

## V.—On Demosthenes' Ability to Speak Extemporaneously

ALFRED P. DORJAHN

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

In this study I have attempted to suggest three types of evidence which show that Demosthenes could speak extemporaneously. First, I have cited and discussed several passages of the *De corona* which appear to be of an extemporaneous character. These passages deal mainly with matters which Demosthenes could not well have anticipated. Next, I have presented a few passages, also from the *De corona*, which are not themselves extemporary in nature, but which seem to imply that Demosthenes could and did speak on occasion without preparation. Finally, I have noted a few passages from Aeschines' *Con. Ctes.* which seem to corroborate my view.

There exists a fairly strong tradition that Demosthenes could not speak publicly without preparation. Plutarch<sup>1</sup> relates that Demosthenes would not heed the call of the people in the assembly, that he come forward to speak, unless he had given thought to the question and prepared himself to speak on it. Also, according to Plutarch,<sup>2</sup> Demosthenes himself admitted that his speeches were "neither entirely unwritten, nor wholly written out." Further, it is recorded<sup>3</sup> that Demades frequently spoke extemporaneously in support of Demosthenes, when the latter was interrupted and shouted down by the people, but that Demosthenes never performed a similar service for Demades. The implication appears to be that Demosthenes did not possess the ability to do so.

Of course, Aeschines' assertion that Demosthenes broke down in the presence of Philip is probably the source of the whole tradition.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, Longinus,<sup>5</sup> Aelian,<sup>6</sup> and Gellius<sup>7</sup> repeat the story. There is no need for present purposes to trace fully the course of this tradition<sup>8</sup> from ancient to modern times, but one instance of its recrudescence in more recent years may be of interest

<sup>1</sup> *Demosthenes* 8.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *ibid.*<sup>4</sup> *De fals. legat.* 34 f.<sup>5</sup> *Rhetor.* 572 W.<sup>6</sup> *V.H.* 8.12.<sup>7</sup> *N.A.* 8.9.<sup>8</sup> Cf. Engelbert Drerup, *Demosthenes im Urteil des Altertums* (Würzburg, 1923) 90, note 4; 164, note 4.

to English speaking scholars. Lord Brougham, a student of eloquence, an accomplished orator, and a classical scholar, feels that "there may be some suspicion that his (i.e. Demosthenes') reluctance to trust his success to Fortune, affected his execution, perhaps in the memorable debate with Philip, of which the orator's illustrious rival has left us so lively and cutting a description."<sup>9</sup> From the oration of Aeschines *De fals. legat.*, however, it is clear that neither Demosthenes nor his fellow-ambassadors were obliged to speak extemporaneously. Aeschines states specifically that, while journeying from Athens to the court of Philip, the ambassadors discussed what should be said, and that Demosthenes in particular promised fountains of oratory with reference to the Athenian claims to Amphipolis and the origin of the war.<sup>10</sup> When the ambassadors arrived, they made further preparations for their interview with Philip.<sup>11</sup> Finally, they presented their case. Demosthenes spoke last. He delivered his proem, but soon thereafter he began to falter, and finally he collapsed altogether.<sup>12</sup> Thereupon Philip urged Demosthenes to "have courage, recall his speech, and deliver it as he had prepared it (ὡς προείλετο)." But Demosthenes had forgotten what he had written (τῶν γεγραμμένων).<sup>13</sup> Since, then, Demosthenes had a subject assigned to him beforehand, had made preparations to speak on it, and had written something out, this anecdote with Philip has no bearing on the question of Demosthenes' ability, or inability, to speak extemporaneously.

## I

The simplest approach to the problem appeared to me to lie in an examination of one of his longer and more important speeches. Accordingly, I chose his *De corona*, for here, I felt, he would avoid extemporization, if he had little or no ability to indulge in it. I shall now cite and comment briefly on a number of passages, which appear to me to have been uttered extemporaneously:

9-11. Aeschines spoke first, inasmuch as he was the plaintiff. Now Demosthenes learned for the first time with certainty of various irrelevant matters, which Aeschines included in his speech.

<sup>9</sup> *Dissertations and Addresses* (London and Glasgow, 1856) 175.

<sup>10</sup> *De fals. legat.* 21.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

The former explains that he will not be led astray by the latter's calumnies, but will deal with relevant matters first.

34. Here again Demosthenes reminds the dicasts that his opponent has brought in many matters not pertaining to the issue, and has, therefore, compelled him to reply to these imputations.

50-52. This passage has an especially extemporaneous character, for Demosthenes quotes, or at least pretends to quote, specific words from Aeschines' speech.

56. Demosthenes says that he will answer the prosecutor's charges in the same order in which they were made. He could not have known the order, until he had heard the actual speech. This remark, therefore, and perhaps much that follows it, was inserted on the spur of the moment.

59. Demosthenes again excuses himself for appearing to stray from the indictment, on the ground that Aeschines' charges compel him to discuss Hellenic policy.

70. Demosthenes refers to a specific, though insignificant, charge which had been made by Aeschines. He could hardly have surmised that his opponent would bring in Serrium, Doriscus, and Peparethus, and blame him for a course of action that had been instituted by Eubulus, Aristophon, and Diopieithes.

82. In *Con. Ctes.* 218, Aeschines asserts that Demosthenes is silent when he has pocketed his bribe, but shouts out when he has spent it. Here Demosthenes makes his reply, such as it is, to the charge, saying: "Aeschines bawls out all the time, and only a sentence of disfranchisement as a result of this suit can shut his mouth."

95-101. This passage deals largely with events antedating Demosthenes' political activity, and was inspired by Aeschines' alleged falsehoods concerning the Euboeans and Byzantines; it has the earmarks of an extemporized digression, provoked by Aeschines' remarks, which could not well have been anticipated by Demosthenes in his prepared speech.

111. To be sure, the laws involved in a suit were posted, and much, if not all, of the evidence was revealed at the *anakrisis*, but only the speech of the plaintiff could reveal how Aeschines would employ this material. Demosthenes could not have prepared his remarks until he had heard the speech in court.

121. This section refers to Aeschines' alleged definition of a patriotic statesman, as well as to his personal invective hurled at Demosthenes. Also, Demosthenes remarks that Aeschines shouted "as from a wagon," a reference to the unbridled conduct which prevailed at the Eleusinia, Anthesteria, and Dionysia. How could Demosthenes have known of this unseemly shouting and ribald conduct, before he had heard Aeschines' speech?

126. At this point the dicasts manifested a favorable attitude toward Demosthenes, so that the latter is prompted to say that a just verdict has been indicated. Surely, these words were inter-

jected extemporaneously. Probably the insertion runs through section 128, for Demosthenes, encouraged by the attitude of the dicasts, felt sure that he could now indulge safely in derogatory remarks on his opponent's character. When Demosthenes uses the words *λόγους τινὰς διασύρει*, he may well be thinking of sections 72 and 166 in the oration *Con. Ctes.*

227. Here Demosthenes is referring directly to *Con. Ctes.* 59. The extemporization probably extends beyond this section.

251. In *Con. Ctes.* 194, Aeschines remarks that Cephalus was never indicted in a public suit. Now Demosthenes replies to that statement, and, by a natural transition, discusses fortune, and compares his life with that of his hated rival. Much of this material may well have been composed and inserted on the spur of the moment.

276. This appears to be Demosthenes' answer to sections 16 and 207 of the oration *Con. Ctes.*

291. Demosthenes points out that Aeschines shed no tears and showed no emotion when he described Athenian disaster. This statement could not have been made before Aeschines had delivered his speech.

299 f. Immediately after the defeat of Chaeronea, even tombstones were used to repair the walls of Athens. This was strictly an emergency measure. Later the task was carried out systematically by Demosthenes. In *Con. Ctes.* 236, Aeschines confuses, perhaps deliberately, the two occasions. Here Demosthenes gives his answer to the unfounded charge.

The foregoing passages, and some that have not been cited, have an extemporaneous appearance. Perhaps some scholars will prefer to believe that these passages were added after the trial, in the final redaction of the speech. Others may incline to the opinion that Demosthenes had ample opportunity, in the long interval between the institution of the suit and the day of the trial, to learn pretty thoroughly what his opponent would say.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, there was no court-reporter in ancient Athens, who recorded the *ipsissima verba* of the litigants. Such considerations, however, have no bearing on the present problem. The simple fact is that many contemporaries, who knew Demosthenes well, who knew his strong as well as his weak points, would read the published speech. If, therefore, Demosthenes had been notoriously incompetent as an extemporizer, neither the orator himself nor a friendly editor would have permitted any passages that appear to have been composed

<sup>14</sup> Cf. my article, "Anticipation of Arguments in Athenian Courts," *TAPhA* 66 (1935) 274-295.

on the spur of the moment to appear in the published version of the speech. For the present problem, then, it matters little how closely our version of the *De corona* approaches the actual speech that was delivered before the dicasts or how much it differs from it. All that counts is this: the *De corona*, in its published form, cannot contain any passages which require qualities of oratory that Demosthenes did not possess. Therefore, if any passage, or passages, in this oration appear to have been composed on the spur of the moment, we must be prepared for the possibility that Demosthenes could and did speak extemporaneously with at least moderate success.

## II

There are two more passages in the *De corona* to which special attention should be directed, not because they appear to be extemporizations, but because they seem to imply that Demosthenes could, and did, speak without preparation, when the occasion demanded it. The passages are the following:

169-173. The fall of Elatea was announced by messenger after dusk to the presiding tribe at Athens. At dawn the next day, the presidents called a meeting of the senate. The generals and orators were present, but nobody answered the herald's call to come forward and speak. Finally, Demosthenes arose and proved himself able to speak and propose decrees *ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς φοβεροῖς*. Surely, Demosthenes must have spoken extemporaneously on this occasion, since neither the circumstances nor the element of time permitted careful preparation.

308. Here the words *τοῦ συνεχῶς λέγοντος* refer to Demosthenes. An orator of this description could hardly be lacking utterly in the ability to speak extemporaneously.

## III

Also, in Aeschines' oration *Con. Ctes.*, there are some few passages which may throw some light on this problem. They are the following:

71. Here Aeschines relates that Demosthenes hurried to the platform and gave no other man a chance to speak. If Demosthenes prepared for this speech, he had only the preceding night in which to do so, and even a part of this time had to be devoted to coaching Antipater, if Aeschines knows whereof he speaks in section 72.

82. The employment of the imperfect tense (*παρεκάλουν . . . ἐνεδίδου*) indicates that Demosthenes was frequently called upon to come forward and speak, and that he did not disappoint his supporters. Surely, an orator who is always at the beck and call of his friends cannot every time come forward with a prepared speech.

97. On this occasion Demosthenes apparently spoke extemporaneously. He could not have deceived his contemporaries, if he had actually lacked this ability.

151. Here it is reported that Demosthenes, panic stricken (*παντάπασιν ἑκφρων*) by the turn of events, spoke and moved a resolution. It is difficult to see how and when he could have prepared remarks for this emergency.

166. At this point, Aeschines offers to yield the platform to his opponent, but Demosthenes does not accept the challenge. Aeschines remarks that he well understands the embarrassment of the former. But it is obvious that he does not attribute this embarrassment to an inability to speak impromptu. If Demosthenes had possessed this oratorical defect, Aeschines would have known it, and he would surely have made capital of it in one of his extant speeches. This would have served his purpose far better than some of the silly and mendacious invective with which his three orations are interspersed.

202. In this passage, Aeschines brands Demosthenes as a sophist. Now, sophists were word-mongers, men who could come forward and conceal an absence of thought under a cloud of language. Hippias, for example, challenged his audiences to suggest any subject on which they wished to hear him discourse. Aeschines would hardly have applied so inappropriate an appellation as that of "sophist" to Demosthenes, if the latter had been a notoriously incompetent extemporizer.

In view of the foregoing considerations, it is my opinion that Demosthenes could, and did, speak extemporaneously. In fact, the character of an ancient orator's training would lead me to believe that at least the master of the profession could not well have been wholly devoid of this ability. The famous controversy between Isocrates and Alcidas shows that the matter of *ex tempore* speaking was an important question at that time. It was the practice of Isocrates and his school to work out their speeches carefully in writing. Alcidas and his school, on the other hand, concentrated entirely on training in extemporization. In his declamation, entitled *On The Sophists*, Alcidas points out that it is far more important for an orator to be able to speak extemporaneously than to write out a good speech. His reasoning is obviously sound: an able extemporizer can always adjust his words to the mood of the

assembly or the law courts; no man can commit enough speeches to memory to enable him to speak effectively at a moment's notice; the habitual employment of written speeches is a great handicap to a man, when he suddenly finds himself in a position where he must speak without preparation. He contends that the art of writing is of secondary importance to an orator, whereas other gifts, such as the ability to speak extemporaneously, are of primary importance. In short, Alcidas makes it abundantly clear that mastery of speech-writing amounted to mastery over only a small department of the rhetorical art. All his life, Demosthenes never did things by halves; so, it is inconceivable that he would rest content with only a partial conquest of the whole field of oratory. In a letter which Professor Werner Jaeger wrote to me recently and from which he has kindly permitted me to quote, there occurs the following significant observation: "Even if Demosthenes' training was mainly autodidactic, he must have paid attention to this aspect (i.e. *ex tempore* speaking) of his art and tried to train his mind accordingly. The collection of prooemia which is preserved to us under his name seems to prove that he tried to be prepared as far as he could in such more typical things, and to work out even the phrasing; but the concrete arguments in every case had to be left to the moment. If he used these prooemia for teaching his students, this would indicate that this, too, reflected his own practice."

In the case of Demosthenes, the *onus* of proving that he could not speak publicly without preparation rests upon those who adhere to this opinion. But there is little material for such proof. The story told by Aeschines concerning Demosthenes' failure on the embassy to King Philip is doubtless true. Demosthenes does not deny it; in fact, he makes no mention of it. But the real reason for his apparent failure is to be sought elsewhere, not in the inability to speak publicly without preparation. With penetrating and unerring insight, Werner Jaeger<sup>15</sup> has given the correct answer to this question. Finally, the stories about Demosthenes' great efforts to train himself to become an orator might lead to the idea that he had little native ability in this direction. Similarly, Pytheas' remark<sup>16</sup> that Demosthenes' periodic style "smelled of the lamp"

<sup>15</sup> *Demosthenes. Der Staatsmann und Sein Werden* (Berlin, 1929) 147: "Oder war er (i.e. Demosthenes) vielleicht auch hier der Einzige, der das theatralische Spiel durchschaute?"

<sup>16</sup> Plutarch, *Demosthenes* 8.

might be misinterpreted to mean that the orator had to labor long and hard in order to work out his speeches. Plutarch's<sup>17</sup> statement that Demosthenes used to hurry to his study and review in their proper order all the points pertaining to an issue may have given spurious corroboration to the theory that Demosthenes could not speak extemporaneously. But Demosthenes' intense striving in his field of endeavor may well be explained on the ground that he was aiming at perfection. In short, there appears to be no valid evidence to support the theory that Demosthenes could not speak extemporaneously, whereas, on the other hand, a number of passages in one of his greatest speeches seem to indicate that he could do so.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*