

Christopher Burden-Strevens: *Cassius Dio's Speeches and the Collapse of the Roman Republic*. The *Roman History*, Books 3–56. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2020 (Historiography of Rome and Its Empire 7). XIX, 340 p. € 121.00/\$ 146.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-37360-0.

Amongst those senators to fall victim to the judicial terror of the reign of Domitian figures a certain Mettius Pompusianus, who was accused of aiming to usurp the throne. One of the proofs adduced was that he carried around with himself an anthology of speeches of kings and leaders excerpted from Livy's history of Rome (Suet. Dom. 10,3). Pompusianus lived a full century before Cassius Dio, but this episode nicely epitomises the significance attributed to speeches in works of history and adumbrates what was to be a particular and distinctive feature of Dio's own work. With his thoughtful and stimulating monograph, Christopher Burden-Strevens makes an attractive case for taking the well-known phenomenon of extended speeches in the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio as an integral, functioning part of that historical work. Alien to modern taste, these speeches have met with disparagement and a lack of understanding in general, and they have commonly been shunted to the side in discussions of Cassius Dio as a historian. Post-modernism with its new literary aesthetic has created an occasion for a more sympathetic evaluation, however, and Burden-Strevens has brilliantly seized the opportunity. Providing a thorough review of the orations that survive (from Books 3 to 56), Burden-Strevens illustrates in systematic fashion how the content of those speeches is intimately related to the narrative in which they are embedded.

The first chapter ("Introduction": 1–35) sets the stage by introducing the protagonist of this monograph, contextualising his work as both a senator under the Antonine and Severan dynasties and an author of the Second Sophistic, and setting forth the main thesis of the volume. The primary object of study, Cassius Dio's treatment of the collapse of the Republic, is memorably evoked by means of a contrast drawn between the historian's handling of speech on the two occasions of Roman negotiations with the Epirote monarch Pyrrhus (280 BCE) and the funeral of the assassinated Julius Caesar (44 BCE): an evolution from forthright simplicity to studied duplicity and rhetorical refinement is manifest in two pieces that are indisputably the work of Dio himself. Calling into question the modern tendency to dismiss the speeches, Burden-Strevens draws attention to the degree to which the *Roman*

History is invested in formal speeches: they form virtually 25% of Books 36–56. In the absence of any overarching analysis offered by the historian in his own voice as narrator, these speeches interact with the narrative so as to lead the attentive reader to an understanding of the causes for the failure of the Republic and the success of the Principate. While a child of the Second Sophistic, however, Cassius Dio was also devoted to the idea of imperial Rome and an experienced and realistic administrator. He was well aware of the power of speech, for ill as well as good. Consequently, an intratextual reading such as that attempted here allows us to appreciate the frequent employment of foreshadowing (*prolepsis*) and backward reflection (*analepsis*) as a means of historical explanation.

Dedicated to interpretative methodology and the issue of the composition of the speeches of the *Roman History*, the second chapter (“Method”: 36–148) is programmatic in nature and offers a clear vision of the three precise problems that Burden-Strevens addresses in this monograph. One problem is the relationship between Cassius Dio’s speeches and their narrative setting, a second is the relationship between these speeches and the sources that Dio used for the *Roman History*, and a third is the relationship between Dio’s rhetorical education and his historiography. Through various case-studies, Burden-Strevens argues for viewing the speeches as usually (allowing for two exceptions) forming a coherent whole with the narrative to which they belong. By means of *analepsis* and *prolepsis*, Cassius Dio creates a meaningful resonance between speeches and narrative. Likewise through case-studies and the comparison of texts, Burden-Strevens explores the relationship between Dio’s speeches and their putative models. While allowing for the fictitious nature of all of Dio’s speeches, Burden-Strevens invites readers to a sympathetic understanding of their achievement, identifying verisimilitude as a goal for which Dio consistently strove. Last but not least, through close attention to language and structure, Burden-Strevens makes a persuasive case for understanding the speeches of the *Roman History* as profoundly informed by contemporary rhetorical education and its emphasis upon personal morality. Without the world of the *progymnasmata*, in short, the speeches of Cassius Dio are inconceivable. Such are the positions or theses argued in this second chapter.

With the third chapter (“Oratory”: 149–191), Burden-Strevens arrives at the heart of the matter and moves to put into practice the method that he out-

lined in the preceding chapter. This chapter in effect constitutes a chronological survey of Dio's treatment of oratory over the course of the *Roman History*, identifying enduring traits and distinctive features as the narrative progresses from the Kings to the Republic to the Principate. Building upon colleagues' prior work on Cassius Dio that has been published in the *Historiography of Rome and its Empire* series of which this monograph is a part, Burden-Strevens not only examines the growing disjuncture between word and reality that contributed to the demise of the Republic, but also perceptively observes a strong realistic vein in Dio's handling of oratory and events under the Kings and further highlights the new rhetoric introduced by the advent of the Principate. To that end he has divided this chapter into three parts, each dedicated to a specific period of Roman history as defined by the constitutional situation: Kings, Republic, Empire. Such an approach well illustrates Dio's historiography on the one hand and the evolving history of oratory at Rome and its role in Roman politics on the other. [Indeed, the subtitle for this monograph ought arguably to have referred to Books 1–56 (cf. p. XIII describing the tables).] This admirably shows that there is a clear presence of oratory (strongly engaged with the narrative, even if offering nothing that might be recognised by a modern history of ancient Rome as possessing any 'factual value') from the very first book of the *Roman History*.

The fourth chapter ("Morality": 192–247) is divided into four sections that successively discuss the vices of envy (*φθόνος*), ambition (*φιλοτιμία*), and covetousness (*ἐπιθυμία*) and their successful curbing by means of the constitutional change effected through the establishment of the Principate by Augustus. Ever alert to ironic dissonance arising from the interplay between the speeches and the narrative in which they are embedded, Burden-Strevens makes a persuasive case for Dio's using speeches and narrative to highlight how these vices came to influence and dominate public discourse in the wake of Roman imperialist adventures overseas. Statistics and a close reading of the text time and time again dovetail in revealing the consistency of Dio's historiographical analysis that the changed circumstances of the imperial Republic gave free play to Roman leaders' moral failings and that these in turn led ineluctably to the crisis of the dynasts, thereby necessitating the establishment of a monarchy capable of repressing unbridled competition and restoring stability. Scholars have long focussed (rightly) on the virtues expected of rulers in the Graeco-Roman world and how these were manifested in public life. However, Burden-Strevens's focus upon the vices of Roman

leaders as represented by Cassius Dio brings a welcome corrective as it were, in complementary fashion highlighting what the historian saw as the causes of the constitutional crisis of the late Republic and nicely explaining why he and his peers preferred *μοναρχία* to *δημοκρατία* in spite of the rhetoric valorising the *libera res publica*. Constitutional change resulted in the Principate effectively meant stricter limits on key private vices and their public consequences.

The fifth chapter (“Institutions & Empire”: 248–305) is divided into three sections that examine successively Dio’s treatment of instability arising from the prorogation of extraordinary commands and iteration of magistracies, the potentiality of the dictatorship as opposed to the tendency towards tyranny nurtured by provincial commands, and the tension between tradition and innovation that found resolution in the Principate of Augustus. Burden-Stevens illustrates how fundamental the theme of *imperii consuetudo* (to use the felicitous expression that he has adopted from Suetonius, who in turn took it from an otherwise unidentified historian dealing with Caesar’s descent into tyranny)¹ is to Dio’s historiographical analysis of the last century of the Republic. Running like a scarlet thread through speeches attributed by Dio to a series of Roman leaders extending from Scipio Aemilianus to Maecenas is the well-founded concern about the destabilising effect that Rome’s Mediterranean empire was having upon the city’s Republican institutions. An institution that is evaluated in a positive light by Cassius Dio, the dictatorship contained the seeds to an eventual solution to this problem. However, rooted as it was in the immediate, local concerns of the world of the city-state and for that reason severely limited in time, the classical form of the dictatorship was inadequate to dealing with the crises of an overseas empire and the experiments that Sulla and Caesar made in their attempts to modify this institution proved unsuccessful because of the resistance that they provoked. Hence, it remained for Augustus to cut the Gordian knot by means of a charade in which he despoiled his person of the outward guise

1 Surely this individual is to be identified with the anti-Caesarian historian that has persuasively been argued to be the source of Dio’s account of Caesar’s military operations in Gaul: G. Zecchini: *Cassio Dione e la guerra gallica di Cesare*. Milano 1978 (Pubblicazioni della Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Scienze storiche 19). Cf. G. Zecchini: *Storia della storiografia romana*. Roma 2016 (Manuali Laterza 354), 186 (“l’unico indipendente e alternativo ai *Commentarii*”).

of power even while arrogating to himself the reality of power in its multiple forms.

A sixth and final chapter (“Epilogue”: 306–317) elegantly uses the death of Augustus for a review of that ruler’s achievement and a summation of this monograph’s contribution to the debate over the nature of Cassius Dio’s historiography. That Augustus had achieved a more perfect form of constitution allowing for republican government without factional strife and monarchy without enslavement is, in effect, the ancient historian’s sentence. Complementing and elaborating upon this, however, is the *laudatio funebris* delivered by Tiberius that Dio reports. That provides a fitting final demonstration of the thesis argued persuasively and at length by Burden-Strevens as regards the function of formal speeches within the *Roman History*.

There are problems, but the fundamental thesis merits serious attention. Treating the speeches as little more than an intermezzo between spectacles never was a satisfactory interpretative approach to the *Roman History*, even if *faute de mieux* that is precisely what many scholars have done. It is the virtue of this monograph to have demonstrated how intimately linked the speeches are to their narrative contexts. While the search for ‘hard’ historical facts in the speeches of the *Roman History* is arguably far more difficult than in the case of the *Panegyrici Latini*, and likely in vain, no one now can claim that the speeches are irrelevant. On the other hand, Burden-Strevens shows a naïve trust in his subject (*viz.* Cassius Dio) that is methodologically indefensible. When Dio claims to have read virtually everything that had been written on Roman history, we would do well to take that claim with a grain of salt and treat it as though it had been made by a student or colleague.² Moreover, it is of the essence to avoid treating Cassius Dio as though he were our alter ego. As a case in point, the reviewer observes that the evidence overall strongly suggests that Dio not only knew well the truth-value of books written by public figures and rulers, but also in practice avoided using them as sources to talk about their own accomplishments. So, we should be extremely hesitant to credit Dio with reading such primary sources as the *commentarii* of Julius Caesar and the *Res Gestae divi Augusti*. The apparent exception constituted by the use of Cicero’s *Philippicae* is in fact no exception, for

2 For a likewise sceptical reading, see J. Rich: Appian, Cassius Dio and Seneca the Elder. In: M. C. Scappaticcio (ed.): *Seneca the Elder and his Rediscovered *Historiae ab initio bellorum civilium**. New Perspectives on Early-Imperial Roman Historiography. Berlin 2020, 329–354, here 331 (“a gross exaggeration”).

Cicero provided Dio with an oppositional view of the actions of M. Antonius that was fundamentally hostile and therefore intrinsically more deserving of credence. Likewise, while we rely heavily upon Suetonius' biographies of the Caesars today and it is inconceivable to teach a course in Roman history without them, the odds are close to nil that Dio paid any serious attention to the work of that equestrian relater of tittle-tattle. It is far more likely that Cassius Dio, a man of his times and no less influenced by snobbish class awareness, relied upon the same sources that had been utilised by Suetonius. Last but not least, there is the problem posed by what has not survived or survives in hardly discernible format. An example of this is posed by Cassius Dio's treatment of the figure of the elder Scipio Africanus.³ From what little survives of Books 17–18, it is clear that Dio was alert to the tyrannical possibility inherent in Scipio's unorthodox career trajectory. There also survives the fragment of a speech that arguably points to an extended oration on the occasion of the suppression of the mutiny at Sucro. Therefore, it was arguably not on the occasion of the Third Punic War, but already in the course of the Second Punic War (if not earlier) that Cassius Dio identified the danger of extraordinary commands and the long-term constitutional problems posed by the creation of overseas provinces. None of these and other, similar problems affects the overall thrust of the thesis of Burden-Strevens, but there is clear scope for caution and improvement.⁴

History is an imaginative undertaking, particularly insofar as it belongs to the realm of literature, and the signal contribution made by this monograph is its having reminded us of how Cassius Dio, like Thucydides, composed his work with a view to training present and future generations for participation in public life. Dio's especial contribution (by way of addition, as opposed to

3 The index (339) is missing a reference to p. 258 n. 39, where Burden-Strevens acknowledges *en passant* the important contribution of Marianne Coudry on this subject. Paradoxically, little is said in spite of its having been noted also in the introduction (20). Readers will wish to consult: M. Coudry: 'The "Great Men" of the Middle Republic in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*'. In: C. Burden-Strevens/M. O. Lindholmer (eds.): *Cassius Dio's Forgotten History of Early Rome. The Roman History, Books 1–21*. Leiden/Boston 2019 (*Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* 3), 126–164, esp. 131–140 and 155–157 (Table 1). See also in the same volume: J. Rich: 'Speech in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Books 1–35. 217–284, esp. 269.

4 Certain *bêtises* somehow managed to escape the watchful eyes of editors, e.g. Severus felicitating Cassius Dio upon his "penmanship" (22) and Faustus Cornelius Sulla rebaptised variously as C. Memmius Faustus (177) and L. Memmius Faustus (337).

the subtraction involved in abridging swathes of narrative), the speeches are demonstrated by Burden-Strevens to play a fundamental role in helping the reader to make sense of the past. It is to be hoped that future work on the Second Sophistic, education, and *Quellenforschung* will pursue the promising route of investigation opened up by Burden-Strevens in this fine monograph.

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