

ESSAY 5

“Discuss the significance of Roman values: Vice and Virtue in Cicero’s *In Verrem II*, 5”

All arguments coerce a response from the mind. However, the most influential arguments not only compel the mind but more importantly the heart. Indeed, Cicero’s “*In Verrem II*” rose to prominence as a literary paradigm of an effective argument in the Roman world not only because of its prime rhetorical style but also because of Cicero’s ability to stir the hearts of the Roman audience through his use of Roman values: vice and virtue.

It is the near innate nature of these values within the Roman public which allowed Cicero to draw such an intense emotional response and he fittingly capitalised on their enculturation within Roman society in two ways. One, by creating fear towards Verres as a threat to the fabric of Roman civilisation and two, by inducing hatred towards Verres’ character as not merely immoral but harbouring every vice¹.

The influence of Cicero’s speech relied on the importance of Roman values to the populace. From the beginnings of the Roman world, Greek values in the writings of philosophers like Plato and Thucydides were adopted and modified by the Romans, becoming revered within the society as yardsticks for personal development and key elements to the progress of society as a whole².

These values became the *mos maiorum*, traditional customs which dictated all aspects of Roman life³. Indeed, the importance of these values in Roman society is evident in their deification, with virtues personified as Gods such as *Clementia* the goddess of mercy and *Pietas* the goddess of duty. Similarly, these values were inherent in the writings of moralistic historians like Livy and Polybius⁴ and the most prominent Roman tales such as that of Aeneas, which projected moral exemplars, the epitomes of certain virtues or vice, as moulds to either follow or avoid for the individual⁵.

Certainly, during the time of the Roman republic, it was common place for personal attacks to be founded on contrasting rivals to exemplars of such culturally cemented values drawn from Roman history, prominent figures like Gaius Mucius Scaevola, the archetype of *gravitas*⁶, and Aeneas, that of *pietas*⁷. Likewise, Cicero does not hesitate to contrast Verres to moral exemplars, using the deep sense of credence towards Roman values within the people as a conduit into their hearts.

¹ Tatum, J, *Cicero’s prosecution of Gaius Verres*, Lecture, 2nd June 2009.

² Severa, A. T., *Virtues*, temple of Religio Romana 2009 <<http://www.religioromana.net/virtues.htm>>

³ Cancik, H and Schneider H, *Brill’s New Pauly*, Antiquity volumes, 2008 Brill Online, Brill.

⁴ Champion C., Review: “Arthur M. Eckstein, *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995”, Bryn Mawr Classical Review.

⁵ Kraus, C.S, *Latin historians*, Oxford; NY; OUP, 1997 p55

⁶ Conway, I. R and Walters, C (eds.) *Ab Urbe Condita. ii. 12* Oxford University Press, 1914:
<<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy/liv.2.shtml>>

⁷ Williams, R. D., *Aeneas and the Roman Hero*, London: Bristol Classical Press, 1999 pp. 29-30

Founded on this comparison of Verres to moral exemplar, Cicero paints him as a veritable threat to the *mos maiorum*, the cornerstone of Roman conduct, tradition and the believed root of Rome's power and refinement over other cultures¹. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his contrast of Verres to Publius Servilius, a Roman general whom Cicero portrays as having *dignitas*, which stemmed from other virtues like *gravitas* and *pietas*.

While Cicero attributes Servilius' *dignitas*, apparent in his "ipse triumphus", (II, 5, 66) which was, "gratissimus populo Romano fuit et iucundissimus", (II, 5, 66) to his *gravitas*, one's sense of responsibility to duty, as he, "hoc iucundissimum spectaculum omnibus victorum captorumque hostium praebebat", (II, 5, 66) Verres' distinct lack of such *gravitas* is emphasised by Cicero's rhetorical questions, "hoc tu quam ob rem non fecisti?" (II, 5, 67) illustrating Verres' behaviour as, "novo more" (II, 5, 67). The significance of this would not have been lost to the Roman people, as Cicero implies Verres' usurpation of the *mos maiorum* on the back of, "novo more". Here, Cicero presents Verres as a primary instigator in the erosion of the values which Cicero himself said, "won the Roman people its fame, and this city its ever-lasting glory"² and thus an existential threat to the Republic itself.

However, Cicero not only uses Roman values to create fear towards Verres as a threat to Roman traditions and society but also as a moral measure for him, against which Cicero could clearly establish his lack of moral fibre, inciting hatred towards his character. Indeed, Cicero's evocation of hatred towards Verres was paramount to the prosecution as his material case was often un-persuasive, mundanely repeating the same line of accusation against Verres' extortion³. Evidently, Cicero felt it necessary to drive the case forward not just by proving that Verres stole but that he possessed every vice and lacked every virtue⁴. In this, Cicero suggests that even if Verres was innocent, he was still a bad Roman who deserved to be punished.

Cicero begins by attacking Verres' *virtus*, a quality the poet Gaius Lucilius said was, "for a man to know what is good, evil, useless, shameful, or dishonourable"⁵. From the opening, Cicero characterises Verres in such negative light with his open lack of this quality emphasised by the superlative as he states, "apertissime C. Verres sicilia sacra profanaque omnia et privatim et publice spoliavit" (II, 5, 1) while the harsh s and p alliteration induces a scornful tone at such behaviour. This scornful tone continues as Cicero assails Verres' *avaritia* emphasised by the gerunds, "versatusque sit sine ulla non modo religione verum etiam dissimulatione in omni genere furandi atque praedandi" (II, 5, 1).

¹ Cancik, H and Schneider H, *op cit.* Antiquity volumes

² Yonge C. D. 1908, *In defence of Murena*, 22. Bell's Classical translations, London: Bell.

³ Tatum, J. *op cit.*

⁴ Tatum, J. *op cit.*

⁵ Ward, A., Heichelheim, F. and Yeo, C. *A History of the Roman People*. 4th Ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003 p. 57

Similarly, Cicero portrays Verres as lacking *clementia* as he treats the captured pirates, “si qui senes ac deformes errant” (II, 5, 64). Equally, Verres’ dearth of *industria* is not overlooked as Cicero articulates, “cum mulierculis iacebat ebrius” (II, 5, 63) whilst also highlighting the absence of *frugalitas* within his temperament, deficiencies Romans would have despised.

Nevertheless, it was perhaps the exposé of Verres’ disregard for *iustitia* which evoked the most disdain towards him. Cicero stresses Verres complete lack of this by contrasting his treatment of Roman citizens as, “civibus romanis securi statim percussis”, (II, 5, 75) to that of the pirates, who had, “lucis usuram tam diuturnam” (II, 5, 75). Hatred towards Verres would have been further compounded as Cicero labels him, “iste homo nefarius”, (II, 5, 72) drawing connotations to the scant *pietas* in his treatment of Roman citizens.

However, the decisive blow to Verres character is Cicero’s depiction of his *crudelitas*, a vice seen as the worst of all¹. The monstrosity of Verres’ person coalesces with the monstrous imagery in his description as, “inflammatus scelere et furore”, (II, 5, 161) and is directly underlined in, “toto ex ore crudelitas eminebat”, (II, 5, 161) as he prepares to execute Gavius, a Roman citizen. This *crudelitas* is made more lucid by the emphatic brevity of the repetition, “crux,-crux”, as Gavius, “usuparetque nomen civitatis”, (II, 5, 162) effectively influencing the Roman audience by arousing further antipathy towards Verres.

The significance of Roman values in, “In Verrem”, stems from their enculturation and prominence within Roman society. Through these Cicero extracted the fear and hatred towards Verres in the Roman audience, stirring their hearts as well as their minds, which was tantamount to achieving Cicero’s initial aim of prosecution. Clearly, Roman values had a prominent role in providing the force and influence of Cicero’s text, elevating, “In Verrem”, as a prevailing literary standard within Roman society.

¹ Tatum, J. *op cit.*

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