

# BELLARIA C



Modern statue outside the Austrian parliament building

## Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c. AD 56-c. 120)

### *Dialogus de oratoribus*

#### Introduction

Our 'school' derives from ancient Greek *skholê*, 'leisure'; the Latin for 'school' is *ludus*, 'game'. That is no coincidence. Since about eighty percent of Romans survived by cultivating their small patch of land, hoping to make a surplus to buy what they could not grow, education was of interest only to people of leisure with time on their hands, i.e. the wealthy.

Its purpose was to help them to make their way up the greasy pole to power. They did that by learning how to construct winning arguments in the political, military and legal arenas. Education—essentially job-training—was designed to that end.

The training centred on the correct use of language. Accurate reading, writing and pronunciation of Greek as well as Latin were drummed in from ages 6-9. From 9-12 higher literary skills were developed, especially close grammatical and linguistic analysis of poetry; and from 12-17 the emphasis turned to rhetoric, the capacity to persuade by argument. Here mythical and historical examples came to the fore: should Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter to appease the gods?



Iphigeneia is taken away for sacrifice (Pompeii)

Should Hannibal have marched on Rome? In the process, understanding of historical precedent and moral and philosophical judgement were honed. And for the really able, a year of advanced education in Greece, home of all things intellectual and artistic, added the clinching flourish. Then into the hurly-burly of political and military life and, they hoped, *gloria*—by winning arguments that advanced their and Rome's power.

Tacitus' *Dialogus*, probably his first work, composed between AD 100-110 but set in AD 75, describes a conversation between three friends, Aper, a keen barrister, Messalla, who had no time for oratory, and Maternus, a barrister who was now writing tragedies. The question they discussed was 'Has oratory had its day, now that political life is no longer led under a free republic but under the thumb of an emperor?' (Vespasian, given the date of the conversation).

The debate was already a live one. Pliny the younger agreed that oratory was not what it used to be, but still opened the way to a suitably noble career. Suetonius certainly thought that the lives of some orators were worth writing up. Quintilian wrote at length on the subject, drawing attention to the best models for the young orator to follow. Cicero was, of course, the man they all looked back to. But Tacitus had his doubts.

We pick up towards the end of the *Dialogus*, when Messalla is explaining exactly how and why the art of oratory has declined. And observe how (relatively) Ciceronian Tacitus's language has become (repetition, balance, etc. ...)

### Oratory has gone to the dogs

28 'Who does not know that eloquence and all other arts have declined from their ancient glory, not from dearth of men, but from the indolence of the young, the carelessness of parents, the ignorance of teachers, and neglect of the old discipline? The evils which first began in Rome soon spread through Italy and are now diffusing themselves into the provinces.'

28 *quis enim ignorat et eloquentiam et ceteras artis descivisse ab illa uetere gloria non inopia hominum, sed desidia iuventutis et negligentia parentum et inscientia praecipientium et obliuione moris antiqui? quae mala primum in urbe nata, mox per Italiam fusa, iam in prouincias manant.*

### Children used to be raised by their parents

28 'But your provincial affairs are best known to yourselves. I shall speak of Rome, and of those native and home-bred vices which take hold of us as soon as we are born, and multiply with every stage of life, when I have first said a few words on the strict discipline of our ancestors in the education and training of children. Every citizen's son, the child of a chaste mother, was from the beginning reared, not in the chamber of a purchased nurse, but in that mother's bosom and embrace, and it was her special glory to study her home and devote herself to her children.'

28 *quamquam uestra uobis notiora sunt: ego de urbe et his propriis ac uernaculis uitiiis loquar, quae natos statim excipiunt et per singulos aetatis gradus cumulantur, si prius de seueritate ac disciplina maiorum circa educandos formandosque liberos pauca praedixero. nam pridem suus cuique filius, ex casta parente natus, non in cellula emptae nutricis, sed gremio ac sinu matris educabatur, cuius praecipua laus erat tueri domum et inseruire liberis.*

### Strict discipline was the order of the day



28 'It was usual to select an elderly kinswoman of approved and esteemed character to have the entire charge of all the children of the household. In her presence it was the last offence to utter an unseemly word or to do a disgraceful act. With scrupulous piety and modesty, she regulated not only the boy's studies and occupations, but even his recreations and games. Thus it was, as tradition says, that the mothers of the Gracchi, of Cæsar, of Augustus—Cornelia, Aurelia, Atia—directed their children's education and reared the greatest of sons. The strictness of the discipline tended to form in each case a pure and virtuous nature which no vices could warp, and which would at once with the whole heart seize on every noble lesson. Whatever its bias, whether to the soldier's or the lawyer's art, or to the study of eloquence, it would make that its sole aim, and imbibe it in its fullness.'

28 *eligebatur autem maior aliqua natu propinqua, cuius probatis spectatisque moribus omnis eiusdem familiae suboles committeretur; coram qua neque dicere fas erat quod turpe dictu, neque facere quod inhonestum factu uideretur. ac non studia modo curasque, sed remissiones etiam lususque puerorum sanctitate quadam ac uerecundia temperabat. sic Corneliam Gracchorum, sic Aureliam Caesaris, sic Atiam Augusti matrem praefuisse educationibus ac produxisse principes liberos accepimus. quae disciplina ac seueritas eo pertinebat, ut sincera et integra et nullis prauitatibus detorta unius cuiusque natura toto statim pectore arriperet artis honestas, et siue ad rem militarem siue ad iuris scientiam siue ad eloquentiae studium inclinasset, id solum ageret, id uniuersum hauriret.*

### Now slaves and parents fill children's minds with trivial nonsense

29 'But in our day we entrust the infant to a little Greek servant-girl who is attended by one or two, commonly the worst of all the slaves, creatures utterly unfit for any important work. Their stories and their prejudices from the very first fill the child's tender and uninstructed mind. No one in the whole house cares what he says or does before his infant master. Even parents themselves familiarise their little ones, not with virtue and modesty, but with jesting and glib talk, which lead on by degrees to shamelessness and to contempt for themselves as well as for others.'

29 *at nunc natus infans delegatur Graeculae alicui ancillae, cui adiungitur unus aut alter ex omnibus seruis, plerumque uilissimus nec cuiquam serio ministerio adcommodatus. horum fabulis et erroribus et uirides teneri statim et rudes animi imbuuntur; nec quisquam in tota domo pensi habet, quid coram infante domino aut dicat aut faciat. quin etiam ipsi parentes non probitati neque modestiae paruulos adsuefaciunt, sed lasciuiiae et dicacitati, per quae paulatim impudentia inrepat et sui alienique contemptus.*

### Gladiators and chariot-races dominate all conversations



Gladiators (Lepcis Magna)

29 'Really I think that the characteristic and peculiar vices of this city, a liking for actors and a passion for gladiators and horses, are all but conceived in the mother's womb. When these occupy and possess the mind, how little room has it left for

worthy attainments! Few indeed are to be found who talk of any other subjects in their homes, and whenever we enter a classroom, what else is the conversation of the youths. Even with the teachers, these are the more frequent topics of talk with their scholars. In fact, they draw pupils, not by strictness of discipline or by giving proof of ability, but by assiduous court and cunning tricks of flattery.'

*29 iam uero propria et peculiaria huius urbis uitia paene in utero matris concipi mihi uidentur, histrionalis fauor et gladiatorum equorumque studia: quibus occupatus et obsessus animus quantulum loci bonis artibus relinquit? quotum quemque inuenies qui domi quicquam aliud loquatur? quos alios adolescentulorum sermones excipimus, si quando auditoria intrauimus? ne praeceptores quidem ullas crebriores cum auditoribus suis fabulas habent; colligunt enim discipulos non seueritate disciplinae nec ingenii experimento, sed ambitione salutationum et inlecebris adulationis.*

...

[Modern barristers have no proper training in law or anything else]

### **No orator has any grasp of the basics of the skill**

**32** 'All this is so neglected by the speakers of our time that we detect in their pleadings the style of every-day conversation, and unseemly and shameful deficiencies. They are ignorant of the laws, they do not understand the senate's decrees, they actually scoff at the civil law, while they quite dread the study of philosophy, and the opinions of the learned; and eloquence, banished, so to say, from her proper realm, is dragged down by them into utter poverty of thought and constrained periods. Thus she who, once mistress of all the arts, held sway with a glorious retinue over our souls, now clipped and shorn, without state, without honour, I had almost said without her freedom, is studied as one of the meanest handicrafts. This then I believe to be the first and chief cause of so marked a falling off among us from the eloquence of the old orators.'

*32 quod adeo neglegitur ab horum temporum disertis, ut in actionibus eorum huius quoque cotidiani sermonis foeda ac pudenda uitia deprehendantur; ut ignorent leges, non teneant senatus consulta, ius huius ciuitatis ultro derideant, sapientiae uero studium et praecepta prudentium penitus reformident. in paucissimos sensus et angustas sententias detrudunt eloquentiam uelut expulsam regno suo, ut quae olim omnium artium domina pulcherrimo comitatu pectora implebat, nunc circumcisa et amputata, sine apparatu, sine honore, paene dixerim sine ingenuitate, quasi una ex sordidissimis artificiis discatur. ergo hanc primam et praecipuam causam arbitror, cur in tantum ab eloquentia antiquorum oratorum recesserimus.*



34 'It was accordingly usual with our ancestors, when a lad was being prepared for public speaking, as soon as he was fully trained by home discipline, and his mind was stored with culture, to have him taken by his father, or his relatives to the orator who held the highest rank in the state. The boy used to accompany and attend him, and be present at all his speeches, alike in the law-court and the assembly, and thus he picked up the art of repartee, and became habituated to the strife of words, and indeed, I may almost say, learnt how to fight in battle. Thereby young men acquired from the first great experience and confidence, and a very large stock of discrimination, for they were studying in broad daylight, in the very thick of the conflict, where no one can say anything foolish or self-contradictory without its being refuted by the judge, or ridiculed by the opponent, or, last of all, repudiated by the very counsel with him.'

*34 ergo apud maiores nostros iuuenis ille, qui foro et eloquentiae parabatur, imbutus iam domestica disciplina, refertus honestis studiis deducebatur a patre uel a propinquis ad eum oratorem, qui principem in ciuitate locum obtinebat. hunc sectari, hunc prosequi, huius omnibus dictionibus interesse siue in iudiciis siue in contionibus adsuescebat, ita ut altercationes quoque exciperet et iurgiis interesset utque sic dixerim, pugnare in proelio disceret. magnus ex hoc usus, multum constantiae, plurimum iudicii iuuenibus statim contingebat, in media luce studentibus atque inter ipsa discrimina, ubi nemo inpune stulte aliquid aut contrarie dicit, quo minus et iudex respuat et aduersarius exprobret, ipsi denique aduocati aspernentur.*

They learned what it meant to have fight a case and win over a crowd



34 'Thus from the beginning they were imbued with true and genuine eloquence, and, although they attached themselves to one pleader, still they became acquainted with all advocates of their own standing in a multitude of cases before the courts. They had too abundant experience of the popular ear in all its greatest varieties, and with this they could easily ascertain what was liked or disapproved in each speaker. Thus they were not in want of a teacher of the very best and choicest kind, who could show them eloquence in her true features, not in a mere resemblance; nor did they lack opponents and rivals, who fought with actual steel, not with a wooden sword, and the audience too was always crowded, always changing, made up of unfriendly as well as of admiring critics, so that neither success nor failure could be disguised. You know, of course, that eloquence wins its great and enduring fame quite as much from the benches of our opponents as from those of our friends; furthermore, its rise from that quarter is steadier, and its growth surer.'

34 *igitur uera statim et incorrupta eloquentia imbuebantur; et quamquam unum sequerentur, tamen omnis eiusdem aetatis patronos in plurimis et causis et iudiciis cognoscebant; habebantque ipsius populi diuersissimarum aurium copiam, ex qua facile deprehenderent, quid in quoque uel probaretur uel displiceret. ita nec praeceptor deerat, optimus quidem et electissimus, qui faciem eloquentiae, non imaginem praestaret, nec aduersarii et aemuli ferro, non rudibus dimicantes, nec auditorium semper plenum, semper nouum, ex inuidis et fauentibus, ut nec bene nec male dicta dissimularentur. scitis enim magnam illam et duraturam eloquentiae famam non minus in diuersis subselliis parari quam suis; inde quin immo constantius surgere, ibi fidelius corroborari.*

## This sort of experience was invaluable

34 'Undoubtedly it was under such teachers that the youth of whom I am speaking, the disciple of orators, the listener in the forum, the student in the law-courts, was trained and practised by the experiences of others. The laws he learnt by daily hearing; the faces of the judges were familiar to him; the ways of popular assemblies were continually before his eyes; he had frequent experience of the ear of the people, and whether he undertook a prosecution or a defence, he was at once singly and alone equal to any case. We still read with admiration the speeches in which Lucius Crassus in his nineteenth, Cæsar and Asinius Pollio in their twenty-first year, Calvus, when very little older, denounced, respectively, Carbo, Dolabella, Cato, and Vatinius.'

34 *atque hercule sub eius modi praeceptoribus iuuenis ille, de quo loquimur, oratorum discipulus, fori auditor, sectator iudiciorum, eruditus et adsuefactus alienis experimentis, cui cotidie audienti notae leges, non noui iudicum uultus, frequens in oculis consuetudo contionum, saepe cognitae populi aures, siue accusationem susceperat siue defensionem, solus statim et unus cuicumque causae par erat. nono decimo aetatis anno L. Crassus C. Carbonem, uno et uicesimo Caesar Dolabellam, altero et uicesimo Asinius Pollio C. Catonem, non multum aetate antecedens Caluus Vatinius iis orationibus insecuri sunt, quas hodieque cum admiratione legimus.*

\*There is more in this vein before the *ms* breaks off. It picks up when Maternus is replying to Messalla in what turns out to be the concluding speech of the discussion, producing a conclusion which may well be thought to be a compromise of which Tacitus himself perhaps approved.

## Because society is not perfect, lawyers are still needed

41 'And so now the forum [i.e. the law courts], which is all that is left from antiquity to our speakers, is evidence of a state not thoroughly reformed or as orderly as we could wish. Who but the guilty or unfortunate apply to us [i.e. barristers]? What town puts itself under our protection but one harassed by its neighbours or by strife at home? When we plead for a province is it not one that has been plundered and ill-treated? Surely it would be better not to complain than to have to seek redress. Could a community be found in which no one did wrong, an orator would be as superfluous among its innocent people as a physician among the healthy.'

41 *sic quoque quod superest antiquitatis oratoribus forum non emendatae nec usque ad uotum compositae ciuitatis argumentum est. quis enim nos aduocat nisi aut nocens aut miser? quod municipium in clientelam nostram uenit, nisi quod aut uicinus populus aut domestica discordia agitat? quam prouinciam tuemur nisi spoliata uexataque? atqui melius fuisset non queri quam uindicari. quod si inueniretur aliqua ciuitas, in qua nemo peccaret, superuacuuus esset inter innocentis orator sicut inter sanos medicus.*



## But great oratory is irrelevant in the presence of an all-wise emperor

41 'As the healing art is of very little use and makes very little progress in nations which enjoy particularly robust constitutions and vigorous frames, so the orator gets an inferior and less splendid renown where a sound morality and willing obedience to authority prevail. What need there of long speeches in the senate, when the best men are soon of one mind, or of endless harangues to the people, when political questions are decided not by an ignorant multitude, but by one man of pre-eminent wisdom? What need of voluntary prosecutions, when crimes are so rare and slight, or of defences full of spiteful insinuation and exceeding proper bounds, when the clemency of the judge offers itself to the accused in his peril?'

*41 quo modo tamen minimum usus minimumque profectus ars medentis habet in iis gentibus, quae firmissima ualetudine ac saluberrimis corporibus utuntur, sic minor oratorum honor obscuriorque gloria est inter bonos mores et in obsequium regentis paratos. quid enim opus est longis in senatu sententiis, cum optimi cito consentiant? quid multis apud populum contionibus, cum de re publica non imperiti et multi deliberent, sed sapientissimus et unus? quid uoluntariis accusationibus, cum tam raro et tam parce peccetur? quid inuidiosis et excedentibus modum defensionibus, cum clementia cognoscentis obuiam periclitantibus eat?'*

## Orators are only as good as their times: count your blessings

41 'Be assured, my most excellent friends and as eloquent as our day requires, had you been born in the past and the men we admire born in our *own* day, and then had some god in fact suddenly swapped your lives and your times, the highest fame and glory of eloquence would have been yours, and they too would not have lacked [today's] moderation and self-control. As it is, seeing that no one can at the same time enjoy great renown and great tranquillity, let everybody make the best of the blessings of his own age without disparaging other periods.'

*41 credite, optimi et in quantum opus est disertissimi uiri, si aut uos prioribus saeculis aut illi, quos miramur, his nati essent, ac deus aliquis uitas ac uestra tempora repente mutasset, nec uobis summa illa laus et gloria in eloquentia neque illis modus et temperamentum defuisset: nunc, quoniam nemo eodem tempore adsequi potest magnam famam et magnam quietem, bono saeculi sui quisque citra obtrectationem alterius utatur.'*

It is a little known fact that Tacitus was the most famous orator of his day. Given the celebrity and status granted to great orators of the republican period (cf. Cicero!), it is astonishing that Tacitus appears to have made no effort to leave any of his for future generations to admire. Perhaps the *Dialogus* explains why: Tacitus thought it a medium which in his day had no significance or meaningful legacy—in contrast to history.

Next week: Tacitus *Histories*: The Year of the Four Emperors (i)