Cicero's Unsentimental Education
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Cicero: The Man and His Works
Andrew R. Dyck
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What set Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE) apart from the many other political climbers of his day? A magisterial biography by Andrew R. Dyck makes the case that the answer lies in his extraordinary formation. An education in the tradition of the Greek *enkyklios paideia* (a general, liberal education) was his birthright, but one he took up voraciously and, in his law career, deployed dazzlingly.

Cicero hailed from Arpinum, southeast of Rome, from a noble family well established in local affairs. Being a provincial, Cicero "would have to forge an identity for himself and decide how to balance loyalties" in the great capital. His family had only become involved in Roman politics in his father's generation, making him a relative newcomer—a *novus homo* or "new man" in the parlance of the day. This was a status that presented difficulties even for a man of Cicero's brilliance and skill. And these challenges were heightened unimaginably in an era that turned out to be, in hindsight at least, the *late* Roman Republic. That historical fact points ahead to Cicero's second education, in *power*.

Cicero's tutelage aimed him at a life in politics, beginning with a legal career, which could only be provided with a secure home base in the city. Marcus Tullius senior provided an education for Marcus *fils* and his younger brother, Quintus, initially with a family connection, the famous orator Lucius Licinius Crassus. Cicero's father bought a house in Rome to facilitate his children's education—per Crassus's advice, in Greek, with Greek tutors, and with Homer featuring, as always, most prominently. Following his bookish father, Cicero chose as his motto Homer's line from the *Iliad*, "always excel [*aristeuein*] and overtop the rest." If this seems bombastic, it was necessary for someone in his position: "Cicero

needed such an emotional thrust," wrote the towering Cicero scholar D.R. Shackleton Bailey, "to make his way among social superiors in a highly caste-conscious community."

Having assumed the *toga virilis*, the traditional Roman coming-of-age marker worn on civic occasions, around age 16 (90 BCE), Cicero was taken by his father to attend a prominent lawyer's consultations, the equivalent of enrolling in law school. Around this time, Cicero also began, Dyck reports, "a lifelong practice of closely observing political events and public speakers," including "almost daily attendance at political meetings called by magistrates (*contiones*)." The ambitious young law student always looked for "good oratorical models," even during his obligatory military service, which happened to occur during the Social War, a struggle between groups on the Italian Peninsula.

As a teenager, Cicero also began to study philosophy, an avocation that would sustain him throughout his life. Cicero argued with all four of the major philosophical schools active during his lifetime: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. Stoicism was his first stop, with his tutor Diodotus, who oversaw his study of dialectic and whom he honored in the latter's blind old age by making him a member of Cicero's own household. Later, he studied with Phaedrus, who eventually presided over the Epicureans at Athens. Most influentially, Dyck argues, Cicero learned from the head of Plato's Academy, Philo of Larissa, whose own intellectual grandfather was the famous skeptic Carneades, known for lecturing in a bellowing voice that could compete with the surf's roar, and for stimulating a stream of interpretations that filled four hundred scrolls. Cicero would draw on this intellectual lineage as a lawyer, politician, and philosopher.

Cicero's training as a lawyer would have been incomplete without extensive tutelage in rhetoric. Here the Greek masters were his guides during their visits to Rome, and Cicero began as a student to compose a detailed rhetorical handbook—not in Greek but, tellingly, in Latin. It marked the beginning of Cicero's efforts to bring the best of Hellenism into a distinctively Roman style and approach to rhetoric and philosophy. He began arguing cases, married, and embarked on an extensive tour of Greece and Asia Minor to freshen his oratorical style.

He stopped in his beloved Athens, from which he developed the conviction that his rhetorical formation was achieved "not from

rhetoricians' workshops [*officinis*] but the walkways [*spatiis*] of the Academy." Besides studying with more Greek philosophers, he made trips to the Delphic oracle, was initiated into the famed Eleusinian mysteries, and sojourned in the Peloponnese. By the end of some six months of travel and study, Cicero had positioned himself as the "self-confident Roman [who] claims the legacy of Greek culture that the Greeks themselves were no longer properly curating."

The Ciceros stood on the cusp of Rome's elite, combining local prominence with upward mobility. Their equestrian wealth, education, and regional leadership created a suitable, if ultimately unstable, foundation for Marcus's rise. Cicero argued dozens of cases, framing even technical disputes with their implications for the health of the republic. (A search confirms that *res publicae* was one of Cicero's most often used terms, after prepositions and conjunctions.)

Cicero became consul in the year 63, overseeing the trial and execution of alleged coup-monger Catiline. This sequence of events produced many of Cicero's most famous orations but also became his Achilles' heel. He ordered Catiline's execution in defiance of constitutional procedure—bypassing review by the tribunes of the plebs—and that decision led to his first exile from Rome.

Cicero's long political career was, as Dyck vividly illustrates, an *education in power* that unfolded through his civic friendships with leaders in the late era of the republic, especially Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Octavian. Each wielded authority in ways that challenged Cicero's republican ideals and imposed practical lessons in the operation of power. These relationships became a living curriculum through which Cicero tested his *paideia*-born convictions about virtue, eloquence, and the state.

With Pompey, who recruited his own legions and called himself Magnus ("great one"), Cicero was painfully aware of a power gap between his own middling military career and the carefully propagandized triumphs of the self-styled "warden of earth and sea." As Dyck notes, Cicero's "position as a self-made 'new man' sharpened his sensitivity to the weaknesses of the traditional aristocracy…but also left him exposed…to the jealousy and resentment of Pompey."

Cicero's encomium to the general's character and courage (*virtus*) and good luck (*felicitas*) oversold Pompey, who exercised power rooted in military success and the loyalty that accompanied it. Cicero admired and resented him in equal measure, borrowing Pompey's patriotic rhetoric even as he worried about its populist appeal. In Pompey, Cicero saw both the ideal of republican service and the temptation of tyranny. His early orations, modeled partly on Pompey's rhetoric of defending the republic, reveal this tension.

From Julius Caesar, whose murder he witnessed and whose conspirators he advised, Cicero learned how intellect could coexist with tyranny. Dyck describes Caesar's deliberate cultivation of Cicero—offering loans and political favors—as "a calculated campaign to draw Cicero closer to him." Caesar dedicated his treatise *On Analogy* to Cicero; Cicero responded with a poem praising Caesar's British expedition. Dyck notes that Cicero "could relate on a literary level" to Caesar, accepting him as part of an "'intellectual community,' distinguished by…humane values…and literary learning." The experience taught Cicero that power could masquerade as civility, and that eloquence could serve the ends of domination. His uneasy cooperation with Caesar shaped a crucial stage in his education—the realization that moral authority was, at least in the late Roman Republic, impotent against the organized might of legionary command and the prestige garnered by military triumphs.

Cicero's final teacher was Octavian, who perfected the art of manipulation and, with Cicero out of the way, transformed himself into the *princeps senatus*: Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. As Dyck recounts, the young heir to Caesar's name played to Cicero's vulnerabilities as a *novus homo*, enlisting him "to save Rome a second time." Believing he could guide the boy toward republican virtue, Cicero threw his influence behind Octavian's cause and "took the lead in organizing resistance to Antony," his rival. Yet Octavian's apparent deference concealed a ruthless pragmatism. Cicero learned too late that his eloquence was being instrumentalized for another man's ascent. After Caesar's murder, "the three-fold world divided" among Octavian, Marcus Antonius, and Lepidus, in Shakespeare's telling, the triumvirs made sure that Cicero's name led the list of political enemies to be eliminated in the year 43, a sentence he received, according to Livy's tragic account, with the words, "I shall die in the homeland I have often saved." Roman troops tracked Cicero down near his villa, where he

extended his own neck to allow the soldier to sever his head cleanly. His head and hands were displayed in the Senate, symbols of the dismemberment of republican virtue. In Octavian, Cicero confronted the final stage of his education in power, realizing that charisma, cunning, and the rhetoric of moral restoration could be fused to overthrow the very republic they claimed to save.

Dyck's portrait of Cicero is an extended meditation—every page inflected by historical depth and biographical breadth—on the limits of reason and rhetoric in an age when the republic itself was collapsing. But Cicero's legacy has never belonged solely to antiquity. His treatises on ethics, law, and politics formed one of the longest and most influential afterlives in the Western intellectual tradition, bridging classical virtue and modern moral responsibility and providing a model of how reasoned speech might sustain civic life against the pull of power.

For early Christians, Cicero provided philosophy to precede revelation. Augustine's conversion narrative begins with his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*, which "changed [his] affections" and transformed his "values and priorities" by "kindl[ing] his love of wisdom" (*sapientia*, *Confessions* 3.4) Even where Augustine departs from Cicero's humanism, he inherits from him the conviction that moral life must harmonize inner virtue with public responsibility.

In the age of the Enlightenment and the founding of the United States, Cicero returned as the philosopher of the republic. His *On Duties* and *On the Commonwealth* circulated among the American founding generation as handbooks of civic ethics. John Adams could find no "greater statesman and philosopher," while Jefferson and Madison read him as a guide to natural law and the necessity of forming virtue in a citizenry and, in Madison's case, establishing an ecology of institutions to check vice. Dyck's discussion of *De Officiis*, Cicero's manual of advice to aspiring statesmen, addressed to "politically ambitious young Italians," resonates strikingly with this transatlantic reception: In the eighteenth century, the book became a template for cultivating virtue in a democratic age. The founders saw in Cicero the ideal of a leader who unites eloquence and integrity—an orator-statesman able to balance liberty with order.

Modern philosophers have continued to find in Cicero a moral vocabulary that resists reduction to mere pragmatism. Kant's conception of duty as obedience to rational law cannot but contend with Cicero's effort to ground morality in universal reason. Arendt,

for her part, mined Cicero's civic humanism for a philosophy of action and public speech in an age of mass politics—and discovered the first use of *culture* as a realm "for matters of spirit and mind." They and many others have found, as Cicero scholar Catherine Steel perceptively argues, that "Cicero's writing…compels our attention because he made being an intellectual and a writer into part of what it meant to be a public figure."

Across these centuries, Cicero's reception forms a continuous moral dialogue: The Christian theologians adapted his virtue ethics; the American republicans translated his civic ideal; and modern philosophers reinterpreted his sense of duty through the lens of autonomy and discourse. Dyck's mammoth and exhaustive account reminds us that Cicero's enduring appeal lies not merely in his eloquence but in his conviction that the moral life and the political life must never be divorced—that the republic, in any age, depends on the cultivation of character.

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