

Conservative Roman Rhetoric of *Marcus Portius Cato* (Cato the Elder)

Introduction

Whenever we need to speak about rhetoric, the constant need of man of the spoken word, as unique way of mutual communication, is probably the first undeniable fact which is imposed. Namely, although it originated a long time ago, the modern way of life cannot be imagined without the thing that distinguishes the human being from the rest of the living creatures, that is the possibility to impose our opinion and view about certain issues by speaking or addressing to other people, or to find compromises to solutions using the force of the arguments.

Hence, although historically honoured, glorified, but also disputed, belittled, vulgarised or even denied, rhetoric managed to rise itself and survive all the undoing caused mainly by the conditions in which it existed.

The fact that it was subject of interest of extremely important and influential historical figures, who came in direct contact with it especially in their professional life, is proof that the rhetoric is extremely important domain of "human affairs". Thus, it became an area of research of many philosophers, writers, jurists, journalists, politicians and theorists who remained permanently impressed in the collective memory of humanity, especially due to its contribution in the area of science in general. It speaks volumes about the fact that the importance of rhetoric, no matter in what form it is, is not a marginal subject which does not deserves attention; on the contrary, the understanding of the rhetoric as scientific discipline, art or skill, or historical and modern dimension of the rhetoric, will undoubtedly demonstrate the right way to use best this "tool" typical only for human beings.

Because of these reasons, we believe that everyone who, in their everyday lives, directly face the possibility and the necessity to address the audience to whom he/she must communicate certain view in precise and clear manner, accompanied by the elements of fun, as well as to often convince them of something, must learn at least something about the oratory. However, this does not mean that "everyone who wants to give a speech will become a good orator, as well as anyone who wants to play piano would become a famous artist"².

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² Slavoljub Popović, *Govorništvo u teoriji i praksi*, (Beograd: NIRO „KNJIŽEVNE NOVINE“ 1987), 7

1. Basic Facts about the Rhetoric

1.1 About the Notion of the Rhetoric

Once again emphasizing the attitude of most of the authors who have dealt with the study of rhetoric, that its simple definition is extraordinarily difficult task³, we will briefly try to give a review of the most significant efforts to do so.

Thus, starting from the fact that the definition or the determination of the notion of rhetoric is always accompanied by the scientist's doubts: whether it is a scientific discipline or it is just some skill: whether it should be considered as *rethorica docens*⁴, or as *rethorica utens*⁵ independently from the historical and theoretical aspect; whether the rhetoric covers the spoken word, or the written word could be taken into consideration; whether the rhetoric is independent discipline or not; whether the rhetoric is same as the oratory⁶ or whether it should be considered in its positive and negative context which express themselves depending on the historical moment?

However, most of the known definitions of rhetoric clearly indicate the view that it should be understood as the art of persuasion based on the organised knowledge and which is done by spoken words. Some of the definitions referring to the rhetoric are:

Latin proverb: *Eloquentia est loquens sapientia*⁷;

Aristotle: Let the rhetoric be an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion.

Quintilian: *Ars bene dicendi, ars persuadendi*⁸ or Oratory is a mean by which we come to the truth. And these means change over time.

La Bruyere: Oratory is a gift of the soul which transforms us in the masters of the hearts and thoughts of other people.

In terms of the etymological meaning, it is a term originating from the Greek word *rhetor*, which means "the one who submits claim to court"⁹. Furthermore, with the change of the conditions, as well as the development of the rhetoric, as we shall see, the term *rhetor* was used to indicate an oratory teacher.

³ Although at first glance we are getting an impression that we can easily describe many other terms, at the end it turns out that actually we understood them best when we feel them, because trying to include all the important aspects which determine the specific phenomenon by defining often ends with a few words that emit at least one important element. It is the same with the rhetoric.

⁴ Examined in the contest of the philosophy, ethics, esthetics, grammar, stylistics, literature, as well as philosophic, moral and esthetic category. See Мирјана Поленак-Акимовска, Гоце Наумовски, „Реторика и правна аргументација“ (Скопје, Правен факултет „Јустинијан Први“),³

⁵ As a summary of practical advices on how to realise a good speech. Ibid

⁶ Обрад Станојевић, Сима Аврамовић, „*ARS RHETORICA ВЕШТИНА БЕСЕДНИШТВА*“ (Београд: Јавно предузеће Службени лист СРЈ) 2002, 13

⁷ Eloquence is a wisdom that speaks

⁸ Art of speaking gracefully, art of persuasion (Cicero has the same view)

⁹ Hence the view that the origins of the rhetoric are connected to the judicial and forensic oratory.

Besides the accepted Greek terminology, the term used by the Romans is orator as “speaker”, but the one who is addressing to someone, the one who begs¹⁰.

However, regardless of what is the primary aspect which is being emphasized, all must be covered so we can talk about elaborated notion of rhetoric. Therefore, the conclusion always comes down to the view that rhetoric is an interdisciplinary measure, especially considering the final objective of the task of rhetoric determination is actually the reconciliation of the bipolar understandings, thus the skill to speak arguments and the style in the same function should prevail¹¹.

1.2. Short Historical Development of Rhetoric

In terms of its origins, it is almost impossible to determine the exact date when the human kind began to use speech as a mean for communication. Often, the spoken form for addressing in its most primitive form, binds to the custom of pronouncing special words by which the human addressed the Gods. The “disputes” among people, referring to issues crucial for the survival of the community, come from the distant past¹².

However, it is considered that rhetoric was born in Sicily¹³ as Greek colony around the middle of the fifth century BC as a result of the change in the social order, which conditioned many processes referring to the ownership structure¹⁴.

Therefore, it can be indisputably concluded that Ancient Greece is the cradle of the rhetoric, in the sense of the everyday human practice,

¹⁰ The noun eloquentia (eloquence) should be mentioned here.

¹¹ On one side, there is the view that the rhetoric is an art of persuasion, and on the other side there is the view that she is in duality with the stylistics, emphasizing the figures of speech. See Мирјана Поленак-Акимовска, „Особености и функции на реториката“, „Зборник на трудови во шест на Томислав Чокревски“ (Скопје: Правен факултет Јустинијан Први), 2010, 132

¹² For example, whether to go hunting, whether to fight another group, etc. See Обрад Станојевић, Сима Аврамовић, op. cit, 43

¹³ The issue of who is the creator of the rhetoric as a discipline is disputable. Namely, Empedocles is often mentioned. He was a philosopher, poet and politician and exactly his political engagement in the introduction of the democracy in one of the poleis of Sicily will label him as the father of the rhetoric. However, it is a fact that Empedocles was not a rhetoric teacher, nor created some kind of a system; he was only extremely good orator, which can be seen from the fact that later Aristotle will not state him as the creator of the rhetoric in his work “Rhetoric”. Therefore, the opinion that the speaker Corax of Siracuse, Sicily is the father of the rhetoric is more correct. He was the author of the first handbook of rhetoric (techne rethorike) and founder of the school of rhetoric. (it should be mentioned that the existence of Corax is disputed in some of the researches with the argument that it is a nickname of Tissius?!)

¹⁴ It is the period of the fall of the tyranny as a form of organisation, whereupon the citizens who were forced to leave there properties tried to return them by the way of litigation. Having in mind the conditions of the time, the only way to be successful in proving of the ownership before the civil jury was for the party to be eloquent and persuasive.

as well as in the sense of the theoretical background¹⁵ which continued to be taught in the Greek oratory schools¹⁶.

Rhetoric experienced its golden era in the Ancient Rome, where large number of prominent figures dedicated significant part of their careers to practicing, studying and teaching rhetoric to youth.

The Middle Ages, however, would not have negative influence on rhetoric, unlike most of the sciences at the time. On the contrary, the homiletics¹⁷ was fostered, as a manner of persuasion used by religious preachers in order to defend the church and religion.

In its own history, rhetoric experienced its “big fall” in the XIX century, devaluing itself by becoming a “mean to influence” and separating itself from the philosophy, thus becoming a subject of critics and belittling.

At the end, speaking especially about the past century, the “rebirth” of the rhetoric can be recognised. Of course, the fact that the modern way of understating and practicing of the rhetoric is very different from the old good ancient rhetoric must not be overlooked. This development of the rhetoric is conditioned by the change of rules, the use of new knowledge in the area of psychology, as well as of the use of the rhetoric in new areas such as: debates, economic propaganda, conquering markets and persuading the consumers¹⁸.

2. Cato the Elder, Representative of the Roman Republican Conservative Rhetoric

2.1 The Development of Rhetoric in Rome

The appearance and especially the development of rhetoric in Rome is connected to the constant fight for civil rights that the plebs, as an underclass, fought with the patricians. In this sense, the development of oratory is especially a characteristic during the period of the Republic¹⁹. The thing that is characteristical about oratory in Rome, especially during its beginnings, is the fact that as in other areas, the Romans understood and taught their knowledge about a phenomenon exclusively by their practical application, that is, the creation of some kind of a system or dealing with the theory of rhetoric would come much later. Namely, the ancient Romans learned oratory from what they saw or heard, at the places that were common for this activity, such as the Senate and the Forum. In addition, the character of the speeches given at Senate sessions significantly differed from the speeches given at the Forum by their content and purpose. Thus, the addressing to the Roman Senate meant giving a speech by senators which, as elected officials, should adopt decisions related to the governance of the country. Contrary

¹⁵ All of this comes from the fact that the Greek civilisation considered the oratory as very important component of the public life. Therefore, it is no wonder that the analysis of the manner of the interpersonal communication, in combination with the “fine words” has its origins from there.

¹⁶ The study of the rhetoric was important part of the Greek education.

¹⁷ Church sermons by which priests addressed the believers in churches or outside them.

¹⁸ Обрад Станојевић, Сима Аврамовић, *op.cit*, 32

¹⁹ It is the period from 509 BC to 27 BC.

to that, the speeches given at the Forum were either judicial speeches, since the courts set at the Forum, or speeches by which the speakers addressed the commission assemblies or a group of citizens that came to listen to them.

However, despite the fact that the Roman rhetoric differed from the Greek rhetoric in terms of the fact that it established the rhetoric system and dealt with the theoretical part besides the practical element, still the influence of the Greek culture in this area is more than evident²⁰.

Truth to be told, a large number of prominent Roman orators at the time, persistently opposed and tried to reject or stop the Greek tradition, believing that it only inflicts damage to the future generations which were trained to be orators²¹. This attitude was especially characteristic for the conservative Roman orators, including the most prominent Cato the Elder.

It is evident that the inclusion of rhetoric in education was compulsory at all levels during the Principate²². The study of the rhetoric art during the compulsory primary education, than during the secondary to higher education, actually meant preparation for one of the most prestigious professions in Rome – juridical one. Exactly in this period, Rome introduced the real rhetorical schools with its most famous lecturer, Quintilian²³.

Logically the period of the empire was an unfavourable period for the development of the rhetoric and oratory in general, when it was almost impossible to talk about political oratory due to the form of the state organisation. However, due to the immanent everyday need of it, judicial and forensic oratory remained, as well as the homiletics due to the rise of the Christian Church and its influence.

Most of the works dealing with the rhetoric and covering the development of the rhetoric in the Roman Empire in their opus, which of course cannot be overlooked, are mostly about several prominent names

²⁰ There were schools for the study of the Greek language and culture in Rome. Such was the school of Livius Andronicus.

²¹ Thus, the Roman Senate adopt a decision (161 BC) for the expulsion of the Greek philosophers and rhetors due to the negative influence to the youth.

²² From 27 BC to 284 BC

²³ Marcus Fabius Quintillianus (40-96 AD) was Spanish who came in Rome as child and was educated by orators. He is the author of the most famous schoolbook of rhetoric *Institutio oratoria* – Creation of the orator, which was made from the notes of his students, found as whole in 1417 in Florence. It is composed of 12 books which mainly cover the previous experiences. His work and views were influenced by Cicero. Shortly, Quintilian accepted the opinion that natural talent is necessary (which is more significant according to him) and that it should be perfected through exercise and practice. Quintilian was state professor of rhetoric during the reign of Vespasian. (it should be mentioned that the oldest schoolbook of rhetoric “Rhetoric: for Herennius” dates from 85 BC and is assumed to belong to Cicero)

of Roman orators such as: Menenius Agrippa²⁴, Cato the Elder²⁵, Marcus Tullius Cicero²⁶ and Quintilian (as rhetoric professor).

2.2 Biography of Marcus Portius Cato (Cato the Elder)

Plutarch in his work “Parallel Lives” gives comprehensive information on the life²⁷ of Cato the Elder²⁸ or *Marcus Portius Cato*.²⁹

It is assumed that *Marcus Portius*³⁰ was born in 234 BC in Tuluscum and spent his early life on the property inherited from his father.

His biography indicates that his ancestors were not prominent historical figures, but speaking about his father and grandfather, he qualified them as brave soldiers who were very often awarded for their merits³¹. Cato was not his original name; it was given to him later due to his personal features in order to mark wise and skilful man³².

We can find more about his physical appearance from the malicious epigram. He had red hair and light grey eyes.

²⁴ His name is related to the famous speech on the comparison of the connection between human body parts with the plebeians and patricians, thus stopping the effort for their separation.

²⁵ We will discuss about him further in the text

²⁶ Cicero (106 – 43 BC) is one of the most famous orators in the world. He was probably Etruscan by origin, and showed his extraordinary intelligence from his earliest years. He overcame his defects, his gentle body structure and quivery voice, by constant everyday gymnastics workout, reciting versus aloud and even studying acting. History recognises his *De oratore* as the most important image of the rhetoric at ancient times. He performed function of quaestor and later of praetor and consul. He was murdered by a soldier whom he probably defended at court. 58 of his speeches are preserved. Although modesty was not his feature and his oratory style, especially after his death, he was labeled as too Asian and decorated, still there is no doubt that he is the greatest Roman master of the spoken word.

²⁷ Besides the abovementioned work, biographic data on Cato can be found at Cornelius Nepos, Aurelius Victor and Cicero

²⁸ The purpose of the supplement the Elder is to distinguish him from his great-grandson. See below.

²⁹ This work of Plutarch (46 – 120 AD) contains 23 pairs of biographies from the Hellenic and Roman world and four single biographies. He wrote this work at the end of his life with the intention to write for the “lives” not for the “history”, as he indicates in the biography of Alexander the Great. He is Greek, coming from a wealthy family and living his golden years during the reign of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian. He is the author of more than 200 works, the most famous of which is “Parallel lives” who shows the Greek and Roman history through the centuries to the modern world, exactly through the analysis of the lives of the persons who had great influence in its formation. For more, see:

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Plutarchs-Exemplary-Lives.html>

as well as

<http://www.bostonleadershipbuilders.com/plutarch/index.htm>

³⁰ Largest part of the biography information is taken from <http://www.bostonleadershipbuilders.com/plutarch/marcuscato.htm>

³¹ These persons did not have family tradition in serving civil services and acquired high positions in the society only as a result of their capability. They were called “new” by the Romans. Because of this, he said that he was really new in the service, but also oldest according to the brave deeds of his ancestors.

³² From *catus*

In addition, he gained physical strength and good health probably because of his occupation mainly with agriculture, cultivating his property alone and his way of life. His first military service, according to him, was at seventeen years of age, precisely against Hannibal who fought with Rome at the time.

He had very modest behaviour, especially during his military service. He carried his weapon by himself and had only one servant who helped him. During the campaigns he drank only water, while he drank wine³³ only when he felt weakness.

He believed that strength, roughness and courage should be shown to the enemy, which, according to him, “sometimes scares them more than sword”, also advising his comrades on this.

After every battle, he returned in his humble house and continued to cultivate his land, without accepting any reward for the successful battles, satisfied with the simple dinner he ate.

Exactly this conservative and strict attitude regarding the costs of living made him to oppose openly to Scipio Africanus³⁴, together with his friend Fabius Maximus, criticising the way he treats his soldiers. Firmly supporting his view that the uncontrolled and unnecessary costs made for certain pleasures of the soldiers after a successful battle, lead to corruption and destruction of the soldiers’ modesty, he requested report personally from Scipio publicly before the Senate.

However, his ability to restrain and his expressive power of self-control deserved admiration especially when it came to lowering the minimum of costs covered by the state treasury. Because of this, his sympathy and empathy towards those subordinated to him³⁵, but also his preciseness, strictness and even rudeness in the administration of justice brought much fear, as well as luck to the Sardinians at the same time.

The growth of the career of Marcus Portius Cato from quaestor (elected in 204 BC)³⁶ to consul (195 BC) through the functions of aedile (199 BC) and praetor (198 BC) comes relatively fast as a result of his confirmation as extremely capable military commander. Namely, he was elected as censor in 184 BC, and consul in 195 when he made the biggest victories in Spain.

However, it is in the role of censor that Cato was largely capable to realise his ideals related to the “simple life” whose devotee was himself. As guardian of the morality, he stood for punishing anyone who misuses public goods³⁷, as well as anyone who acts contrary to the moral norms

³³ It is interesting that he continued to drink the same wine and ate the same food as his servants when he became magistrate.

³⁴ Especially known for his defeat by Hannibal at Zama.

³⁵ When he was a governor of Sardinia.

³⁶ He performed this function during the Second Punic war against Hannibal and Carthage.

³⁷ He established norms for the demolition of all private facilities which were on state property, cutting all pipes from the public water supply network used for illegal watering, and taxes were introduced for all luxurious goods, thus burdening the rich people with great taxation as a result of his principal commitment for minimising the luxurious costs. In this period, he performed reparation of the water supply network and constructed the Basilica Porcia. See <http://www.roman-empire.net/republic/cato-e.html>

in the family³⁸ (which it seems he took far too seriously). He opposed the abolition of Lex Oppia referring exactly to the limitation of women's spending on luxury.

However, the constant hate against the long-term enemy of Rome, Carthage, has the most significant place in his biography. He, like no one else, constantly demanded and wished for the destruction of Carthage to take place as soon as possible, believing that Carthage can cause chaos in the Empire by rising again³⁹. Because of this he always finished his speeches with his "*Ceterum censeo Cartaginem esse delendam!*" before the Senate even when they were not thematically related to it.⁴⁰

Another proof of his intolerance against Carthage, as well as of his power and influence at the time, is surely the fact that his idea won against the idea of Publius Scipio Nasica, and the enemy Carthage was destroyed in the Third Punic War (149-146 BC). In history, he will be remembered as one of the biggest supporters of the plunder and the biggest initiator of the future war against Carthage.

His biography states the fact that he was married twice, first time to Licinia, with whom he had his son Porcius Cato Lucianus⁴¹ and second time⁴² (following the death of his first wife), when he was already in his old age, to young slave whose father previously served at him, with whom he had his son Portius Cato Salonianus⁴³.

2.3. The Rhetoric of Cato the Elder

From some of the reviews of the life and work of Cato the Elder it can be established that maybe his work as literary man and orator deserves more attention than his career as soldier or magistrate.

Due to his understandings on the way of life for which he strongly stood for and according to the characteristics of its rhetoric, it can be freely established that Cato the Elder, as influential figure in Rome, is typical representative of the extremely conservative patrician type. The definition of Cato on the rhetoric "*Vir bonus eloquentiae peritus*" i.e. "only good man can be orator" shows his attitude that the rhetoric is conditioned by the ethics and that the moral component of the person who wants to be good orator is condition sine qua non⁴⁴.

³⁸ Example of this is when he managed to expel Manilius who was a candidate for consul because he hugged his wife in public, before their own daughter! Ibid

³⁹ There is an anecdote according to which he deliberately dropped from his hands a fig from Libya and was marvelling its size when he bent to take it. He used the situation to warn that the fruit's country of origin is at the distance of only three days by sea.

⁴⁰ "I still believe that Carthage should be destroyed"

⁴¹ Who died before his father

⁴² Although, according to the Roman tradition, this behaviour was worth of mockery.

⁴³ Who got his surname according to his grandfather by his mother's side. His son, Marcus, was grandfather of Cato the philosopher, who was one of the most famous persons of his time

⁴⁴ This view was completely accepted by Quintilian, who, starting from this definition, further develops the necessary connection that needs to exist between the ethics and rhetoric in his schoolbook.

His speeches before the Senate included traditional beliefs in terms of certain issues from the everyday life. He always stood for the established custom and moral component, opposing the influences brought by the new time and the new constellation of relations.

Here, we should emphasize the rejection of the influence of the Greek culture for which he believed that dangerously threatens to undermine the traditional Roman education and upbringing of the youth, thus the strong Roman tradition⁴⁵. Therefore, new, open-minded understandings of certain issues were absolutely unacceptable to him.

From his speeches it can be clearly noticed that he is a supporter of the attitude that innate ability is enough to be a good orator because of which he opposed the schools of rhetoric⁴⁶. He is famous for his thought “*Rem tene, verba sequentur*” or “*Grasp the subject, the words will follow*”, without need of special editing of the speech.

According to Cicero, there were around hundred and fifty speeches of Cato the Elder, but only small part of them is preserved. Their content was primarily determined by Cato’s attitude towards some issues. Often they referred to his opposing to women’s luxury costs⁴⁷, as well as the glorification of the ancestors and the tradition.

Besides this, due to the fact that his primary occupation was agriculture, he is an author of such handbook “*De Agricultura*” or “*De Re Rustica*” full of advices on the management of the agricultural household⁴⁸. From historical aspect, the importance of this handbook is surely great since it gives clear picture of the common habits and relations in one agricultural family at the time.

His most important work is “*Origines*”, which is the history of Rome from its earliest days. It contains information on the historical development of some of the Italian cities. By creating this work, Cato the Elder will qualify himself as the first author of the Rome history in Latin.

He also appears as the author of a collection of maxims, “*Praecepta ad Filium*”, which should have been useful for his son, as well as a collection of rules referring to the everyday life, written in verses under the name “*Carmen de Moribus*”.⁴⁹

In terms of his style of expression, as abovementioned, he always relied on his natural talent for oratory. He believed that no special preparation or special education is needed to be successful orator, so there is certain power and authority in his speeches, but there is also a lack of fine composition which can be achieved only by learning⁵⁰.

He can be attributed with another immanent component of modern propaganda - that is the persistent repetition which ultimately leads to persuasion of the auditorium. Namely, the abovementioned custom of

⁴⁵ See <http://www.nndb.com/people/212/000095924/>

⁴⁶ Cato himself was self-taught and formally uneducated orator.

⁴⁷ See above in the part dedicated to his biography Lex Oppia

⁴⁸ He kept the attitude that the old and feeble slaves should be sold, wage workers should be used for the heavy works and good neighborly relations should be maintained. He qualifies farmers as strongest, bravest and most devoted people.

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Обрад Станојевић, Сима Аврамовић op.cit , 79

Cato to end each speech with his commitment for the destruction of Carthage, results in its defeat at the end.⁵¹

In summary, “two sides of the medal” can be clearly seen in the rhetoric of Cato the Elder. On one side there is the strictness, strength and the authority of his speeches especially because of the image of him as strict traditionalist, and on the other side there is permeation with deep sensitive elements which caused outburst of emotions among listeners.

Instead of Conclusion

We will begin the conclusion of this short review with a famous quote from Cato, who when asked what his thoughts about the unveiling of his monument are, he said: *“After I’m dead, I’d rather have people ask why I have no monument than why I have one”*.

Behind this thought, again, there is on one side his strictness and integrity, and on the other side there is the inspiration of the deep thoughts in his speeches. Strictly keeping to the simple and strict way of life, he strives for man’s value to be recognised by the environment without personal affirmation, which obviously is the case with his life⁵².

The emphasis on the value as a person can be seen in his thought *“Wise men profit more from fools than fools from wise men; for the wise men shun the mistakes of fools, but fools do not imitate the successes of the wise”*.

He shows his expressive ability for self-control and reservation in the following thoughts *“Patience is the greatest of all virtues”*, or *“The first virtue is to restrain the tongue; he approaches nearest to gods who knows how to be silent, even though he is in the right.”*

Finally, when we take into account all of his activity and contribution to the benefit of his country due to his service, as well as his prominence as orator and influential figure of the time, we can say that Cato the Elder was a man of great merit for the preservation of the Roman tradition, - and the strengthening the spirit of the nation.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Which is not the case with the largest part of the later most distinguished orators who did not missed any opportunity to express praise and to note their personal merits. For example, such is the case of Cicero 1.2.

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