

The Power of Language: Selections from the Ancients

Isocrates (353 BCE)

For in our other facilities, as I said earlier, we do not differ from other living beings, and in fact we are inferior to many in speed, strength, and other resources. But since we have the ability to persuade one another and to make dear to ourselves what we want, not only do we avoid living like animals, but we have come together, built cities, made laws, and invented arts. Speech is responsible for nearly all our inventions. It legislated in matters of justice and injustice and beauty and baseness, and without these laws, we could not live with one another. By it we refute the bad and praise the good; through it, we educate the ignorant and recognize the intelligent. We regard speaking well to be the clearest sign of a good mind, which it requires, and truthful, lawful, and just speech we consider the image of a good and faithful soul. With speech we fight over contentious matters, and we investigate the unknown. We use the same arguments by which we persuade others in our own deliberations; we call those able to speak in a crowd "rhetorical"; we regard as sound advisers those who debate with themselves most skillfully about public affairs. If one must summarize the power of discourse, we will discover that nothing done prudently occurs without speech, that speech is the leader of all thoughts and actions, and that the most intelligent people use it most of all.

Source: Isocrates, *Antidosis*. *Isocrates*. Trans. David C. Mirhady and Yun Lee Too. Austin: U of Texas P, 2000. 251-52.

Cicero (ca. 90 BCE)

For there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals and lived on wild fare; they did nothing by the guiding of reason, but relied chiefly on physical strength; there was as yet no ordered system of religious worship nor of social duties; no one had seen legitimate marriage nor had anyone looked upon children whom he knew to be his own; nor had they learned the advantage of an equitable code of law. And so through their ignorance and error blind and unreasoning passion satisfied itself by misuse of bodily strength, which is a very dangerous servant.

At this juncture a man-great and wise I am sure-became aware of the power latent in man and the wide field offered by his mind for great achievements if one could develop this power and improve it by instruction. Men were scattered in the fields and hidden in sylvan retreats when he assembled and gathered them in accordance with a plan; he introduced them to every useful and honourable occupation, though they cried out against it at first because of its novelty, and then when through reason and eloquence they had listened with greater attention, he transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk.

To me, at least, it does not seem possible that a mute and voiceless wisdom could have turned men suddenly from their habits and introduced them to different patterns of life.

Source: Cicero, *De Inventione*. Trans. H. M. Hubbell. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1949. 5-7.

Cicero (55 BCE)

"Nor does anything seem to me," he added, "more noble than to be able to fix the attention of assemblies of men by speaking, to fascinate their minds, to direct their passions to whatever object the orator pleases, and to dissuade them from whatsoever he desires. This particular art has constantly flourished above all others in every free state, and especially in

those which have enjoyed peace and tranquility, and has ever exercised great power. For what is so admirable as that, out of an infinite multitude of men, there should arise a single individual who can alone, or with only a few others, exert effectually that power which nature has granted to all? Or what is so pleasant to be heard and understood as an oration adorned and polished with wise thoughts and weighty expressions? Or what is so striking, so astonishing, as that the tumults of the people, the religious feelings of judges, the gravity of the senate, should be swayed by the speech of one man? Or what, moreover, is so kingly, so liberal, so munificent, as to give assistance to the suppliant, to raise the afflicted, to bestow security, to deliver from dangers, to maintain men in the rights of citizenship? What, also, is so necessary as to keep arms always ready, with which you may either be protected yourself, or defy the malicious, or avenge yourself when provoked? Or consider (that you may not always contemplate the forum, the benches, the rostra, and the senate) what can be more delightful in leisure, or more suited to social intercourse, than elegant conversation, betraying no want of intelligence on any subject? For it is by this one gift that we are most distinguished from brute animals, that we converse together, and can express our thoughts by speech. Who, therefore, would not justly make this an object of admiration, and think it worthy of his utmost exertions, to surpass mankind themselves in that single excellence by which they claim their superiority over brutes? But, that we may notice the most important point of all, what other power could either have assembled mankind, when dispersed, into one place, or have brought them from wild and savage life to the present humane and civilized state of society; or, when cities were established, have described for them laws, judicial institutions, and rights? And that I may not mention more examples, which are almost without number, I will conclude the subject in one short sentence; for I consider, that by the judgment and wisdom of the perfect orator, not only his own honor, but that of many other individuals, and the welfare of the whole state, are principally upheld."

Source: Cicero, *De Oratore*. Trans. John Selby Watson. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1970. 13-14.

Quintilian (95 AD)

In truth, the sovereign deity, the parent of all things, the architect of the world, had distinguished man from other beings, such at least as were to be mortal, by nothing more than by the faculty of speech. Bodily frames superior in size, in strength, in firmness, in endurance, in activity, we see among dumb creatures, and observe, too, that they have less need than we have of external assistance. To walk, to feed themselves, to swim over water, they learn, in less time than we can, from nature herself, without the aid of any other teacher. Most of them, also, are equipped against cold by the produce of their own bodies; weapons for their defense are born with them; and their food lies before their faces; to supply all which wants mankind have the greatest difficulty. The divinity has therefore given us reason, superior to all other qualities, and appointed us to be sharers of it with the immortal gods. But reason could neither profit us so much, nor manifest itself so plainly within us, if we could not express by speech what we have conceived in our minds; a faculty which we see wanting in other animals, far more than, to a certain degree, understanding and reflection.

Source: Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*. Trans. John Selby Watson. *Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing: Translations from Books One, Two, and Ten of the Institutio oratoria*. Ed. James J. Murphy. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. 52-53.