

**THE GREEK ORATORS
CONSIDERED AS HISTORICAL
AUTHORITIES: THE ARNOLD
PRIZE ESSAY FOR 1866**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649308231

The Greek Orators Considered as Historical Authorities: The Arnold Prize Essay For 1866 by
Francis Allston Channing

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THE ARNOLD PRIZE ESSAY FOR 1866.

BY

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"Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoris magistra vitæ nuntia vetustatis, quæ voce aliis, nisi oratoris, immortalitati commendatur?"

CICERO. *De Oratore* II. 9.

"Quoniam quidem concessum est rhetoribus ementiri in historiis, ut aliquid dicere possint argutius."—CICERO. *Brutus*, xi. 42.

OXFORD:

T. & G. SHRIMPTON, BROAD STREET.

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THE GREEK ORATORS CONSIDERED AS
HISTORICAL AUTHORITIES.

AN ancient writer has said that history is a subject peculiarly suited to the orator, and the fact that the writer was himself a great orator gives weight to his opinion.* If history is to be something more than a simple record of actions and events, if it is to give not only events but causes, not only actions but motives, there are two qualities necessary for the historian. He must have an intellect sagacious and comprehensive to select the facts and to group them in their true relations. Again, he must be keenly sensible to the varied play of human feelings and human motives to appreciate and express the moral bearings of human actions and events. But these are just the qualities that a good orator possesses. He chooses and arranges his facts so as to bring out their meaning in the conclusion which is the object of

* Cicero, *De Legibus*, I. ii. 5. Opus unum hoc oratorium maxime. Cf. *De Oratore*, II. xii. 51, seq.

his speech. And in both choice and arrangement of matter he is guided by the sympathies of his hearers, who, if they are to be persuaded, must be made to feel the whole as well as the parts.

Such an analogy between the qualities needed for history and for oratory, may be of use in estimating the historical value of the statements of orators, though it obviously cannot be pressed far. Practically, the orator differs from the historian both in matter and in treatment. Facts of history are only a part of the matter of oratory. The acts and circumstances of individuals, and the technicalities of law, are as much facts for the orator as military movements and constitutional or social changes. If the historian and the orator are compared in the treatment of what they have in common, it may be said that the object of the historian is to state with accuracy and clearness the facts, their causes, and their consequences; the object of the orator is so to group and colour the facts as to make his hearers think and feel and act in a certain manner. Thus facts are acceptable to the historian because they are true, to the orator because they are useful.^b Both history and oratory present the facts as a connected whole. But the connexion given by history is drawn from the facts themselves; the connection given by oratory depends on the point which the facts are adduced to prove or carry.^c

The historical value of statements of fact in an

^b Dion. Halic. *Art. Rhet.* p. 392. *Reiske, ἀγὰρ δι' ἡκανονίαις περιστάσεων ὡς τῆς ἰστορίας.*

^c Id. *ib.* p. 388.

oration will thus depend on the aim of the oration, as well as on the powers and character of the orator. Facts brought forward to carry a great decision of national policy, where many interests join or clash in earnest debate, will be worth more than if the aim is to gratify the light-hearted multitude at a public festival, or to establish private rights or satisfy private enmities in courts of justice.

Again, the treatment of the facts will depend on the temper and the experience of the audience. The great check which is imposed on all statements whether of orators or historians, is the standard of probability. By such a standard all that is meant is conformity with experience. What is improbable is what has not been experienced, or what is unlike what has been experienced. Such a check operates more stringently on the historian, because his statements have to meet the careful study of thoughtful and experienced readers. The orator, on the other hand, has only to satisfy hearers for the moment. Inaccuracies may easily escape observation, or if they are observed they may be carried off by the point of the argument.⁴ Still he is responsible. He cannot venture wholly to misrepresent a fact well known to his hearers; and in stating facts slightly known or even unknown to them he must reconcile his statements with known facts, and the inferences derived from them, thus producing a connection closely corresponding to that of history.⁵

⁴ Cicero, *Brut.* c. xii. § 42.

⁵ Arist. *Rhet.* I. i. § 6. Διὸ τὰ ληθῆ καὶ τὰ βιολίω τῆ φήμει ἀσυνλογιστότερα καὶ ἀπιστότερα, ὥς ἀσέβησι εἰπῆν.

The orator, then, is obliged to conform to the experience and the reason, as well as to the taste of his audience; the facts he states must be probable if they are to persuade. Thus the knowledge and the character of those addressed will be an important condition of the worth of historical statements made before them.

The truth of his facts is the first aim of the historian; in the case of the orator, the truth or even the probability of the facts is only a necessary condition of attaining the main object, which is the persuasion of the audience. The historian is directly and permanently responsible for his veracity, the responsibility of the orator is indirect and temporary. On the one hand, then, the fact that he has not to address the prejudices and passions of the moment gives still greater weight to the authority of the historian. On the other hand, where the words of the orator are measured at once by the experience of men whose attention is quickened by deep personal interest, and who are responsibly discussing a matter of practical importance, the facts may be more truthfully as well as more vividly stated, than in subsequent historical narration. This was probably one of the reasons for the insertion of speeches by the ancient historians.

Facts given in orations may be stated with or without proofs. They may be proved by the production of eye-witnesses or authentic documents, and, in this case, they have the highest historical value. For original testimony is the highest form of historical evidence. Again, they may not be proved, but stated