

Anne Leen, Professor of Classics  
Furman University  
September 2008

## Lesson Plan for Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.12.45 Laelia's Latin Pronunciation

### I. Introduction

Cicero's *De Oratore* is a treatise on rhetoric in dialogue form written in 55 BCE. The principal speakers are the orators Lucius Licinius Crassus (140-91 BCE) and Marcus Antonius (143-87 BCE), the grandfather of the Triumvir. The dramatic date of the dialogue is September 91 BCE. The setting is the Tusculan villa of Antonius. While the work as a whole addresses the ideal orator, Book 3 is devoted largely to good style, the first requirement of which is pure and correct Latin. The topic at hand in this passage is pronunciation, defined as a matter of regulating the tongue, breath, and tone of voice (*lingua et spiritus et vocis sonus*, 3.11.40). The speaker, Crassus, has noticed the recent affectation of rustic pronunciation in people who desire to evoke the sounds of what they wrongly think of as the purer diction of the past, and correspondingly the values of antiquity. To Crassus this is misguided and ill-informed. The urban Roman sound that must be emulated lacks rustification and instead mirrors ancient Roman diction, the only remaining traces of which he finds in the speech of his mother-in-law, Laelia, as he explains.

### II. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.12.45

**Equidem cum audio socrum meam Laeliam - facilius enim mulieres incorruptam antiquitatem conservant, quod multorum sermonis expertes ea tenent semper, quae prima didicerunt - sed eam sic audio, ut Plautum mihi aut Naevium videar audire, sono ipso vocis ita recto et simplici est, ut nihil ostentationis aut imitationis adferre videatur; ex quo sic locutum esse eius patrem iudico, sic maiores; non aspere ut ille, quem dixi, non vaste, non rustice, non hiulce, sed presse et aequabiliter et leniter.**

### III. Notes and Vocabulary

*equidem*, particle- "I, for my part"; often used by writers in contrasting their own opinions with those of other authorities, or by speakers in answer to questions or remarks about themselves or in replies to requests.

*socrus*, -us, f.- mother-in-law

*Laelia* - Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 1.1.6, tells us that she is the daughter of Gaius Laelius Sapiens, whose elegance of language she imitated (*Laelia C. filia reddidisse in loquendo paternam elegantiam dicitur*). She was the wife of Quintus Mucius Scaevola.

*expers*, -tis (+ gen.)- having no share in, devoid of, free from, without

*disco, discere, didici-* to learn

*Plautus, Titus Maccius* (c. 254-184 BCE.)-the earliest Roman playwright whose comedies survive. Quintilian 10.1.99 tells us that the earliest Roman philologist, Aelius Stilo (144-70 BCE), considered Plautus's Latin so superb that, he claimed, if the Muses spoke Latin they would speak in the language of Plautus (*Licet Varro Musas, Aelii Stilonis sententia, Plautino dicat sermone locuturas fuisse, si Latine loqui vellent.*)

*Naevius, Gnaeus* (c. 270-c. 199 BCE)- an early Roman poet and author of tragedies, comedies, and an epic in Saturnian verse. He is regarded as one of the founders of Roman satire.

*sono ipso . . . recto et simplici est-* ablative of quality; the subject of *est* is Laelia

*rectus, -a, -um-* straight-forward, direct

*simplex, -icis-* simple

*ostentationis aut imitationis-* partitive genitives following *nihil*

*aspere-* adverb, with a harsh sound; in an unrefined manner, coarsely, roughly

*ex quo-* "wherefore," "from which fact;" the antecedent is the preceding sentence, from which Crassus draws this inference

*ille, quem dixi-* Lucius Aurelius Cotta, mentioned in 3.11.42, where Cicero criticizes his heavy tone and rustic pronunciation (*gravitate linguae sonoque vocis agresti*). Cf. also 2.22.91 and Cicero, *Brutus* 259, where Cotta's pronunciation is also mentioned.

*vaste-* adverb, without refinement, broadly, coarsely. This and the following five adverbs are here defined with regard to pronunciation.

*rustice-* adverb, sounding like, a countryman, in a provincial fashion

*hiulce-* adverb, disconnectedly, disjointedly

*non vaste, non rustice, non hiulce-* Note how anaphora and asyndeton emphasize the stylistic flaws and imitate the harshness of such pronunciation, faults that Laelia's father and ancestors lack, as Cicero goes on to illustrate.

*presse-* adverb, in a concise or restrained style

*aequaliter-* adverb, regularly, smoothly

*leniter-* adverb, with a smooth sound, so as not to jar on the ear

*sed presse et aequaliter et leniter -* polysyndeton lends rhythm to Crassus's words and models the virtue under discussion.

#### IV. Comprehension Questions

1. What is the meaning of *incorruptam antiquitatem*? Why do women more readily preserve this value, according to Crassus?
2. What qualities of Laelia's Latinity recall Plautus and Naevius?
3. How did Laelia's father and ancestors speak?
4. What are the defects of pronunciation listed by Crassus? What are its virtues?

## V. Discussion Questions

1. What does Crassus mean when he describes women as *multorum sermonis expertes*? Is he generalizing about all Roman women, or is he speaking only of the elite? Does this refer to elite women's lack of exposure to others? Or does it refer to the fact that they consort only with other elites and so do not have the opportunity to speak with the *vulgi* on the streets or the *rustici* from the country?
2. From what Crassus says about the Latin of Plautus, Naevius, and her father and ancestors, how might we reconstruct the way Laelia talked? If her Latin is not affected or imitative, as Crassus says, how likely is it that she spoke literary Latin (Plautus and Naevius), or like an older man, without contributing any qualities of her own?
3. Why is Laelia's pronunciation described exclusively in terms of her male relations? What role might her mother have played as a model of pronunciation?
4. What does this passage have to say about the relationship between elite fathers and daughters in ancient Rome?
5. How many values of correct pronunciation are also moral values? What does this equation suggest to you about the value of correct pronunciation and style in Cicero's time?
6. What roles do accent and pronunciation play in our evaluation of a person today, whether of his/her style of speech, substance of argument, or personal character?
7. Can you think of anyone today who is so isolated from mainstream culture that he or she preserves an antiquated style of speech? How do we judge this person's speech? Would it provide the model for us that Crassus found in Laelia's Latin?

## VI. Suggested Extra Activities

1. Read in Latin or English Quintilian, *Institutiones* 1.1. 4 and 6 (*Worlds of Roman Women*, p. 33), where Quintilian discusses Cornelia and Hortensia as well as Laelia. Compare what Quintilian says there about the role of the *materfamilias* in ensuring the correct diction of her sons with what Crassus suggests were Laelia's models.
2. Read in Latin or English Tacitus, *Dialogus de Oratoribus* 28-29.1-3 (*Worlds of Roman Women*, p. 67), on the influence of slave caretakers on the speech of Roman elite children and compare this with the role played by literature and her male ancestors in Laelia's Latinity.
3. To further investigate female Latinity, read Cornelia's purported letter to her son in Cornelius Nepos, *Fragmenta, De Viris Illustris* (*Worlds of Roman Women*, p. 77).

## VII. Bibliography

### Reference works

*Oxford Classical Dictionary*  
*Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*  
*Oxford Latin Dictionary*

### Secondary Scholarship

Farrell, J. *Latin Language and Latin Culture From Ancient to Modern Times* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001) 65-69. A very useful discussion of this passage.  
Gilleland, M.E., "Female Speech in Greek and Latin," *AJP* 101 (1980) 180-183. Surveys the evidence from Greek and Latin sources for female use of language.  
Ramage, E.S., "Cicero on Extra-Roman Speech," *TAPA* 92 (1961) 481-494. Especially useful for its elucidation of the fine distinctions articulated in the last two lines of the passage.