after his return in September 57 (*Red. sen.* 6-8), but

---

27 See *Sest*. 75, 85-89, with my commentary ad locc.

28 *Sest*. 86 *oportere hominum audacium ... sceleri legibus et iudiciis resistere; si leges non valerent, ... si res publica vi consensuque audacium armis oppressa teneretur, praesidio et copiis defendi vitam et libertatem necesse esse.*

which he completely suppresses here. The suppression allows him to present Milo, not as the headstrong and impulsive character we otherwise have reason to think he was, but as a model of sober constitutionality; and having created that character for Milo, he is able to make it serve double duty.

First, and more directly, it is useful for the defense of Sestius: it allows Cicero to cast Sestius in the same mold as Milo and argue that he, too, had assembled a *praesidium* of his own — that is to say, a crew of gladiators and armed thugs — only unwillingly, under compulsion, and for the sake of self-defense (*Sest.* 79-84). The second purpose this tricky encomium serves becomes plain when we recall two facts about Milo: as tribune in 57 he, too, had labored for Cicero's recall and was therefore among those to whom Cicero owed a great deal; second, he was currently in peril, because Clodius had in early February brought Milo to trial before the people on a charge of violence, with Pompey himself as his defender, and at the time of this speech that trial — after two stormy sessions memorably described in a letter from Cicero to his brother — was in adjournment, the charge still hanging over Milo's head.[29] In other words: by offering this encomium Cicero is working to repay his debt to Milo, not just by offering the currency of generalized praise, but by laying out a specific plea for his defense. And in fact, we know that Cicero had done just this sort of thing — speaking in one trial with an eye on another — very recently. On February 11, the day after Sestius was charged, Cicero appeared in defense of Calpurnius Bestia; and as he tells his brother, he took the occasion to "lay a bit of groundwork" for his future defense, inserting in his speech for Bestia an extended eulogy of Sestius, just as he inserts in the present speech for Sestius an extended eulogy of Milo:[30]

> I defended Bestia on a charge of electoral bribery ... and ... I took the opportunity to lay a bit of groundwork concerning the charges being brought against Sestius: I praised him to the skies — and truly — to the general agreement of all present. The fellow found it terribly gratifying.

It pleases me to imagine that on this occasion Pompey — one of Milo's advocates, seated there in court while Cicero spoke — was taking notes.

I hope I have persuaded you that the practice of praise as we find it in Cicero is at least as interesting as the practice of invective, and if anything more diverse. On the one hand, one could publicly praise others for any number of reasons, as we see Cicero doing in the eulogies he doles out in *pro Sestio*. On the other hand, the person eulogized was free to turn the praise he received to any number of uses, as we also see Cicero doing, in the passages commonly regarded as self-aggrandizing. To use again the economic metaphor of my title, praise was coin of the realm, and no token of praise served only one determinate purpose, forever and immutably. If we had a view larger than Cicero himself affords — if we had more of the orations and correspondence of his contemporaries — we could trace a vast economy of praise at work, in which only a fraction of the praise is simply what it seems, and even less of it ever seems to be just

---

29 See esp. *QFr*. 2.3.1-2, with M. C. Alexander, *Trials in the Late Roman Republic* (Toronto 1990), 129 (no. 266).

30 *QFr*. 2.3.6 *dixi pro Bestia de ambitu … προῳκονομησάμην quid<d>am εὐκαίρως de iis quae in Sestium apparabantur crimina et eum ornavi veris laudibus magno adsensu omnium. res homini fuit vehementer grata*.

one thing, as the tokens are traded back and forth, repaying a creditor here or underwriting an expansion of one's own *dignitas* there. But even with the limitations of the material we have in Cicero, there is, I think, ample scope for further work.

Princeton University