

Patria on stage: Cicero and the use of *prosopopoeia*

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Recibido: 28 de febrero de 2023 / Aceptado: 20 de junio de 2023

Abstract: Ancient rhetoricians knew how important the use of theatrical techniques was to increase the persuasive effect of rhetorical arguments. Therefore, training with theatrical techniques of voice modulation, breathing exercises and physical exercises was strongly recommended. This way the *orator* became similar to the *histrion*, because both shared the *actio*. Cicero himself puts these theoretical precepts into practice, in his intense oratorical activity, by impersonating the characters he defends or accuses, reproducing their words, revealing their character, as if he were performing on stage. Quintilian recognizes Cicero's mastery in playing parts even in the first speech against Catiline in the Senate, when Cicero plays the part of an abstract entity, *Patria*, the Fatherland (Cic. *Catil.* 1,18 and 1,27-29): the theatrical fiction of *prosopopoeia* supports Cicero's rhetorical and political strategy. He has more effective influence on the audience and persuades them to act harshly against Catiline.

Keywords: *actio*; *orator*; Cicero; Catiline; Fatherland; *prosopopoeia*.

[es] *Patria* en escena: Cicerón y el uso de la *prosopopoeia*

Resumen: Los antiguos retóricos sabían lo importante que era el uso de técnicas teatrales para aumentar el efecto persuasivo de los argumentos retóricos. Por ello, recomiendan encarecidamente entrenarse con técnicas teatrales de modulación de la voz, ejercicios respiratorios y ejercicios físicos. Así, el orador se asemejaba al histrión, porque ambos compartían la *actio*. El mismo Cicerón pone en práctica estos preceptos teóricos en su intensa actividad oratoria, personificando a los personajes que defiende o acusa, reproduciendo sus palabras, revelando su carácter, como si estuviera actuando en escena. Quintiliano reconoce la maestría de Cicerón en la interpretación de papeles incluso en el primer discurso contra Catilina en el Senado, cuando Cicerón interpreta el papel de un ente abstracto, *Patria*, la Patria (Cic. *Catil.* 1,18 y 1,27-29): la ficción teatral de la *prosopopeya* apoya la estrategia retórica y política de Cicerón. Tiene una influencia más efectiva en la audiencia y la persuade para que actúe con dureza contra Catilina.

Palabras clave: *actio*; *orator*; Cicerón; Catilina; Patria; *prosopopoeia*.

Cómo citar: Tedeschi, A. *Patria* on stage: Cicero and the use of *prosopopoeia*, *Cuad. Filol. Clás. Estud. Lat.* 43.1 (2023), 75-83.

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The synergy between *actio rhetorica* and *actio scaenica* within speeches was fundamental for ancient rhetoricians. They knew how important the use of theatrical techniques was to increase the persuasive effect of rhetorical arguments and to stir emotions in the audience².

Aristotle already believes such a bond to be indissoluble and highlights how useful it is for the orator to make use of acting techniques³. Demosthenes, on the other hand, becomes a real authority on the art of blending recitation with declamation and he is also the protagonist of numerous anecdotes. Some of them, for instance, relate that Demosthenes had taken lessons from the actor Andronicus in order to overcome his initial failures⁴ and that he had maintained that *actio* is not only the first desirable quality in an *orator*, but also the second and third quality as well:

Cic.*Brut.*142 ut uerum uideretur in hoc illud, quod Demosthenem ferunt ei, qui quaesiuisset quid primum esset in dicendo, actionem, quid secundum, idem et idem tertium respondisse. Nulla res magis penetrat in animos eosque fingit format flectit, talisque oratores uideri facit, qualis ipsi se uideri uolunt⁵.

Following the example of Demosthenes, Cicero believes that the dialectic skill of the speaker should not be based exclusively on *inuentio* and *elocutio*. The orator has to make his speech alive and powerful through the *eloquentia corporis*, conveyed by suitable gestures and voice modulation⁶. Without this skill, even a great orator could be surpassed by a less experienced one, if the latter is more skilled in performative techniques, as Cicero writes in *De orat.*3,213:

Haec omnia perinde sunt, ut aguntur. Actio, inquam, in dicendo una dominatur; sine hac summus orator esse in numero nullo potest, mediocris hac instructus summus saepe superare.

Therefore, training with theatrical techniques of voice modulation, breathing exercises and physical exercises was strongly recommended, as Cicero says in *De orat.* 1,156:

Iam uocis et spiritus et totius corporis et ipsius linguae motus et exercitationes non tam artis indigent quam laboris; quibus in rebus habenda est ratio diligenter, quos imitemur, quorum similes uelimus esse. Intuendi nobis sunt non solum oratores, sed etiam actores, ne mala consuetudine ad aliquam deformitatem prauitatemque ueniamus.

Stage art provided the orator with useful knowledge of the right body movements, of the appropriate bearing and also of the ability to adapt gestures and tone of voice to words. It taught to become more persuasive, to stir passions and stimulate the emotional involvement of the audience. This way the *orator* became similar to

² On *actio* see Lausberg (1960, § 1091); Cavarzere (2006, 7); Pernot (2006, 14-22).

³ Arist.*Rhet.* 1403b,22; 1404a,18; 1413b,18-26. See Nocchi (2013, 7-14).

⁴ Quint.*Inst.* 11,3,7.

⁵ See also Cic.*De orat.* 1,260-261; 3,213; *Orat.* 26; 56-57; Quint. *Inst.* 11,3,6. See Hall (2014, 129-154).

⁶ Cic.*Orat.* 55.

the *histrion*, because both shared the *actio*. If the *orator*, however, had to deal with real judicial and political cases, the *actor* played in a fictional dimension, populated by mythical heroes and fictional characters⁷.

Cicero keeps the *histrion* and the *orator* ethically distinct, because the *orator* is a real life *actor*, while the *actor* is an imitator of reality⁸. However, he emphasizes that there is an ambiguous proximity between the rhetoric of the *orator* and the theatricality of the *actor*. The emotional participation stirred by the *actor* represented a model for becoming more incisive⁹. To put it another way, being a good *orator* depended on the ability to demonstrate the theatrical skills of an actor, to the point of even surpassing actors¹⁰.

The *ethopoeia* and the *prosopopoeia* were rhetorical exercises which were useful to gain mastery of the theatrical techniques. While in *prosopopoeia* abstract entities or fictional characters took the floor, in *ethopoeia* the speaker impersonated a real character¹¹. When real characters, fictional characters or abstract entities spoke, when they expressed their feelings and their emotions with words appropriate to their *status*, there was a combination of theatrical and rhetorical practice. By virtue of the school practice of *prosopopoeia* and *ethopoeia*, students trained themselves to impersonate various characters by reproducing or even just by imagining their gestures and their words. Such training, therefore, was useful for the dramatization of events. The student performed the *imitatio uitae naturarumque*, which, according to Cicero, was essential to the oratorical activity¹².

This way, the future *orator* learned to *personam induere*, as Quintilian maintains (*Inst.* 3,8,50); therefore, he acquired the ability to step into the role of the character he played, by taking his point of view, by adopting his gestures and by feeling his emotions. Being skilled at embodying many identities, in a way that resembled their character, the speaker became similar to a chameleon: he could impersonate any human type, perhaps better than an actor could, and was also able to reproduce a living and vivid image of the character he was playing¹³.

Cicero, for example, remembers the mastery of Crassus in imitating the gestures of Domitius Enobarbus, how he moved his arm and raised objections¹⁴. Cicero himself puts these theoretical precepts into practice, in his intense oratorical activity, by impersonating the characters he defends or accuses, reproducing their words, revealing their character, as if he were performing on stage. Take, for instance, his giving voice to the *lictor* of Verres, a cruel man who gets rich by exploiting the suffering of the condemned:

Cic. *Verr.* II,5,118 Patres hi quos uidetis iacebant in limine, matresque miserae pernoctabant ad ostium carceris ab extremo conspectu liberum exclusae; quae nihil

⁷ Cic. *De orat.* 2,194.

⁸ Cic. *De orat.* 3,214. On the *status* of actors in ancient Rome see Edwards (1993, 98ff.).

⁹ See Petrone (2005², 23).

¹⁰ Cic. *Tusc.* 4,55 *aguntur ista paeclare, et ab oratore quidem melius, si modo est orator, quam ab ullo histrione, sed aguntur leniter et mente tranquilla*; Cic. *Diu.* 1,8.

¹¹ These speeches could also be called *sermocinationes* and *fictiones personarum*: *Rhet. Her.* 4,52 65; Quint. *Inst.* 9,2,29. Such terminology is very problematic among rhetoricians: see Lausberg (1960, § 820); Moretti (2007, 152); Stramaglia (2010, 130-135); Nocchi (2013, 178); Pirovano (2013, 223ff.); Berardi (2015, 100).

¹² Cic. *Orat.* 138-139. This position is in line with the thought of Dionysius of Halicarnassus: see Berardi (2015, 99).

¹³ Quint. *Inst.* 3,8,50-51. See Nocchi (2013, 174); Lentano (2013-2014, 68).

¹⁴ Cic. *De orat.* 2,242.

aliud orabant nisi ut filiorum suorum postremum spiritum ore excipere liceret. Aderat ianitor carceris, carnifex praetoris, mors terrorque sociorum et ciuium romanorum, lictor Sextius, cui ex omni gemitu doloreque certa merces comparabatur. «Vt adeas, tantum dabis, ut cibum tibi intro ferre liceat, tantum». Nemo recusabat. «Quid, ut uno ictu securis adferam mortem filio tuo, quid dabis? Ne diu crucietur, ne saepius feriat, ne cum sensu doloris aliquo spiritus auferatur?» Etiam ob hanc causam pecunia lictori dabatur.

Cicero relates the words uttered by the *lictor* when he extorted money from the relatives of people wrongfully imprisoned by Verres, in exchange for a less painful death for their loved ones. This *ethopoeia* heightens the feeling of shame for the blameworthy behaviour of Verres and of his men. It also amplifies the emotional response, which would have been already stirred by the pathetic description of fathers and mothers waiting to be able to bring food to their children or to see them taking their last breath¹⁵.

Much appreciated by Quintilian (*Inst.* 6,1,26-27) is in particular Cicero's performance when he plays the role of his defendant Milo, who is present at the trial (*Cic. Mil.* 72-75 and 93-94). While impersonating Milo, Cicero confesses to the murder of Clodius and laments the uselessness of his efforts to stem the actions of Clodius against the senate and the fatherland¹⁶. Commenting on Cicero's passage, Quintilian (*Inst.* 6,1,26-27) highlights the value of a rhetorical strategy which was effective in moving the judge by making use of the first person. As if Cicero were the unfortunate defendant, his performance also involved a scenography of tears.

These dramatization devices are also used by Cicero in his *Pro Caelio* (34-36), where, through his voice, both Appius Claudius Caecus (Clodia's ancestor) and Clodius (her brother) take the floor. Clodia accused Caelius of the attempted murder of Dion. In order to discredit Clodia's confession¹⁷, Cicero has Appius Claudius Caecus and Clodius speak, two *personae* who embody opposite behavioural patterns. While Appius Claudius Caecus represents the ancient rigorist ethics, and therefore blames Clodia for her promiscuity, Clodius stands for the more licentious contemporary morality and urges Clodia to correct her misbehaviour¹⁸.

Furthermore, in *Pro Caelio* 37-38, the introduction of both the comedy mask of the strict father, derived from Caecilius Statius, and the mask of the indulgent father, derived from Terentius, amplify the theatrical dimension of the scene¹⁹. The plurality of voices in the courtroom, which was turned into a comic theatre²⁰, increased audience engagement and caused the onlookers' reactions, as if they were watching a play rather than attending a trial. By making use of these theatrical devices, Cicero gives a stronger persuasive effect to his proclaiming the innocence of Caelius, presented here as a victim of *meretrix* Clodia's machinations.

Quintilian recognizes Cicero's mastery in playing parts even in the first speech against Catiline in the Senate, when Cicero plays the part of an abstract entity,

¹⁵ See Tedeschi (2021b, 13-14).

¹⁶ See Casamento (2006, 181ff.); Gamberale (2011, 19-42).

¹⁷ See Piras (2017, 63ff).

¹⁸ The speeches of Appius Claudius Caecus and Clodius are listed as *prosopopoeias* by Quintilian (*Inst.* 3,8,54). See Leigh (2004, 300-335); Moretti (2007, 152); Nocchi (2013, 178); Berardi (2015, 100); Tedeschi (2021b, 19-23).

¹⁹ See Narducci (1989, 50-51); Moretti (2006, 150ff.); Moretti (2007, 289-308).

²⁰ Greffcken (1973, 10).

Patria, the Fatherland²¹. *Patria* opposes the subversive actions of Catiline by appealing to the imagination of the audience and takes the floor in two *prosapopoeias* (Cic. *Catil.* 1,18 and 1,27-29).

In the first *prosapopoeia*, with *tacita loquitur* Cicero translates the dreadful silence of the Fatherland into words:

Cic. *Catil.* 1,18 Quae tecum, Catilina, sic agit et quodam modo tacita loquitur: «Nullum iam aliquot annis facinus exstitit nisi per te, nullum flagitium sine te; tibi uni multorum ciuium neces, tibi uexatio direptioque sociorum impunita fuit ac libera; tu non solum ad neglegendas leges et quaestiones, uerum etiam ad euer-tendas perfringendasque ualuisti. Superiora illa, quamquam ferenda non fuerunt, tamen, ut potui, tuli; nunc uero me totam esse in metu propter unum te, quicquid increpauerit, Catilinam timeri, nullum uideri contra me consilium iniri posse, quod a tuo scelere abhorreat, non est ferendum. Quam ob rem discede atque hunc mihi timorem eripe; si est uerus, ne opprimar, sin falsus, ut tandem aliquando timere desinam».

In the style of a hymn to deities, although of opposite meaning, the Fatherland directly addresses Catiline²². *Patria* doesn't recall his merits - as one would do in prayers - but rather his sins, his crimes, his harassment and his lack of respect for the laws. After a brief summary, the conclusion is the firm request to leave Rome (*Catil.* 1,18 *Quam ob rem discede...*). The celebratory function of the traditional hymn is, thus, overturned and *Patria*'s words have a deprecatory function²³, aimed at removing Catiline, who represents a plague for the *salus rei publicae*.

In the second *prosapopoeia* the Fatherland addresses Cicero himself:

Cic. *Catil.* 1,27-29 Etenim, si mecum patria, quae mihi uita mea multo est carior, si cuncta Italia, si omnis res publica sic loquatur: «M. Tulli, quid agis? Tunc eum, quem esse hostem comperisti, quem ducem belli futurum uides, quem exspectari imperatorem in castris hostium sentis, auctorem sceleris, principem coniurationis, euocatorem seruorum et ciuium perditorum, exire patiere, ut abs te non emissus ex urbe, sed immissus in urbem esse uideatur? Nonne hunc in uincla duci, non ad mortem rapi, non summo supplicio mactari imperabis? 28. Quid tandem te impedit? Mosne maiorum? At persaepe etiam priuati in hac re publica perniciosos ciuis morte multarunt. An leges, quae de ciuium romanorum supplicio rogatae sunt? At numquam in hac urbe, qui a re publica defecerunt, ciuium iura tenuerunt. An inuidiam posteritatis times? Praeclaram uero populo Romano refert gratiam, qui te, hominem per te cognitum nulla commendatione maiorum tam mature ad summum imperium per omnis honorum gradus extulit, si propter inuidiam aut alicuius periculi metum salutem ciuium tuorum neglegis. 29. Sed, si quis est inuidiae metus, num est uehementius seueritatis ac fortitudinis inuidia quam inertiae ac nequitiae pertimescenda? An, cum bello uastabitur Italia, uexabuntur urbes, tecta ardebunt tum te non existimas inuidiae incendio conflagraturum?»

²¹ On Fatherland for Cicero see Gamberale (2020, 302-310).

²² See Pierini (2012, 215-248).

²³ See Ratkowitsch (1981, 157-167); La Bua (1998, 134-135); Tzounakas (2006, 222-231).

Patria calls Cicero by name and asks him why he hesitates in reacting decisively against Catiline. He is described in detail, not only as an enemy (*hostis, dux belli, imperator in castris hostium*), but also as a criminal and as a subversive man (*auctor sceleris, princeps coniurationis, euocator seruorum et ciuium perditorum*). The request for proper punishment is expressed in a *tricolon* marked by an ascending *climax* with the elements in parallel, marked by the anaphora: the chains, a death sentence, a sacrifice killing, as can be gathered by the occurrence of the verb *macto*, which pertains to the religious sphere (*Catil. 1,27 Nonne hunc in uincla duci, non ad mortem rapi, non summo supplicio mactari imperabis?*).

Fatherland suggests three reasons that could have prevented Cicero from taking action against Catiline, but all three of them are cleverly refuted. First, *Patria* takes into consideration the *mos maiorum* (*Catil. 1,28 Mosne maiorum?*). This objection is however rejected by mentioning private citizens who famously punished dangerous people with the death penalty, as is the case with Scipio Nasica²⁴. The second obstacle concerns the laws *de prouocatione* (*Catil. 1,28 An leges quae de ciuium romanorum supplicio rogatae sunt?*). According to the laws *de prouocatione*, the accused could appeal to the clemency of the popular assembly, which had the right to execute a citizen. However, this second point of criticism is equally refuted by mentioning the example of the ancient executions of citizens guilty of conspiracy against the State²⁵. The third and last objection is also *Patria*'s main argument: Cicero fears the criticism of posterity (*Catil. 1,28 An inuidiam posteritatis times?*)²⁶. The ironic mistrust towards the Roman people's view on him is an opportunity to express his pride for a *cursus honorum* based exclusively on his abilities and not on the prestige of his family (*Catil. 1,28 nulla commendatione maiorum*).

By criticising Cicero's soft attitude towards Catiline, Fatherland provides him with an authoritative basis for a tougher action. This way, the theatrical fiction of *prosopopoeia* supports Cicero's rhetorical and political strategy. He has more effective influence on the audience and persuades them to act harshly against Catiline²⁷.

The performative dimension of the *prosopopoeia* is also increased by the presence, in the first Catilinarian speech, of some rhetorical devices which have been detected by Quintilian: take, for instance, the series of *interrogationes figuratae* (*Cic. Catil. 1,1 ff.*), which confer passion to the prose (*Quint. Inst. 9,2,7-8*)²⁸, as well as the *pathos* of exclamations, such as «*O tempora, o mores*» (*Quint. Inst. 9,2,26*)²⁹, up to the fictional dialogue between Catiline and Cicero himself:

²⁴ Scipio Nasica is mentioned in *Cic. Catil. 1,3 P. Scipio, pontifex maximus, Ti. Gracchum, mediocriter labefactantem statum reipublicae, priuatus interfecit*.

²⁵ As recalled in *Cic. Catil. 1,3 illa nimis antiqua praetereo, quod C. Servilius Ahala [...] Fuit, fuit ista quondam in hac re publica uirtus, ut uiri fortes acrioribus suppliciis ciuem perniciosum quam acerbissimum hostem coercerent*.

²⁶ On this see *Cic. Catil. 1,22 quanta tempestas inuidiae nobis*.

²⁷ See Tedeschi (2021a, *ad loc.*).

²⁸ *Quint. Inst. 9,2,7-8 «Quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?» et «Patere tua consilia non sentis?» et totus denique hic locus. Quanto enim magis ardet quam si diceretur «Diu abuteris patientia nostra» et «Patent tua consilia»*.

²⁹ *Quint. Inst. 9,2,26 «O tempora, o mores» et «Miserum me! Consumptis enim lacrimis infixus tamen pectori haeret dolor»*. See Mazzoli (2018, 59ff.).

Cic.*Catil.*1,19-20 Quid, quod tu te in custodiam dedisti? Quod, uitandae suspicionis causa, ad M. Lepidum te habitare uelle dixisti? [...] «Refer - inquis - ad senatum»; id enim postulas.

The use of dialogue allows Cicero to express the opponent's hypothetical objections and then to give answers as if they were in a real debate³⁰. Moreover, the *deprecatio* to Jupiter Stator at the end of the speech, where Cicero requests protection for the community and total destruction of the opponent, can be referred to a theatrical dimension and confers a final peak of *pathos* to the whole passage³¹. Invocation and solemn gestures of prayer, which would have been part of the performance of the speech, created an effective process of dramatizing:

Cic.*Catil.*1,33 Hisce ominibus, Catilina, cum summa rei publicae salute, cum tua peste ac perniciē cumque eorum exitio, qui se tecum omni scelere parricidioque iunxerunt, proficiscere ad impium bellum ac nefarium. Tu, Iupiter, qui isdem quibus haec urbs, auspiciis a Romulo es constitutus, quem Statorem huius urbis atque imperi uere nominamus, hunc et huius socios a tuis ceterisque templis, a tectis urbis ac moenibus, a vita fortunisque ciuium omnium arcebis et homines bonorum inimicos, hostis patriae, latrones Italiae scelerum foedere inter se ac nefaria societate coniunctos aeternis suppliciis uiuos mortuosque mactabis.

By giving voice to the Fatherland, who vividly expresses reproaches and enacts the ritual gestures of the final *deprecatio*, Cicero makes the most of all the resources of the «great pathetic game», to quote Roland Barthes³², and he is thus able to stir more intense emotions in his audience.

Cicero is aware that he is a true master at this, as he says in *Orat.* 130³³. He is aware of the similarities between his *actio uehemens* and the *actio* of a famous actor, such as Aesopus³⁴. With the skills of an actor, Cicero doesn't hesitate to make use of religious feelings and collective icons, like *Patria*, to enhance his rhetorical persuasion. He puts these feelings on stage, even accompanying them with ritual gestures and heartfelt invocations³⁵. Looking back, Cicero acknowledges that the real reason for his success lies in his performative qualities, with which he is able to move or excite the public, crushing even the most challenging of adversaries, as he states in *Orat.* 129:

Quo genere nos mediocres aut multo etiam minus, sed magno semper usi impetu saepe aduersarios de statu omni deiecimus. Nobis pro familiari reo summus orator non respondit Hortensius; a nobis homo audacissimus Catilina in senatu accusatus obmutuit.

We learn by him the effect that his dialectic skills had. He remembers proudly how the great Hortensius, Verres defence lawyer, had found no arguments to fight

³⁰ See Bianco (2009, 210-223).

³¹ See Grilli (2006, 223-230); Tedeschi (2017, 305).

³² Barthes (1972, 91).

³³ See May (1988, 1-12); Dugan (2005, 133ff.).

³⁴ Cic.*Diu.* 1,80.

³⁵ See Tedeschi (2021c, 293-303).

him, and how Catiline, despite being an unscrupulous man, was left speechless by Cicero's mastery of rhetoric.

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