

Erskine May, Vol. II, Chapter VII, pp. 112-130

Parliamentary Oratory

One of the proud results of our free constitution has been the development of Parliamentary oratory,—an honour and ornament to our history,—a source of public enlightenment,—and an effective instrument of popular government. Its excellence has varied, like our literature, with the genius of the men, and the events of the periods, which have called it forth: but from the accession of George III. may be dated the Augustan era of Parliamentary eloquence.

The great struggles of the Parliament with Charles I. had stirred the eloquence of Pym, Hampden, Wentworth, and Falkland; the Revolution had developed the oratory of Somers; and the Parliaments of Anne, and the two first Georges, had given scope to the various talents of Bolingbroke, Pulteney, Wyndham, and Walpole. The reputation of these men has reached posterity: but their speeches,—if they survived the memory of their own generations, [113] — have come down to us in fragments,—as much the composition of the historian or reporter, as of the orators to whom they are assigned.(1) Happily the very period distinguished by our most eloquent statesmen was that in which they had the privilege of addressing posterity, as well as their own contemporaries. The expansion of their audience gave a new impulse to their eloquence, which was worthy of being preserved for all ages.

Lord Chatham had attained the first place among statesmen in the late reign, but his fame as an orator mainly rests upon his later speeches, in the reign of George III. Lofty and impassioned in his style, and dramatic in his manner, his oratory abounded in grand ideas and noble sentiments, expressed in language simple, bold and vigorous. The finest examples of his eloquence stand alone, and unrivalled: but he flourished too early, to enjoy the privilege of transmitting the full fruits of his genius to posterity.(2)

He was surrounded and followed by a group of orators, who have made their time the classic age of Parliamentary history. Foremost among them was his extraordinary son, William Pitt. Inferior to his father in the highest qualities of an orator,—he surpassed him in argument, in knowledge, in intellectual force, and mastery. [114] Magniloquent in his style, his oratory sometimes attained the elevation of eloquence: but rarely rose above the level of debate. His composition was felicitously described by Windham, as a 'State paper style.' He may be called the founder of the modern school of Parliamentary debaters. His speeches were argumentative, admirably clear in statement, skilfully arranged, vigorous and practical. Always marked by rare ability, they yet lacked the higher inspirations of genius. In sarcasm he had few equals. No one held so absolute a sway over the House of Commons. In voice and manner, he was dignified and commanding. The minister was declared in every word he uttered; and the consciousness of power, while it sustained the dignity of his oratory, increased its effect upon his audience.

The eloquence of his great rival, Mr. Fox, was as different, as were his political opinions and position. His success was due to his natural genius, and to the great principles of liberty which he advocated. Familiar with the best classical models, he yet too often disdained the studied art of the orator; and was negligent and unequal in his efforts. But when his genius was aroused within him, he was matchless, in demonstrative argument, in force, in wit, in animation, and spontaneous eloquence. More than any orator of his time, he carried with him the feelings and conviction of his audience; and the spirit and reality of the man, charm us scarcely less in his printed speeches. Wanting in discretion, he was frequently betrayed into intemperance of language and opinion: but his generous ardour in the cause of liberty still

appeals to our sympathies; [115] and his broad constitutional principles are lessons of political wisdom.

Mr. Fox had been from his earliest youth, the friend and disciple of Mr. Burke,—and vast was the intellect of his master. In genius, learning, and accomplishments, Mr. Burke had no equal either among the statesmen, or writers of his time; yet he was inferior, as an orator, to the three great men who have been already noticed. His speeches, like his writings, bear witness to his deep philosophy, his inexhaustible stores of knowledge, and redundant imagination. They are more studied and more often quoted than the speeches of any other statesman. His metaphors and aphorisms are as familiar to our ears as those of Lord Bacon. But transcendent as were his gifts, they were too often disfigured by extravagance. He knew not how to restrain them within the bounds of time and place; or to adapt them to the taste of a popular assembly, which loves directness and simplicity. His addresses were dissertations rather than speeches. To influence men, an orator must appeal directly to their reason, their feelings, and present temper: but Mr. Burke, while he astonished them with his prodigious faculties, wearied them with refinements and imagery, in which they often lost the thread of his argument.

Mr. Sheridan is entitled to the next place in this group of orators. His brilliancy and pointed wit,—his spirited declamation and effective delivery,—astonished and delighted his audience. Such was the effect of his celebrated [115] speech on the fourth, or 'Begum charge' against Warren Hastings, that the peers and strangers joined with the House in a 'tumult of applause;' and could not be restrained from clapping their hands in ecstasy. The House adjourned, in order to recover its self-possession. Mr. Pitt declared that this speech 'surpassed all the eloquence of ancient or modern times, and possessed everything that genius or art could furnish, to agitate or control the human mind.' Mr. Fox said, 'eloquent indeed it was; so much so, that all he had ever heard,—all he had ever read, dwindled into nothing, and vanished like vapour before the sun.' Mr. Sheridan afterwards addressed the Lords, in Westminster Hall, on the same charge, for four days; and Mr. Burke said of his address, 'that no species of oratory, —no kind of eloquence which had been heard in ancient or modern times; nothing which the acuteness of the bar, the dignity of the senate, or the morality of the pulpit could furnish, was equal to what they had that day heard in Westminster Hall.' But while particular efforts of this accomplished speaker met with extraordinary success, he was restrained by want of statesmanship and character, from commanding a position in the House of Commons, equal to his great talents as an orator.(3)

The qualities of Mr. Windham were of another class. Superior to the last in education and [117] attainments, and little inferior in wit, he never achieved successes so dazzling; yet he maintained a higher place among the debaters of his age. Though his pretensions to the higher qualities of a statesman were inconsiderable, and his want of temper and discretion too often impaired his unquestionable merits in debate, his numerous talents and virtues graced a long and distinguished public life.

Lord Erskine was not inferior, as an orator, to the greatest of his contemporaries: but the senate was not the scene of his most remarkable triumphs. His speeches at the bar combined the highest characteristics of eloquence,—fire,—force,—courage,—earnestness,—the closest argument,—imagery,—noble sentiments,—great truths finely conceived and applied,—a diction pure and simple,—action the most graceful and dignified. But none of these great qualities were used for display. They were all held, by the severity of his taste, and the mastery of his logic, in due subordination to the single design of persuading and convincing his audience. The natural graces of his person completed the orator. Lord Brougham has finely portrayed 'that noble figure, every look of whose countenance is expressive, every motion of whose form graceful; an eye that sparkles and pierces, and almost assures victory, while it "speaks audience ere the tongue.'" Had his triumphs been as signal in the senate, he would have been the first orator of his age. In that arena there were men greater than himself: but he was admitted to an eminent place amongst them. He fought for many [118] years, side

by side, with Mr. Fox; and his rare gifts were ever exerted in the cause of freedom.

To complete the glittering assemblage of orators who adorned the age of Chatham and of Pitt, many remarkable figures yet stand in the foreground. We are struck with the happy wit and resources of Lord North,—the finished precision of Wedderburn,—the rude force of Lord Thurlow, the bold readiness of Dundas,—the refinement and dignity of Lord Mansfield,—the constitutional wisdom of Lord Camden,—the logical subtlety of Dunning,—the severe reason of Sir William Grant,—the impassioned gentleness of Wilberforce,—and the statesmanlike vigour of Lord Grenville.

The succession of orators has still been maintained. Some of Mr. Pitt's contemporaries continued to flourish many years after he had passed from the scene of his glory,—and others were but commencing their career, when his own was drawing to its close. He lived to hear the eloquence of Mr. Grattan, which had long been the pride of his own country. It was rich in imagination, in vehemence, in metaphor, and pointed epigram. Though a stranger to the British Parliament, his genius and patriotism at once commanded a position, scarcely less distinguished than that which he had won in the Parliament of Ireland. Englishmen, familiar with the eloquence of their own countrymen, hailed his accession to their ranks, as one of the most auspicious results of the Union.

Mr. Canning's brilliant talents, which had been matured under Mr. Pitt, shone forth in full splendour, after the death of that [119] statesman. In wit and sarcasm, in elegant scholarship, in lively fancy, and in the graces of a finished composition, he was without a rival. His imagery,—if less original than that of Chatham, Burke, and Erskine,—was wrought up with consummate skill, and expressed in language of extraordinary beauty. For more than twenty years, he was the most successful and accomplished debater in the House of Commons,—delighting his friends with his dazzling wit,—and confounding his opponents with inexhaustible repartee.

Earl Grey had also risen to distinction in the days of Mr. Pitt: but the memorable achievements of his riper age, associate him with a later generation. In dignity and high purpose,—in breadth of principle,—in earnest gravity of argument and exposition, he was the very model of a statesman. His oratory bespoke his inflexible virtues, and consistency. While his proud bearing would have pronounced him the leader of an aristocracy, and the mouthpiece of his order,—he devoted a long life to the service of the people.

Lord Eldon exercised so important an influence upon political affairs, that he cannot be omitted from this group of orators, though his claims to oratory alone, would not have entitled him to a place amongst them. From the time when he had been Mr. Pitt's Solicitor-General, until he left the woolsack,—a period of nearly forty years, his high offices gave authority to his parliamentary efforts. For twenty years he led captive the judgment of the House of Lords: but assuredly neither by eloquence, nor argument in debate. Tears and [120] appeals to his conscience were his most moving eloquence,—a dread of innovation his standing argument. Even upon legal questions, the legislature obtained little light from his discourses. The main service which posterity can derive from his speeches, is to note how recently prejudice and errors were maintained in high places, and how trivial the reasons urged in their defence.

Lord Plunket, like his great countryman, Mr. Grattan, had gained a high reputation for eloquence in the Parliament of Ireland, which he not only sustained, but advanced in the British House of Commons. He had risen to eminence at the bar of Ireland, where his style of speaking is said to have resembled that of Erskine. In debate,—if displaying less originality and genius than Mr. Grattan, and less brilliancy than Mr. Canning,—he was as powerful in sustained argument, as felicitous in illustration, and as forcible and pointed in language, as any orator of his time.

Sir Robert Peel was a striking counterpart of Mr. Pitt. At first his extraordinary abilities in

debate had been outshone by the dazzling lustre of Mr. Canning, and subdued by the fiery vehemence of Mr. Brougham: but his great powers, always improving and expanding, could not fail to be acknowledged. His oratory, like that of Mr. Pitt, was the perfection of debate. He rarely aspired to eloquence: but in effective declamation, in close argument,—in rapid appreciation of the points to be assailed or defended,—in dexterity,—in tact,—and in official and Parliamentary [121] knowledge, he excelled every debater of his time. Even when his talents were exercised in maintaining the political errors of his age and party, it is impossible not to admire the consummate skill with which he defended his untenable positions, against assailants who had truth on their side. Arguments which provoke a smile, when we read them in the words of Lord Eldon, surprise us with their force and semblance of truth, when urged by Sir Robert Peel.

The oratory of a man so great as the Duke of Wellington, was the least of all of his claims to renown. First in war, in diplomacy, and in the councils of his sovereign,—his speeches in Parliament were but the natural expression of his experience, opinions, and purposes. His mind being clear,—his views practical and sagacious,—and his objects singularly direct,—his speaking was plain, and to the point. Without fluency or art, and without skill in argument, he spoke out what his strong sense and judgment prompted. He addressed an audience, whom there was no need to convince. They hung upon his words, and waited upon his opinions; and followed as he led. The reasons of such a man could not fail to be weighty but they were reasons which had determined his own course, and might justify it to others, rather than arguments to prove it right, or to combat opponents.

The House of Commons was not the field for the best examples of Mr. O'Connell's oratory. He stood there at a disadvantage,—with a course to uphold which all but a small band of [122] followers condemned as false and unpatriotic,—and with strong feelings against him, which his own conduct had provoked; yet even there, the massive powers of the man were not unfrequently displayed. A perfect master of every form of argument,—potent in ridicule, sarcasm, and invective,—rich in imagination and humour,—bold and impassioned, or gentle, persuasive and pathetic,—he combined all the powers of a consummate orator. His language was simple and forcible, as became his thoughts:(4) his voice extraordinary for compass and flexibility. But his great powers were disfigured by coarseness, by violence, by cunning, and audacious license. At the bar, and on the platform, he exhibited the greatest, but the most opposite endowments. When he had thrown open the doors of the legislature to himself and his Roman Catholic brethren, the great work of his life was done; yet he wanted nothing but the moral influence of a good cause, and honest patriotism, to have taken one of the highest places in the senate.

His countryman, Mr. Sheil, displayed powers singularly unlike those of his great master. He was an orator of extraordinary brilliancy,—imaginative, witty, and epigrammatic. Many parts of his speeches were exquisite compositions,—clothing his fancy in the artistic language of the poet. Such passages may be compared with many similar examples in the speeches of Mr. Canning. He was equally happy in antithesis and epigram. He [123] excelled, indeed, in the art and graces of oratorical composition. But his thoughts were wanting in depth and reality: his manner was extravagant in its vehemence: his action melodramatic; and his voice, always shrill, was raised in his impassioned efforts, to a harsh and discordant shriek.

This second group of contemporary orators would be incomplete, without some other striking characters who played their part amongst them. We would point to the classical elegance of Lord Wellesley,—the readiness and dexterity of Perceval,—the high bearing and courage of Lord Castlereagh,—the practical vigour of Tierney,—the manly force and earnestness of Whitbread,—the severe virtues and high intellect of Romilly,—the learned philosophy of Francis Horner,—the didactic fulness of Mackintosh,—the fruitful science of Huskisson,—the lucid argument of Follett, and the brilliant declamation of Macaulay.

All these have passed away: but there are orators still living, who have contended in the same debates, and have won an equal fame. Their portraiture will adorn future histories: but who is there that will not at once fill up this picture of the past, with the transparent clearness and masterly force of Lord Lyndhurst, and the matchless powers and accomplishments of Lord Brougham.

Progressive excellence in so divine an art as oratory, is no more to be achieved than in poetry or painting,—in sculpture or architecture. Genius is of all ages. But if orators of our own time have been unable to excel [124] their great models, a candid criticism will scarcely assign them an inferior place. Their style has changed,—as the conditions under which they speak are altered. They address themselves more to the reason, and less to the imagination, the feelings and the passions of their audience, than the orators of a former age. They confront, not only the members of their own body, but the whole people,—who are rather to be convinced by argument, than persuaded by the fascination of the orator. In their language, there is less of study and artistic finish, than in the oratory of an earlier period. Their perorations are not composed, after frequent recitals of Demosthenes:(5) but give direct and forcible expression to their own opinions and sentiments. Their speaking is suited to the subjects of debate,—to the stir and pressure of public affairs,—and to the taste and temper of their audience. The first principles of government are no longer in dispute: the liberties of the people are safe: the oppression of the law is unknown. Accordingly, the councils of the state encourage elevated reason, rather than impassioned oratory. Every age has its own type of excellence; and if the Nestors of our own time insist upon the degeneracy of living orators, perhaps a more cultivated taste may now condemn as rant, some passages from the speeches of Burke and [125] Chatham, which their contemporaries accepted as eloquence.

Coarse Personalities of Former Times

But whatever may be the claims of different generations to the highest examples of oratory, the men of our own age have advanced in political knowledge, and statesmanship; and their deliberations have produced results more beneficial to the people. They have also improved in temper and moderation. In the earlier years of George III., party spirit and personal animosities,—not yet restrained by the courtesies of private society, or refined by good taste,—too often gave rise to scenes discreditable to the British senate. The debates were as coarse and scurrilous as the press.

In these excesses, Lord Chatham was both sinned against, and sinning. In the debate upon the indemnity Bill in 1766, the Duke of Richmond 'hoped the nobility would not be browbeaten by an insolent minister'—a speech which Horace Walpole alleges to have driven the Earl from the House of Lords, during the remainder of his unfortunate administration. Some years later, we find Lord Chatham himself using language repugnant to order, and decency of debate. On the 1st February, 1775, he thus addressed the ministers: 'Who can wonder that you should put a negative upon any measure which must annihilate your power, deprive you of your emoluments, and at once reduce you to that state of insignificance, for which God and nature designed you.' A few days later, [126] the House of Lords became the scene of personalities still more disorderly. Lord Shelburne having insinuated that Lord Mansfield had been concerned in drawing up the bills of the previous session relating to America, Lord Mansfield rising in a passion, 'charged the last noble Lord with uttering the most gross falsehoods,' and said that 'the charge was as unjust, as it was maliciously and indecently urged.' In the same debate Lord Lyttelton imputed to Lord Camden 'professional subtlety and low cunning.' Again on the 5th December, 1777, we find Lord Chatham accusing Earl Gower of 'petulance and malignant misrepresentation.'

No man so often outraged propriety and good taste as Edmund Burke. His excessive love of imagery and illustration, often displayed itself in the grossest forms. Who is not familiar with

his coarse portrait of Lord North, 'extending his right leg a full yard before his left, rolling his flaming eyes, and moving his ponderous frame'? or with the offensive indecency with which he likened Lord North's Ministry to a party of courtesans? Of Lord Shelburne he ventured to say, 'if he was not a Cataline or Borgia in morals, it must not be ascribed to anything but his understanding.'

We find Colonel Barré denouncing the conduct of Lord North as 'most indecent and scandalous;' and Lord North complaining of this language as 'extremely uncivil, brutal, and insolent,' until he was [127] called to order, and obliged to apologise. We find Mr. Fox threatening that Lord North's ministry should expiate their crimes upon the scaffold, and insinuating that they were in the pay of France. Nay, transgressing the bounds of political discussion, and assailing private character, he went so far as to declare that he should consider it unsafe to be alone with Lord North, in a room; and would not believe his word. Even of the king, he spoke with indecorous violence.

Improved Standard of Decorum

There have since been altercations of equal bitterness. The deepest wounds which sarcasm and invective could inflict, have been unsparingly dealt to political opponents. Combatants 'have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adder's poison is under their lips.' But good taste and a stricter order in debate, have restrained the grosser outrages to decency. The weapons of debate have been as keen and trenchant as ever: but they have been wielded according to the laws of a more civilised warfare. The first years of the Reformed Parliament threatened the revival of scenes as violent and disorderly as any in the last century: but as the host of new members became [128] disciplined by experience, and the fierce passions of that period subsided, the accustomed decorum of the House of Commons was restored.(6)

Indeed, as the Commons have advanced in power and freedom, they have shown greater self-restraint, and a more ready obedience to the authority of the Speaker. They have always been more orderly in their proceedings than the Lords; and the contrast which the scenes of the first twenty years of George III. present to those of later times, can scarcely fail to strike an attentive student of Parliamentary history.

What would now be thought of such scenes as those enacted in the time of Sir John Cust, Sir Fletcher Norton, and Mr. Cornwall,—of rebukes and interruptions,—of unseemly altercations with the Chair,—of the words of the Speaker himself being taken down,—and of a motion that they were disorderly and dangerous to the freedom of debate?

In concluding this sketch of Parliamentary oratory, a few words may be added concerning the general standard of debate in the House of Commons. If that standard be measured by the [129] excellence of the best speakers at different periods, we have no cause to be ashamed of the age in which our living orators and statesmen have flourished. But judged by another test, this age has been exposed to disparaging criticisms. When few save the ablest men contended in debate, and the rank and file were content to cheer and vote, a certain elevation of thought and language was, perhaps, more generally sustained. But, of late years, independent members,—active, informed, and businesslike, representing large interests,—more responsible to constituents, and less devoted to party chiefs, living in the public eye, and ambitious of distinction,—have eagerly pressed forward, and claimed a hearing. Excellence in debate has suffered from the multiplied demands of public affairs. Yet in speeches without pretensions to oratory are found strong common sense, practical knowledge, and an honesty of purpose that was wanting in the silent legions of former times. The debates mark the activity and earnest spirit of a representative assembly. At all times there have been some speakers of a lower grade,—without instruction, taste, or elevation. Formerly their commonplace effusions were not reported: now they are freely read, and scornfully criticised. They are put to shame by the writers of the daily press, who discuss the same subjects with superior

knowledge and ability. Falling below the educated mind of the country, they bring discredit upon the House of Commons, while they impair its legislative efficiency. But [130] worse evils than these have been overcome; and we may hope to see this abuse of free discussion eventually corrected, by a less tolerant endurance on the part of the House, and by public reprobation and contempt.(7)

Footnotes.

1. Of the speeches of Somers and Bolingbroke there are no remains whatever. Mr. Pitt said he would rather recover a speech of Bolingbroke than the lost books of Livy, or other writings of antiquity.
2. Some of his earlier speeches were composed by Dr. Johnson from the notes of others; and even his later speeches were delivered when reporting was still very imperfect.
3. Lord Byron said of him: 'Whatever Sheridan has done, or chosen to do, has been, *par excellence*, always the best of its kind. He has written the best comedy, the best opera, the best farce (it is only too good for a farce), and the best address (the monologue on Garrick), and to crown all, delivered the very best oration, the famous Begum speech, ever conceived or heard in this country.'
4. It was happily said of him by Mr. Sheil, 'He brings forth a brood of lusty thoughts, without a rag to cover them.'
5. 'I composed the peroration of my speech for the Queen, in the Lords, after reading and repeating Demosthenes for three or four weeks, and I composed it twenty times over at least, and it certainly succeeded in a very extraordinary degree, and far above any merits of its own.'—Lord Brougham to Zachary Macaulay, as advice to his celebrated son, March 10th, 1823.
6. These remarks referred to 1861, when they were written.
7. The paramount importance of debate in the government of England, was thus described by Lord Aberdeen, in a letter to the Prince Consort: 'Wisdom? Why, the country is not governed by wisdom, but by talk. Who can talk will govern.'—Martin, *Life of the Prince Consort*, v. 255 n.

[Next](#)

[Contents](#)

[Previous](#)