

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CASSIODORUS' *VARIAE* TO THE HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL RHETORIC

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Cassiodorus Senator (c. 484-c. 584) is most often recognized by rhetorical scholars as the author of an instructional manual for monks, the *Institutiones* (c. 562), which contains one book devoted to religious studies and one to secular studies. The second book, which presents a somewhat encyclopedic discussion of the seven liberal arts, served as an important source of rhetorical doctrine for subsequent writers, including Isidore of Seville. Thus, on the basis of this work, James J. Murphy has labeled Cassiodorus "the first Christian encyclopedist" in the history of rhetorical theory (Murphy 64-66). While this title helps identify the significance of the *Institutiones* in the transmission of Classical rhetorical theory during the Middle Ages, it fails to acknowledge the political career of Cassiodorus as a practicing rhetorician in his own age.

Cassiodorus, an Italian nobleman, had a long and varied career--from politician to scholar to educator. His political career flourished under the reign of the Ostrogoth, Theoderic. Later, when Cassiodorus decided to quit politics, he left Italy and began his work as a Christian scholar in Constantinople. After returning to Italy, in 554, he settled at Vivarium, the monastery he had established near his birthplace. The *Institutiones* was written in this last period of his life at the monastery (O'Donnell 202-22). For this reason, despite its subsequent influence, the work does not reflect Cassiodorus' skill as a practicing rhetorician, nor does it reveal how rhetoric was being used in secular Italy of the late fifth and early sixth centuries. To gain such information, rhetorical scholars need to examine Cassiodorus' *Variae*.¹

The *Variae*, published around 538, is a collection of 470 official documents, arranged in twelve books. Cassiodorus composed these documents as an official of the Italian court in the name of Theoderic and his successors and in his own name, as Praetorian Prefect. The collection includes various royal edicts, proclamations, legal *formulae*, and individual letters which exhibit Cassiodorus' rhetorical skill. As Murphy characterizes the work:

[With the *Variae*,] Cassiodorus thus represents one of the last major examples of the artistic letter-writer in the Ciceronian mode, relying on his own literary abilities in composing messages. He does not follow rigid formulas, nor does he enunciate theoretical principles about the craft of letter writing. . . . [Still] His *Variae* were distributed widely throughout the middle ages, ranking second in popularity only to the letters of Cicero. (198-99)

Cassiodorus claims he completed the work at the insistence of learned friends "in order that future generations might recognize the painful labours which I had undergone for the public good, and the workings of my own unbribed conscience" (*Var. Praef.*, 133). Yet, the work has a clear propagandistic intent. It constituted the written record of the Ostrogothic reign in Italy, a record which Cassiodorus tried to present in the most favorable way. As historian P. D. King notes:

[Cassiodorus] seeks to cultivate a positive appreciation of the especial merit of the Romano-Gothic polity which [had] come to exist. Cassiodorus in short, was a professional royal propagandist--and, it should be said, an outstandingly successful one; the image of Theoderic 'The Great' which flourishes still today is in the greatest measure his creation. (132)

The purpose of this essay is to discuss why the *Variae* needs to be studied by rhetorical scholars. Even more than the *Institutiones*, which is obviously derived from the Classical tradition, the *Variae* is a true product of its age, revealing many aspects of medieval rhetorical practice, especially in terms of arrangement and linguistic style. But, before considering these aspects of the *Variae*, we must have some understanding of the historical-political context in which Cassiodorus was writing. This context may be understood best, I think, by recounting first the general political situation which existed in Italy and then the role Cassiodorus had as a high-ranking official of the court.

The Gothic reign of Italy actually began late in the fifth century, with the dethroning of the man whom historians label "the last of the western Roman emperors," a youth named Romulus Augustulus

(Thompson 61). In August of 476, following a complicated series of political maneuvers, an Ostrogothic general named Odovacer (Odoacer, Odovacar) assumed control of Italy and returned the imperial insignia to Constantinople, thereby pledging his allegiance to the eastern ruler, Zeno, as emperor over both halves of the Empire. During the next few decades, as relations between the eastern and western parts of the Empire deteriorated, largely over religious dogma, Zeno never conferred any official status upon Odovacer but allowed him to rule as a self-named "king of the Goths and Romans" (Thompson 65-68). By 489, however, Odovacer had abandoned any appearance of allegiance to Zeno, and Zeno sent a young Ostrogothic general, Theoderic (Theodoric), as his deputy to Italy. The result was that by 493, Theoderic had secured military control of Italy, executed Odovacer, and established himself as the sole ruler of Italy, with Zeno's sanction (Jones 246-47).

Thus began the reign of Theoderic which spanned three decades and brought a period of relative peace and prosperity to Italy. Theoderic established a dualist state, designed to calm Roman resentment over being dominated by barbarians and to present his regime as one committed to the continuity of *civilitas*, i.e., the combination of peace, harmony, and Roman culture (Thompson 92). According to King, Theoderic fostered the separate development of the Goths and the Romans by keeping them legally separate, by prohibiting interracial marriages, and by maintaining their religious distinction: Goths were Arian, whereas Romans were Catholic (131). Also, while the army was the exclusive domain of the Goths, the Senate was Roman. So, throughout his reign, Theoderic took pains to show the proper deference to the members of the Senate, in order to help "soothe [their] wounded pride and flatter [their] vanity" (Hodgkin, *Letters* 27).

This brief account, then, depicts the political situation of Italy when Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator was born. His family had a long record of active service to the State, from his great grandfather's efforts against the Vandals to his father's service to the State under Odovacer and later as Praetorian Prefect for Theoderic (Hodgkin, *Theodoric* 160-61). Not unexpectedly, Cassiodorus became involved in politics at an early age. According to Thomas Hodgkin, "When his father was made Praetorian Prefect (about the year 500), the young rhetorician received an appointment as

Consiliarius, or Assessor in the Prefect's court . . ." (*Theodoric* 161). James J. O'Donnell remarks that since Cassiodorus was rather young, probably mid to late teens, at the time of this appointment, we may presume that this position was not one closely monitored by the king (58). Still, it was in this capacity that Cassiodorus first attracted the attention of Theoderic--by means of an oration praising him--which won for Cassiodorus the "illustrious" office of Quaestor, a type of chief rhetorician for the State. As Hodgkin claims, the job required him "to reply to the formal harangues in which the ambassadors of foreign nations greeted his master, to answer the petitions of his subjects, and to see that the edicts of the sovereign were expressed in proper terms" (*Theodoric* 162). So, between 507-511, while not yet thirty, Cassiodorus became one of the most influential members of Theoderic's court. Cassiodorus himself describes this influence in the *Variae*:

No Minister has more reason to glory in his office than the Quaestor, since it brings him into constant and intimate communication with Ourselves [the King]. The Quaestor has to learn our inmost thoughts, that he may utter them to our subjects. Whenever we are in doubt as to any matter we ask our Quaestor, who is the treasurehouse of public fame, the cupboard of laws; who has to be always ready for a sudden call, and must exercise the wonderful powers which, as Cicero has pointed out, are inherent in the art of an orator. He should so paint the delights of virtue and the terrors of vice, that his eloquence should almost make the sword of the magistrate needless. (*Var.* 6.5, 300-01)

Although specific dates have not been fixed for all the documents in the *Variae*, the largest number written for Theoderic date to this early period of Cassiodorus' political career. Certainly, most of the letters in Books 1-5 and probably those in 6 and 7 were written during his quaestorship (Skahill xix and O'Donnell 60).

Cassiodorus' rhetorical service to Theoderic continued past his tenure as Quaestor, formally or otherwise, until Theoderic's death in 526. At that time, Cassiodorus was serving officially as *Magister Officiorum*, master of the offices, and was therefore confronted not only with the loss of a sovereign he had served since his youth, but also with the problems of the new reign. In fact, O'Donnell (63) states that the termination of Cassiodorus' tenure in this office

relatively soon afterwards suggests that Cassiodorus was on the political outside in the new reign. Letters from this period appear mainly in Book 8 of the *Variae* (O'Donnell 60).

Theoderic was succeeded by his grandson, a mere boy, Athalaric. The actual head of the government became the boy's mother, Amalasuētha (Amalasuētha, Amalasuētha), who conducted her regency with a genuine enthusiasm for Roman culture, winning for her the approval of Senate members and the disapproval of her own Gothic warriors (Hodgkin, *Theoderic* 293-94). Hodgkin describes her as

[A] woman of great and varied accomplishments, perhaps once a pupil, certainly a friend, of Cassiodorus, [who] ruled entirely in accordance with the maxims of his statesmanship. . . . During the whole of her regency we may doubtless consider Cassiodorus as virtually her Prime Minister, and the eight years which [her regency] occupied were without doubt that portion of his life in which he exercised the most direct and unquestioned influence on State affairs. (*Letters* 38)

In fact, it was during this regency that Cassiodorus finally gained the State's most prestigious position, Praetorian Prefect. But he had been Prefect for little more than a year when young King Athalaric died, October of 534. Within seven months, Amalasuētha, who sought to rule as Queen, was betrayed by her cousin, Theodahad, and murdered. Theodahad as nearest male heir to Theoderic then took over as king for about a year. Then, Gothic warriors deposed him and elected their own successor, Wittigis (Thompson 93-95; Jones 274-76). Wittigis (Vitigis, Witigis) lost no time in executing Theodahad and went on to rule for the next four years, until the forces in the eastern part of the empire again took control, in 540. Cassiodorus remained in office through this period of betrayal and murder until 537. Most of the letters he wrote for others during this period are in Book 10 of the *Variae*. Books 11 and 12 contain letters he wrote on his own authority as Prefect (Skahill xix).

With this understanding of the historical-political context and Cassiodorus' role within that context, let me turn to the *Variae* itself. Here, I focus primarily on the inherently rhetorical nature of the work, much of which has already been acknowledged by historians

and Classical scholars but regrettably ignored in rhetorical scholarship.² As stated initially, Cassiodorus obviously designed the *Variae* to enhance the public image of the monarchy. Most scholars agree that with the publication of these letters, Cassiodorus not only was serving his own needs for recognition, but also was creating a record of the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy which could have reconciled, or at least not offended, the different factions who potentially constituted his audience. As O'Donnell notes, whether read in Rome, or Constantinople, or Campanian villas, or Ravenna, the *Variae* would have been seen as "a nonpolemical treatise, threading carefully through the events of the preceding decades, glossing over disturbances past and present, emphasizing only the happy and the successful" (68).

Though everyone Cassiodorus mentions in his sanitized account appears honorable, even Theodahad and Wittigis, it is Theoderic who emerges in truly heroic proportions. O'Donnell remarks:

Whatever he may have been in real life, the King we meet in the *Variae* was a gentle man, always happy to praise his subjects for their faithful service to his kingdom and . . . to virtue and justice. (84)

Additionally, though Theoderic was most certainly incapable of reading or writing in Latin, Cassiodorus has him quoting and interpreting various Latin sources to his people (Skahill xxi). The result is that the Theoderic presented in the *Variae* is the ideal leader--the wise and benevolent monarch (Jones 264). This image is evident in a letter at the end of Book 5, where Theoderic is establishing a peaceful reconciliation with the King of the Vandals. The letter reads:

You have shown, most prudent of kings, that wise men know how to amend their faults, instead of persisting in them with that obstinacy which is the characteristic of brutes. In the noblest and most truly kinglike manner you have humbled yourself to confess your fault . . . and to lay bare to us the very secrets of your heart in this matter. We thank you and praise you, and accept your purgation of yourself from this offence with all our heart. As for the presents sent us by your ambassadors, we accept them with our minds, but not our hands. Let them return to your Treasury, that it may be

seen that it was simply love of justice, not desire of gain, which prompted our complaints. We have both acted in a truly royal manner. Let your frankness and our contempt of gold be celebrated through the nations. It is sweeter to us to return these presents to you, than to receive much larger ones from anyone else. Your ambassadors carry back with them the fullest salutation of love from your friend and ally. (*Var.* 5.44, 293)

This general propaganda function is also conveyed through the arrangement of the documents within the collection. O'Donnell has noticed that though these documents tend to be grouped according to time periods in Cassiodorus' political career, they are not strictly chronological in order. Rather, chronology is often sacrificed to show honor, so letters to emperors characteristically appear *only* at the beginning of a book and barbarian kings at the end (O'Donnell 77-78). In addition, several books end with groups of letters carrying a particular theme which illustrates the culture or benevolence of the Ostrogothic reign. O'Donnell asserts: "If the first letters in each book demonstrate the public grandeur of the kingdom in its negotiations with great monarchs, the last letters give an elegant picture of the whole life of the kingdom and its society" (80).

Despite the obvious propagandistic nature of the *Variae* as a collected whole, and not discounting the questions scholars have raised about the authenticity of these letters as original historical documents,³ it seems apparent that each individual letter was more than just a governmental communiqué. Whether by the direction of his monarch or by his own design, Cassiodorus seems to have composed these various letters in ways specifically suited to serve the best interests of the State. So, for example, Cassiodorus depicts the Goths' military domination of the Romans not as a ruthless act of aggression but as a selfless task undertaken for the common good:

Let both nations hear what we have at heart. You [o Goths!] have the Romans as neighbours to your lands: even so let them be joined to you in affection. You too, o Romans! ought dearly to love the Goths, who in peace swell the numbers of your people and in war defend the whole Republic. It is fitting therefore that you obey the Judge whom we have appointed for you, . . . and thus you will be

found to have promoted your own interests while obeying our command. (*Var.* 7.3, 322)

Perhaps the most consistent impression conveyed by the letters individually is the importance of *civilitas*, a Romanized view of good citizenship. As Cassiodorus writes for Athalaric, "the true praise of the Goths is *civilitas* preserved" (*Var.* 9.14, 397). This ideological goal was established in contrast to *praesumptio*, a term used throughout the *Variae* (over 125 times) to refer to any kind of behavior the State wanted to discourage or declare undesirable (O'Donnell 98). Regardless of the degree of responsibility owed to Cassiodorus for the conception of this governmental policy, it is apparent that his penning of the policy placed it in action (Skahill xviii). Furthermore, Cassiodorus was responsible for adapting this purpose and others to suit the particular subject and occasion of each document. Unfortunately, this dimension of his talents is more difficult to determine. O'Donnell rightly observes, "there is doubtless substantial tailoring of the more important letters to the individual recipients in a way that is inaccessible to us, since the private details of the relationships between this people . . . and their king are lost to history" (87). Still, it is clear from reading the letters that the attempt at individual tailoring was made.

Thus, the *Variae* as a collective whole may be viewed as a rhetorical effort, but so, too, may the individual documents collected therein be seen as rhetorical efforts. Why, then, have rhetorical scholars generally dismissed the *Variae* in their efforts to signify Cassiodorus' place in the history of medieval rhetoric? Perhaps it is Hodgkin, the only scholar to attempt to translate the whole of the *Variae*, who provides the best answer:

The style [of these documents] is undoubtedly a bad one, whether it be compared with the great works of Greek or Latin literature or with our own estimate of excellence in speech. Scarcely ever do we find a thought clothed in clear, precise, closely-fitting words, or a metaphor which really corresponds to the abstract idea that is represented by it. We take up sentence after sentence of verbose and flaccid Latin, analyze them with difficulty, and when at last we come to the central thought enshrouded in them, we too often find that it is the merest and most obvious commonplace, a piece of tinsel wrapped in endless folds of tissue paper. (*Letters* 17)

O'Donnell, too, acknowledges that the content of the *Variae* is not very accessible to modern readers. He blames the letters' strong topical interest, the deletion of names and dates, and the absence of attached *breves*, which contained specific data modern readers would find interesting (93). Though we might not appreciate Cassiodorus' rhetorical style, it certainly increased the work's attractiveness at that time.

The most characteristic feature of Cassiodorus' style is his use of digressions, especially of natural phenomena.⁴ Many of these seem to be derived from Ambrose's *Hexameron* (O'Donnell 89). A particularly effective example of Cassiodorus' digressive style is found in a letter addressed to "all Goths and Romans and those who keep the harbors and mountain-fortresses." It is from Theoderic, angered by the murder of a master by his slaves, who compares human behavior to vultures:

We hate all crime, but domestic bloodshed and treachery most of all. Therefore we command you to act with the utmost severity of the law against the servants of Stephanus, who have killed their master and left him unburied. They might have learned pity from birds. Even the vulture, who lives on the corpses of other creatures, protects little birds from the attacks of the hawk. Yet men are found cruel enough to slay him who has fed them. To the gallows with them! Let *him* become the food of the pious vulture, who has cruelly contrived the death of his provider. That is the fitting sepulchre for the man who has left his lord unburied. (*Var.* 2.19, 181-82)

Except in this manner, Cassiodorus makes little use of Classical sources, acknowledged or not. He does, however, share the preference of late classical writers for etymologies. In his 1945 study, Joseph van den Besselaar identifies 43 uses of etymology in the *Variae*.

Scholars who have studied such factors as terminology, syntax, clausulae, and vocabulary in the *Variae* have concluded that the language Cassiodorus uses is derived from the Latin literary tradition and is obviously uninfluenced by Gothic elements.⁵ Cassiodorus uses a lot of newly coined words which seem to have had more specific

meaning than their classical synonyms, yet his linguistic style is completely consistent with the rhetorical training taught in late antiquity.⁶ In fact, Rev. Bernard Henry Skahill concludes that Cassiodorus seldom breaks from the standards common to Latin prose of antiquity:

[W]here Cassiodorus' syntax, either nominal or verbal, and his vocabulary diverge from classical norms, a precedent can be found for his usage in the writings of the Silver Age or in the Earlier Late Latin Writers, profane and ecclesiastical. He deliberately, then, takes counsel of the past and adopts in the main the linguistic usage of earlier authors. The result is a work that is highly artificial. (260)

We must remember that regardless of contemporary standards, Cassiodorus *was* an effective rhetorician, one of the best his age produced, and his work the *Variae* has long been recognized by historians as both characteristic of and important to that era. If we as rhetorical scholars are truly interested in understanding medieval rhetoric, we must begin examining the *Variae* and works of its type which represent actual rhetorical practice; we must not restrict our attention to works such as the *Institutiones* which trace only the way in which Classical rhetoric was transmitted in abbreviated or distorted form through the ages. Particularly in the case of Cassiodorus, a man living in an age of transition, the significance of such study should be apparent. As Hodgkin comments:

His position, . . . which was in more senses than one that of a borderer between two worlds (i.e., between ancient and modern, or Roman and Teutonic), gives to the study of his writings an exceptional value. (*Letters* 1)

NOTES

¹The *Variae* has been edited most recently by Ake J. Fridh in the Latin series of *Corpus Christianorum*. Translated passages cited in this essay are from Thomas Hodgkin's *The Letters of Cassiodorus* and are noted by book number, letter or form number, and the page reference in Hodgkin.

²Herein, I cite mainly the comprehensive account provided by Cassiodorian scholar, O'Donnell (73-102).

³O'Donnell (84-85) provides a helpful discussion of how much latitude Cassiodorus probably exercised with these documents in creating the public image of Italy's rulers. Skahill (xxi) discusses the degree to which Cassiodorus' words transform even Theodahad, "one of the meanest insects that ever crawled across the page of history," into "a holy and devout man." On the problem of authenticity, refer to Skahill (xix and xxi).

⁴O'Donnell 88-89; cf. the studies of H. F. A. Nickstadt and Ake J. Fridh, *Terminologie et formules dans les "Variae"* 18-19.

⁵For example, refer to the three studies by Fridh on the language of the *Variae*, to Skahill's work on its syntax, and to O. J. Zimmermann's study of the vocabulary of the *Variae*.

⁶O'Donnell 95; cf. E. R. Curtius 273-301.

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