

Characteristics of some
Great Orators.

by
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Outline

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Its convincing qualities.

A subject of admiration.

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What characterises Roman oratory.

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Daniel Webster.

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Nothing seems more excellent than to be able to convince the understanding and guide the inclinations of whole assemblies, by the commanding powers of eloquence.

What can be a juster subject of admiration than, amidst a vast multitude, one man only, or a very small number, should rise superior to all others in the exercise of that power, oratory. It is indeed the peculiar characteristic of our nature, which distinguishes us by language.

We may recollect the extraordinary degree of perfection to which eloquence was carried by Demosthenes and Cicero, and their productions which have come down to us, give the most satisfactory proofs that they were masters of their art.

The height of Attic eloquence was reached in Demosthenes, who spent his whole life and his magnificent eloquence in a noble effort. He, had the advantage over his predecessors in

living nearer the age when literary history began to be extensively written.

Demosthenes received, during his youth the ordinary grammatical and rhetorical education of a wealthy Athenian. Even as a boy, he is said to have manifested extraordinary appetite and interest for rhetorical exercise.

It appears that he was from childhood of sickly constitution and feeble muscular frame; so that partly from his own disinclinations, partly from the struggle with natural infirmities, he took little part either as a boy or as a youth in the exercise of his art. Being neither strong nor confident, being short-breathed, with indistinct utterance, and using awkward angular gestures, it is not strange that his first appearance was worse than a failure. Altho' the happy dream of his youth thus seemed on the point of vanishing forever, he was determined to be heard again. According to the custom of his

predecessors, he sought instruction from most of the best sources. The energy and success with which Demosthenes overcame his defects in such a manner as to satisfy a critical assembly like the Athenians, is one of the most memorable circumstances in the general history of self-education.

Repeated mockery and ridicule only spurred him on to fresh efforts. He corrected his defective elocution by speaking with pebbles in his mouth; he prepared himself to overcome the noise of the assembly, by declaiming in stormy weather on the sea shore of Phalerum. After patient struggle for years, he was rewarded at last with complete success. His delivery became full of decision and force.

Not because his task was easy and pleasant, but because honor and duty demanded it of the state and citizen, is the moral teaching which distinguishes him from many of his contemporaries.

His early eloquence was somewhat stately and elaborate, but in his later oratory we find varied and abundant subject matter. He knew how to make his facts carry their pathos; in a brief clause or even a single word, he could move the whole assembly. Longinus says, "One might as soon face with steady eyes, a descending thunder-bolt, as to oppose a calm front to the storm of passion which Demosthenes can arouse".

For thirteen years his eloquence swayed the land, then the orator and statesman went down in ruins.

All in all, we place him as the first orator of the ancient world. As the standard of true art is exemplified, it will be seen that Demosthenes has approached nearest to perfection in the high art of oratory.

The literary high-water mark was reached at Rome during the

first century before the Christian Era, and its representative was the orator Marcus Cicero.

Never perhaps, did any man unite so many components within himself to so great an extent as Cicero.

As we have found from the various descriptions and letters of his contemporaries, he was tall of stature; his features were severe, noble, pure, lighted up by the intellect from within. With the exception of his deep and well trained voice, his whole external appearance was that of a pure intellectuality.

Poetry was the first study to interest him. Cicero was a poet always. He became a transcendent orator only because he was a poet.

On reaching manhood, he studied philosophy under the Greek masters of his science. He opened his soul entirely to learning, wisdom, inspiration and eloquence.

Cicero was born at the very moment of the culmination and dissolution of the Roman Republic; so that his history combined with that of his country, is that of the most memorable man of his time.

His one great art lies, where it always lies with the true artist, in the application of material at hand to the production of amazing results. He argues round and round his subject; surveys it in every light, till the hearer cannot doubt a conclusion which rests on such strict and abundant argument.

Other orators have excelled in other departments of art, but none in the wealth and variety of words to the purpose in view.

The genius, the style and the manner of both Demosthenes and Cicero were much the same. Cicero was by nature, full of mirth and pleasantry, and always smiling and serene. Demosthenes on the

contrary was serious and always in earnest, even so much so that his enemies called him worse and ill-natured.

Hence we see there is more of nature in Greek oratory and more of art in Roman. Demosthenes had a single object and a rigid purpose; Cicero was less earnest, more pleasing, winning admiration.

The perfections of these two men whose names are often linked together, are so diverse and yet so similar that critics are at a loss as to whom the preference should be given.

English Eloquence, is shining with the rest. Her oratory is not occupied with American affairs wholly, but because of Colonial power, her orators made the age more famous than it otherwise might have been.

The reign of George III would indeed

have been miserably imperfect if it had omitted the name of Edmund Burke.

Of his early life we know little. His heavy Quaker-like figure, the scratch wig, the great roll of paper which so often loaded his pocket, gave little promise of a great orator.

His early education was largely biblical, and to the Bible in after years, Burke often resorted for illustrations. This characteristic distinguishes him as an orator of almost oriental magnificence of expression.

Industrious and faithful to study, Burke acquired that most useful of all powers, the ability to think at all times and in all places. He possessed materials for generalization, far more ample than any politician of his time, and he had a mind capable of taking large views. On many occasions and, indeed whenever an opportunity was offered, he showed his capacity as an

original and wide thinker. His ideas seemed to become beautiful living pictures, from the splendor and fire of his imagination.

Burke is perhaps, the only English statesman who is recognized as a great author because of the permanency and literary interest of his political writings and speeches alone.

This singular fact may be due to the historic importance and dramatic subject matter which he chose. It is undoubtedly due also to the fact that Burke used in his discussions distinctly literary gifts; as style, smoothness, rapidity etc. His treatment of current politics shows not merely the orator, the master of style, but also, he is pre-eminently the thinker who rises above simple contemporary interests.

Hence Burke has been called the greatest thinker, with the single exception of Bacon, "who has ever

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devoted himself to the practice of English politics."

Of his three magnificent speeches it may be said, they compose a body of instruction in the study of public affairs which is unsurpassed. Fresh and natural to the last degree, he brings out the hidden force of common words and phrases as no other orator has ever done. In all his oratory there is a something which escapes the last analyses of criticism.

The majority of judges place him before any other orator of modern times as a parliamentary speaker. In this one character of a Political philosopher, he stands unrivalled among English statesmen.

The tide of American oratory, which had been rising for more than half a century, reached its full flood in the eloquence of Daniel Webster. In a man occupying the high place

which he held in the eye of the nation, very little is known of his private character. He was ambitious, and it was that proud ambition which knew its strength and compelled the world to recognize it. His preeminence as an orator will be denied by no one but the most daring critic.

The story of his life is a very simple and common one; a farmer's son, a struggle with poverty, and noble sacrifices in the family, to give Daniel the best that the remote district afforded in the way of self help, in securing an education.

Webster's tremendous personal and intellectual force, joined to his remarkable abilities as an orator, pushed him rapidly to the front. The gift which was bestowed thru the man upon his age, and the working habit of sturdy generations, produced the perfect flower and fruit of oratory, after nearly a century of growth.

Like the man himself his language was plain, but full of power. Webster had the wisdom to view things in their true relations, uncolored by the imaginativeness or sympathies. His familiarity with Latin authors is shown by his skilful introduction of Latin phrases, according to the custom of his day. The Bible also was a source of allusion, in which he was perfectly at home.

The longer this great man lived, the higher he rose, he was a man whose talents and devotion to public duty placed him and kept him in a position of sole command.

In the last months of his life, the whole affectionateness of his nature, his consideration of others and his desire to see them happy, seemed to come out in more beautiful expression than ever before. It is due to ourselves that as a nation we should know the man who, more than any of his

contemporaries raised this people in the esteem of the world.

In regard to the present condition of oratory or that of the future, it is wholly impossible to tell whether it is or will be greater than that of the past. Eloquence is probably at its greatest height at present, it may be greater tomorrow.

The problems of the future may not call for such bursts of eloquence as those in the past, yet they are likely to call forth powers from the human voice beyond our present idea of conceiving.

Therefore, the necessity still remains, of gathering up the lessons left by the great masters in the past, and profiting by their successes and avoiding their failures, the men of the future may know how they can bring the world to their feet.