

Though from his boyhood a reader and writer of verse, Cicero, unlike his friend Varro, did not compose a theoretical work on poetry and poets. His views on the subject must therefore be reconstructed from scattered references. I will explore Cicero's opinions on poetry, including its status, its genesis, its rôle in society, and some of the implicit or explicit judgments he passed about poetic quality.

Like oratory, poetry is an artificial linguistic construct in which rhythmical patterns appeal to the ear. Sometimes Cicero chooses to emphasize the similarity, as when he sees Homer as an orator (*Brut.* 40) or emphasizes that oratory, like poetry, needs variety (*Orat.* 109). More typically, however, he patrols the frontier between the genres. Cicero illustrates the difference with the story of Antimachus reading his poem and abandoned by his entire audience except for Plato; the poet continued undeterred; Demosthenes, however, Cicero adds, would be forced to stop, since by losing so many listeners he would have failed in his purpose (*Brut.* 191).

Cicero marks poetry off from history as well. Thus in the opening chapters of *De legibus* "Marcus" denies one should expect literal truth in a historical poem (1.4). But in spite of this awareness and his own creation of fictional characters in his dialogues, Cicero speaks as if the views expressed by characters are those of their authors or of the historical personages represented. Thus at *Off.* 3.82 Cicero quotes Eteocles' verses about rule as the proper goal of unjust action from Euripides' *Phoenissae* (524-25) with this comment: *capitalis Eteocles uel potius Euripides*. On the other hand, at *Off.* 1.38 Cicero quotes a speech Ennius gives to Pyrrhus as if it were an actual pronouncement by Pyrrhus.

In defending the poet Archias Cicero hints that the poet's gift comes through divine inspiration: *poetam . . . quasi diuino quodam spiritu inflari*: §18. He no doubt is thinking of the doctrine his beloved Plato propounded in the *Ion* (534d-e). He does not, however, indicate this background to the jurors, and by inserting *quasi* and *quodam* he hedges so as not to deviate too far from norms of forensic rationality; he is less guarded in his theoretical writings (*de Orat.* 2.194; *Div.* 1.80). In the same speech, while acknowledging the recreational value of literature (§16), Cicero emphasizes its social rôle in celebrating the great deeds of members of the Roman élite and hence strengthening the Roman community generally (§22).

Cicero's cites poets frequently, especially in the essays, where he follows the precedent of Greek philosophers like Zeno and Chrysippus who argued that their doctrines were in line of the views of the poets. Though in his letters he sometimes quotes Greek poets in the original, elsewhere Cicero renders or paraphrases the Greek in Latin. Euripides heads the list with ten translations, followed by Homer, rendered 9x. These preferences seem to be in line with general Roman taste. Among Roman poets Cicero had highest regard for Ennius as is shown by the honorific epithets he bestows on him and the massive number of citations. Nonetheless he pronounces Pacuvius the best Roman tragedian (*Opt. gen.* 2). There is some ambiguity about his favorite comic poet (*Att.* 7.3.10 vs. *Opt. gen.* 2). He also made no attempt to conceal his aversions: he had no use for the *cantores Euphorionis* who despised Ennius and declared that even a second lifetime would not suffice to warrant reading the lyric poets (*apud Sen. Ep.* 49.5).