

REVIEW

SPEECHES AND THE LATE REPUBLIC IN CASSIUS DIO

Christopher Burden-Strevens, *Cassius Dio's Speeches and the Collapse of the Roman Republic: The Roman History, Books 3–56*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020. Pp. xix + 340. Hardback, €121.00/\$146.00. ISBN 978-90-04-37360-0.

Ancient historiography abounds in fierce speeches, some more articulate than others. Each author, of course, serves his own agenda. By the time Cassius Dio wrote his *Roman History*, speeches had become an inseparable part of historical narrative. It appears that modern research is, naturally, more troubled by the historicity and overall quality of these speeches than were our ancient predecessors, and modern judgement of these literary pieces is often highly critical. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that in the ancient historiographical tradition, speeches served an important purpose. They were not simple embellishment of texts, nor were they mere rhetorical exercises. Speeches are part of the historical narrative; they can add information which the author may not be inclined to share in his own voice; and they can reveal more of the author's evaluation of his characters and the historical events he is narrating.

Therefore, it behoves us to grant the speeches particular thought and analysis. This is the main objective which this book intends to achieve and it does so successfully. Christopher Burden-Strevens states from the beginning a very clear aim for this book, and that is to restore dignity to Dio's speeches and to illustrate how speeches are a significant part of ancient historiography, particularly Dio's history. He demonstrates Dio's deep understanding of the power of oratory and his masterful use of it in the *Roman History*. Dio's use of oratory is multifaceted and aspires not only to emphasise a particular point in the narrative but also to highlight the dangerous use of oratory in the late Republic.

Throughout the book the author repeats and emphasises his arguments that the speeches in Dio's *Roman History* were not simply an ornament (as is argued, for example, by Fergus Millar's seminal work of 1964)¹ and were not a rhetorical exercise. Millar had referred to Dio's speeches quite harshly as

¹ F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford, 1964).

disappointing and even banal. Burden-Strevens sets out to refute this statement by meticulously demonstrating step by step, and almost speech by speech, how Dio planned and organised his speeches so that they form an intrinsic part of his literary and moral agenda and contribute to it. This book is part of the wide-ranging and thought-provoking *Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* series (published by Brill), edited by Carsten Hjort Lange and Jesper Majbom Madsen. The series offers insight into ancient historiography, mainly during times of conflict. Furthermore, several volumes in the series have provided a closer examination into the work of Cassius Dio, and the current book is situated in this context.

The book comprises a lengthy introduction, including a useful segment on 'Using This Book', the second chapter is entitled 'Method', and is followed by three more chapters, used as case-studies, and an epilogue. Chapters 3–5 are divided into thematic sections: Oratory, Morality, and Institutions & Empire. As the author explains, 'these explore Dio's use of speeches across Books 3–56 of his *Roman History* to elucidate in his historical argument about the role played by each of these four questions in the collapse of the Republic and the solidification of Augustus' rule' (31). The author thus divides the speeches into these categories not solely to draw inferences on the importance of the speeches for Dio's historiography, but to further examine and analyse the material in light of the collapse of the Roman Republic. Hence the author collects all of the speeches under discussion in this volume under the umbrella of civil war and political changes from Republic to Monarchy. This grouping of the speeches aims to position the continuum of thought which is evident in Dio's narrative and which is also apparent in the speeches, and thus undermines the argument that the speeches are mere rhetorical ornamentation. As the author shows, the speeches are expressive and supportive of the agenda which Dio develops throughout the *Roman History*.

At the beginning of the book, the author provides a detailed table of speeches, containing an index of all the formal orations in *oratio recta* from Books 1–56 (i.e., the books narrating from the founding of Rome to the death of Augustus) with which the author engages throughout the book. The table also contains select discussion of each of these speeches, in other sources as well as in the current book, which makes it an important tool for researchers wishing to focus on certain speeches. An exhaustive list of all the speeches in the *Roman History* might have been a propitious addition, yet is not necessary for the central focus of this book. To accentuate its importance for Dio, the author explains how rhetoric played an important role in Dio's political life (22). The pamphlet which Dio dedicated to Severus won him favour in the eyes of the emperor and allowed him to keep his position (and his head). This is the first evidence from Dio himself on the importance he assigned to rhetoric. Thus it seems reasonable that he would treat the other rhetorical

devices in his *magnum opus*, that is, the speeches, with similar care and with a full understanding of the power of words.

The mammoth second chapter, 'Method', intends to refute the sentiment which views Dio's speeches as 'fictitious moralising'. The author covers extensive themes which may have caused, so he believes, the misunderstanding of Dio's speeches and his methods. The chapter surveys questions of narrative and dramatic setting, sources and models, and rhetorical education and moralising argument, all with the intent of establishing the coherence and importance of Dio's speeches as well as their contribution to his philosophical and political agenda.

The author hence tackles this challenge by focusing on what he refers to as 'three important components of Dio's method' (37). These components are:

1. 'the embeddedness of the speeches within the historical narrative';
2. 'the historian's use of source-material';
3. 'the role of "moralising" forms of argument as a means of analysis, explanation, and persuasion.'

By focusing on these specific elements, the author proposes to prove that Dio's method was deliberate and thoughtful, that he carefully planned the settings as well as the wording of each speech as integral to his larger literary schema.

The author admits that we should not search for historicity in all of Dio's speeches (nor should we search for it in other authors' works either). However, his main point is that '*inventio* does not preclude the function of historical and political analysis on the part of the historian' (39). There is a tendency in modern historical research to try to point out the flaws of the ancient historians, to catch them out making factual mistakes or inserting their own prejudicial opinion. This of course may lead to a broader question regarding the objectivity of historiography in general, not just in the ancient past. However, we should keep in mind that the ancient historians, Dio included, did not write in a literary or a political vacuum. They were fully aware of the power of their words and they had specific aims in mind when writing. From Thucydides' methodical explanation, to Sallust's apologetic tone, to Tacitus' *sine ira et studio*, these historians wrote to express their views on the history of their beloved cities, to lament their deterioration, to perhaps even offer a solution to the ills of the times or to at least make them known for all to read and realise. The speeches play a fundamental role in portraying a more vivid picture of the political atmosphere and in expressing the opinions which the historian perhaps could not.

Speeches are inserted within an important context, they highlight a specific event and magnify it, even if their setting is perceived as perhaps unrelated. For example, the famous debate between Agrippa and Maecenas may not have happened at all, yet the views pronounced in it are crucial to the

understanding of Augustus' regime and more importantly, of the reasons that the Republican system was no longer viable (according to Dio's view). Dio wrote, of course, in the shadow of the political upheavals of his own time, of which his readers are fully aware. The speeches forcefully elucidate the foundations of the principate. As the author notes, '[s]imply put, the deracination of either of these compositions from their historical and interpretative context in the *Roman History* is manifestly wrong and utterly bizarre. It may be that some critics have skipped over the narrative and analysed either or both parts of this *controuersia* in isolation as standalone products. But this was not the historian's intention ... and the flaw lies within their reading rather than Dio's writing' (39–40). Following this statement, the author acutely analyses this debate to show how carefully Dio penned these speeches, even if the words uttered might seem to contradict his authorial voice.

This is but one brief example which displays Burden-Strevens' approach and method in this book. Hence he portrays the speeches as products of their times, influenced by Dio's political experience and cautiousness, but they also reflect the setting of the *Roman History* and are part of Dio's larger literary and moral agenda. As the author argues, 'Dio consciously and deliberately composed them *within* the narrative, and indeed as an integral part of it. The techniques of analepsis and prolepsis—reflecting on past developments and foreshadowing future ones—are used even in those speeches which critics have mistakenly set most apart from the story-arc of the *Roman History*. Often they underline his interpretation of the causes of events. Rhetorical considerations were not, it seems, the only factor' (69).

The author further explains how Dio constructed his speeches when source material was available (for example, for the *lex Gabinia*). He claims that Dio preferred to read the source material in its original form rather than rely on the interpretations of other historians (for example, Plutarch or Sallust) when possible. The author argues that Dio 'viewed speeches in historiography as a different type of evidence to published oratorical speeches. Published oratorical speeches were to be treated with special care: ... the content and usually structure of the argumentation were preserved, and Dio also retained certain components of the rhetorical packaging' (93). The historiographical speeches gave Dio more leeway for personal interpretation. Dio strove to create speeches which corresponded in style to those delivered during the late Republic.

By this minute examination of the speeches Burden-Strevens supports his claim for the planned and careful composition of Dio's speeches within the *Roman History*.