

# Classical Rhetoric in the Legal Speeches of John Philpot Curran

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John Philpot Curran was an important Irish lawyer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Curran was taught the classical system of rhetoric at Trinity College, under the tutelage of Thomas Leland. This article examines how both classical rhetorical theory, and classical orations by Cicero and Demosthenes, influenced the rhetorical strategy employed by Curran to argue some of his most important criminal cases. The analysis discusses Curran's forensic practice in each of the five classical offices of the orator: Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery. Of special note is the manner in which Curran imitated passages from classical orations as a way of suggesting an attitude for his hearers toward the cases he argued. The article demonstrates the practical importance of the classics in Irish legal culture at the turn of the nineteenth century.

“The classical tradition has influenced the ideals, actions, and thoughts of the Irish continuously for more than fifteen centuries,” observed W. B. Stanford in his masterful work *Ireland and the Classical Tradition*. “For centuries,” he notes, “no Irish schoolboy or university student could escape from the classics” (vii). John Philpot Curran not only could not escape from the classics, but, according to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, he in fact “was an ardent classical scholar, and never allowed his knowledge to fall into disuse in after life” (Vol. V, 333). This article will focus specifically on how Curran’s classical reading, especially in rhetoric and oratory, influenced his own forensic practice as a lawyer in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Ireland.

In 1761, when Curran was still a schoolboy of eleven years, Sir John Carr recorded his surprise at the widespread classical learning among the Irish peasantry. Even a poor lad, “under the appearance of the most abject poverty,” he wrote, “was well acquainted with the best Latin poets, had read most of the Historians, and was then studying the orations of Cicero” (Stanford, 25). Ireland in the age of Curran was a place where, in the words of Sir Robert Peel, “the young peasants . . . run about in rags with a Cicero or a Virgil under their arms” (Stanford, 25).

Reading of the classics in Ireland was sanctioned by the highest educational authorities. In 1759, when Curran himself was attending grammar school, Trinity college recommended a list of classical authors to be read by Dublin schoolboys. The list included, among other ancient authors, Homer, Xenophon, Sallust, Horace, Ovid, Virgil, and “Cicero’s Orations against Catiline.” Moreover, the Trinity faculty recommended to the Dublin schoolmasters “that you instruct your scholars early in quantity, and

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Such parallels by Curran are not mere ornament. The analogy acts as a master trope, providing a perspective from which he would encourage the classically trained to view his defense of Rowan. It suggests that Rowan, like Cicero's Milo, was a patriot serving the interests of his country. It implies further that Curran, like Cicero, was a virtuous advocate struggling with eloquence against the forces of tyranny and arms.

But the case for a classical influence on Curran does not need to rest solely on situational analogies. Substantial historical and textual evidence supports the claim that Curran saw his task as a classical forensic effort. Classical rhetorical doctrine divides the art of public speaking into five parts: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. This was the doctrine that Curran was taught at Trinity, and he seems to have mastered each of the offices in his own practice.

At this distance, it is of course difficult to assess Curran's delivery. Yet it is interesting to note a parallel between the development of his delivery skills and those of Demosthenes. In Plutarch's life of Demosthenes, Curran would have read how the Athenian, at first, had "a certain weakness of voice and indistinctness of speech and shortness of breath which disturbed the sense of what he said by disjoining his sentences" (Plutarch, *Demosthenes* vi.3). Yet Demosthenes overcame these weaknesses by "every day without exception" exercising to "form his action and cultivate his voice" (vii.3). He compensated for his "bodily deficiencies" and improved his "indistinctness and lisping" by "taking pebbles in his mouth and then reciting speeches" and by "discouraging while running or going up steep places." Moreover, to improve his action and gesture, "he had in his house a large looking-glass, and in front of this he used to stand and go through his exercises in declamation" (xi. 1-2).

Curran appears to have closely followed Demosthenes' example in his own efforts to improve his rhetorical delivery. According to Curran's son, his father's "enunciation was naturally impeded, his voice shrill and his accent strongly provincial." It was also the case that "his person was without dignity or grace—short, slender and inelegantly proportioned." Yet "to remove these defects, he adopted the practice of daily reading aloud, slowly and distinctly" and "recited perpetually before a mirror." These exercises, as they helped Demosthenes achieve fame, allowed Curran to cultivate "the clearness of articulation, and a peculiar, uninterrupted, graduated intonation; which whatever was the subject, whether tender or impassioned, melodised every period" (Curran, 50).

Neither can we know for certain if Curran followed any particular classical exercise to develop his memory for long orations. But it has been reliably reported that his speech for Rowan, transcribed to seventy-seven pages in the Whittier edition of Curran's works, was delivered from a note page containing thirty words: "To arms—Second. Reform—Third. Catholic Emancipation—Fourth. Convention—Now unlawful—consequence of conviction—Trial before revolution—Drowned—Lambert—Muir—Character of R.—Furnace etc. Rebellion smothered stalks—Redeeming spirit." According to Hale, Curran typically "composed his speeches walking about the shrubberies at Rathfarnham, constantly polishing a phrase and committing it to memory" (Hale, 111).

Stylistically, there are a number of parallels between Curran's oratory and that of the great classical orators. Curran's orations are frequently marked by the use of classical figures and constructions—antithesis for example, and rhetorical questions. But most interesting are those instances in Curran's oratory where style becomes a token of a larger situational and strategic analogy. Curran imitates the rhetoric Cicero or Demosthenes used to meet specific demands in the most familiar of their eloquent

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