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Making Rhetoric Risky for Democracy

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Goodman defends that most maligned aspect of the rhetorical tradition: eloquence. Surely, one would think that eloquence, by its very nature, speaks for itself and quite effectively so, with all the pleasing and persuasive effects of a grand style. Perhaps popular audiences are easily carried along by decorous speech, but Goodman addresses his defense to theorists of politics who tend to greet obvious rhetorical flourish with a deep suspicion of manipulation and deception, or at least of frivolity. On this view, the best thing that can be said about eloquence in its classical form is that it poses no serious threat since the modern advent of mass society and large-scale democracy marks its demise. Goodman forces readers to reconsider the story of the rhetorical tradition's elitist, manipulative, and obsolete character through an engaging, nuanced, and unexpected retelling of Ciceronean eloquence as a tradition that spans the ancient and modern world, one that survives and responds to the challenges of democratic judgment in large polities. Goodman's compelling and insightful book poses an important challenge to theorists of democracy, both contemporary and historical, to take eloquence seriously as an invitation to democratic judgment.

Among its many intriguing provocations is the notion that eloquence is risky. In his self-aggrandizing manner, Cicero presents the orator's audience as a force to be reckoned with. The challenge of speaking effectively and persuasively becomes a kind of heroic effort in which the speaker faces down an audience that can never be fully knowable or predictable. The canny orator, however, comes armed with the most expansive complement of skills, the broadest range of styles (plain, middle, and grand) and ornamental devices, adapting to the occasion and purpose at hand. Rising to the occasion is harder than it seems and success is never guaranteed, even for the most seasoned professionals.

Decorum is a demand, not just for good taste or manners, but for continuous judgment as to how and when to meet expectations. At the same time, and importantly for Cicero and for Goodman, spontaneity can be an invaluable tool. The complication comes in realizing that spontaneity can be a convention. So the success of the orator's boldest gestures depends not only on

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the speaker's judgment, but no less on the willingness of the audience to go along in the performance. Orators must know the steps and when to throw out the rule book, but even then they cannot control their reception and response. The recognizable yet disruptive performance of oratorical spontaneity highlights the delicate negotiation that unfolds between an audience and a skilled speaker.

Goodman crucially recasts eloquence from the exertion of the speaker's influence to a reciprocal orator-audience relation. He pushes back against the long-standing sense that the rhetorical tradition centers on the lone and elite figure gifted in the arts of speech. Reciprocity breeds ambivalence, however. There is a temptation to evade dependency, even mutual, by seeking means of controlling audiences for more predictable responses. Goodman cleverly presents this risk aversion through parallel figures of Cicero's Attic critics and today's political consultants and analysts. By contrast, Cicero embraces this reciprocity and the mutual risk of transformation that accompanies persuasion as a burden to be shared, not offloaded. Cicero sees a "rhetorical bargain" in which both audience and speaker take on the vicissitudes of circumstance and jointly allow for the demands of both decorum and spontaneity (192).

This book really shines in carrying forward this Ciceronian bargain beyond the small audiences oriented to the rhetorical culture of the Roman Republic to the large-scale polities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It turns out to be the consummate student of democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, who plays the foil to Ciceronian eloquence. By contrast, it is Edmund Burke, in theory and practice, who illustrates the value of eloquence as a disruptive force, a wake-up call to judgment. Where Burke regards such rhetorical excess as dangerous among revolutionaries, Goodman shows how Burke deems it surprisingly desirable for dislodging parliamentarians from their procedural and habitual modes of thought. In place of the seemingly predictable whiggishness of Macaulay, Goodman highlights an aspirational pedagogy of judgment. Goodman is an excellent reader and his interpretative attention rewards the reader with unexpected intellectual companions.

In political worlds no longer organized around the orator and their immediate audience, eloquence still matters. There is no escaping the irony, however, that this insight is wrested from thinkers who were at best ambivalent if not intensely skeptical about democracy. This irony is generative in two respects. First, it attests to the ingeniousness of Goodman's borrowing and redeployment of insights from the rhetorical tradition toward democratic futures. Second, it directs our attention to a larger disjunction between this strain of the rhetorical tradition and democratic theory, one that scholars of rhetoric, including myself, must wrestle with. Indeed, *Words on Fire* provokes broader thinking about democratic theory and rhetoric going forward.

The first question of two lines of such inquiry is how Ciceronean reciprocity and risk sharing should incline us toward some visions of democratic life over

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others. Goodman does not adhere to just one version of democracy, choosing instead to engage in a wider conversation with figures including Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Sheldon Wolin. Insofar as we are persuaded of its conclusions, can we then determine if some forms of democracy are better suited to the risks and rewards of eloquence? Might the distance between the rhetorical tradition and democratic theory be more easily bridged where contestation and unpredictability, including the possibility of disappointment, are seen as regular features of a robust democratic culture, rather than cause for despair? Does *Words on Fire* illuminate an unexpected affinity between agonistic democracy and the demands of decorum?

Second, if theorists of democracy have too often kept their distance from the rhetorical tradition, can we locate more democratic tendencies in this tradition? As far as writers on rhetoric go, Cicero is a long-standing favorite of political theorists. Not only does he write about rhetoric and politics, but he does more than most rhetorical writers to think philosophically about rhetoric. On top of all that, he is so eloquent. Yet Cicero is an anomaly. So much of the rhetorical tradition is far less theoretical. It is not made up of so many lesser Ciceros as it is populated by handbook writers and technicians who sought to popularize the insights once preserved for the lucky few who received proper training in oratory. Cicero may well have looked down on these writers, as would many political theorists, I suspect. Indeed, their detailed, technical jargon is in many ways derivative, lacking both vision and analytical rigor. But, then, these writers were not necessarily aspiring philosophers. They concerned themselves with the performance of rhetoric, the doing more than the thinking of rhetoric. They sought to give practical advice and to spread it popularly, something political theorists often fail to consider, much less achieve. As popularizers, they have had great and centuries-long influence, gaining particular influence with the expansion of printing in the early modern period and continuing at least through the expansion of rhetorical pedagogy in the nineteenth century. Might these works harbor unrecognized democratic energies in the rhetorical tradition?

In starting with Cicero, as political theorists are inclined to do, we gravitate toward our theoretical fellow traveler. Are we then innocent when we go on to lament rhetoric's elitism and its ill-suited qualities for mass society? Do we not reconstruct the rhetorical tradition to flatter our practices and values rather in a manner that suppresses those who reached out to large-scale, popular audiences? To consider these other voices in the rhetorical tradition is well beyond the scope of this book, and my invitation for scholars of rhetoric and political theory to do so should not diminish Goodman's achievements. It is the degree to which I am persuaded by *Words on Fire* that leads me to ask if perhaps we have not yet done enough to wrest from the rhetorical tradition insights that may inform contemporary practices of addressing one another as equal partners in the risky endeavors of popular democracy. What risks might political theorists need to share in for these insights to be earned? What would happen if we brought the kind of

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inventive and attentive reflection that Goodman brings to Cicero to those elements of the rhetorical tradition that resist some of our theoretical impulses and conceits, especially if those elements are those that have held the most sway with that unpredictable and recalcitrant object, the demos?

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