

Symmachus. Oration VI. For Flavius Severus. 376-378.

Introduction

Flavius Severus, *PLRE* I Severus 24, is known only from this fragmentary oration in which Symmachus requests admission to the senate for the former imperial official. Pabst 285 suggests that Symmachus may have become acquainted with Severus when he served as proconsul of Africa during the years 373–374,¹ when Theodosius the elder was also in the province dealing with the insurrection of Firmus (372–375). Theodosius was sent in 373 and stayed in the province until his execution at Carthage, late in 375. For the African campaign, see Ammianus 29.5.4–56.

Historians find several things of especial interest in this fragmentary oration: Symmachus' value for our understanding of *adlectio* into the senate, his characterization of the senate as a class, and the mention of Theodosius the elder. Vera 1979: 398–401 argues that the date, first proposed by Seeck, may be too early, and that the *argumentum e silentio*, viz., that after 378 Symmachus would have mentioned the newly appointed Augustus along with his father, is not compelling in view of the fragmentary nature of the text. Vera's date of around 388 depends on other suppositions: he argues that a young person as calculating as Symmachus had shown himself on many occasions would not have praised the elder Theodosius so soon after his execution and while both Valens and Gratian were still alive.² Yet Theodosius must have had friends and supporters — witness the appointment of his son upon Valens' death — and unknown influences upon Symmachus cannot be discounted.³

1 . . . can claim for virtue. But what need is there to boast about anyone's family in the presence of the most noble men of the human race?⁴ Every light is dimmed by the rays of the sun; the brightness of day does not allow the stars' fires to glow.⁵ Remember, nevertheless, that this happens not because of diffidence but because of reverence. Before the somehow sacred⁶

¹ Matthews 1971: 122 sets forth the evidence for the termini of his appointment.

² Sogno 2006: 26, however, is open to the possibility that there was a friendship between Symmachus and Theodosius that affected the orator even after Theodosius' death.

³ See notes to §4 below.

⁴ Passage cited, inter alia, by Chastagnol 1970: 314 to show Symmachus' traditional view of the senate at Rome, a direct inheritance from the time of the Republic and early Empire. He also cites *Ep.* 1.52 *pars melior humani generis*, and *Or.* 8.3 *impulsu fortasse boni sanguinis, qui se semper agnoscit*. As Chastagnol 1986: 77–78 observes, to Ammianus as well as to Symmachus the adjective *nobilis* denotes a senator. Then perhaps *nobilissimus* has taken over the meaning of the Republican superlative adjective *amplissimus*.

⁵ Cf. *Orations* 1.5 and 3.2, and their notes, and references to imperial light, or an emperor's keen gaze, or some similarly glorious sight, in *P.L.* 11.2.1, 6.17.1. Cicero once compared non-essential virtues to starlight in sunshine: *Fin.* 5.71 *ita enim parvae et exiguae sunt istae accessiones bonorum, ut, quem ad modum stellae in radiis solis, sic istae in virtutum splendore ne cernantur quidem*.

⁶ The adjective *sacer* does need to be qualified by *quodammodo*, as it had long been synonymous with 'imperial' in most official contexts relating to human beings.

doors of the curia a new colleague lays aside the distinctions of his own ancestors, he enters attended only by virtues,⁷ which alone can reveal even ancestry which we were unwilling to praise.⁸

2 If any order could be maintained in such important matters, I would first proclaim the character of the man, then his honors; but I understand that each must be united; for political power is a faithful judge of individuals' abilities. With what great embarrassment do you think he happened to be chosen so late! Having long ago advanced into the highest ranks of the state he is still doubtful whether he can discharge the office of senator.⁹ Assuredly this hesitation has increased our dignity and a higher place has been created which the best of men has reserved for himself after the most powerful offices. We must admit, *patres conscripti*, that something more distinguished has been offered us, because we deny nothing to others who hasten to this order.

3 Moderation in desires¹⁰ ought to be celebrated with no trifling praise, especially in this easy age of ours, which does not have degrees of desire. Who would believe that a man noble for eloquence long accounted among the ornaments of the forum,¹¹ ex-governor,¹² a little while ago received a province and after traversing a long journey set sail toward an almost trifling honor,¹³ when most of the more common men begin practically with the highest offices?¹⁴ But a good conscience considers this thing which it has undertaken itself extraordinary, and established the order of magistracies which the merits of upright men have created. It does not know how to reckon public concern by names and thinks that that is the pinnacle, which has received a more worthy man.

⁷ In contexts of praise and recommendation, the argument from virtue, or accomplishment, stands in for lack of appropriate ancestry.

⁸ Severus' lack of noble, i.e. senatorial, ancestors is noted; without an appropriate family to recommend him for admission to the senate, the candidate stands on his record. Thus the next section opens with a reference to what Symmachus says is the usual order of topics in a speech of praise and his inability to adhere to this schema — character first, then offices he has held (on the meaning of *honor* see *Oration* 4.6 with note 18) — evidently because character (*mores*) is best elucidated by ancestry.

⁹ See note 10 to *Oration* 4.4, on rank, outranking, and status. Chastagnol 1970: 312 discusses qualifications for *adlecti*, who at Rome entered *inter praetorios* or *inter consulares*.

¹⁰ Sogno 2006: 106 n. 168 agrees with Chastagnol 1986: 79 that by this phrase Symmachus describes Severus' entry into the senate *inter praetorios*. See discussion in Chastagnol 1992: 284 of Symmachus' argument in *Relatio* 5 for inducting the Greek orator Celsus at the consular level. A person who became a senator at the praetorian level was liable for the considerable expense of praetorian games.

¹¹ Indication that he had been an advocate.

¹² There is no information about the exact location, but consensus is that he was governor of Mauretania Sitifensis, and in that capacity encountered the *magister militum* Theodosius, whom Severus assisted in the campaign against Firmus (see §4).

¹³ Again, as Callu notes, an indicator of entry to the senate at the lower rank.

¹⁴ Some have seen in this a criticism of Valentinian's practice of promoting his fellow Pannonians and others with little or no claim to status or, perhaps, even education. Pabst n. 8 to *Oration* 6.

4 The office of governor grew greatly in distinction at that time and extended to the rank of its holder. And when one province did not contain the glory of a powerful man, a wider reputation took care of itself: thus he was joined as adviser for the war in Africa to Theodosius, once the most renowned of *magistri militum*.¹⁵ Here I can no longer conceal what testimony¹⁶ . .

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¹⁵ Callu believes that Symmachus knew Theodosius in Africa, and probably Severus as well. Matthews 1971 had argued on geographical grounds that Symmachus probably did not encounter the general while still proconsul of Africa and resident in or near Carthage, but saw him only after his term was up when he traveled to Mauretania Caesariensis to check on his estates. He may also (Matthews 1971: 127) have met Theodosius earlier, in Trier.

¹⁶ The reasons for the trial and execution of Theodosius, father of the man soon to be named emperor, are not clear. Ammianus does not continue his narrative of affairs in Africa after Theodosius' restoration of order to the area, and there is little ancient evidence. For discussion and bibliography, see Coşkun 2002: 187–188 and Kelly 2013: 399–401, who have most recently argued in favor of the gloss on Jerome's *Chronicle* s.a. 376 that Theodosius was killed *factione eorum, qui et ipsi mox caesi sunt, id est maximinus ex praefecto et ceteri*. Errington 1996: 446–447 leaves open the possibility that Maximinus and associates actually were the guilty parties, but believes that the emperor Theodosius was willing to accept that they were.

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