

PANEGYRICUS

Isocrates

The institution of festivals which include athletic competitions has often led me to feel surprise at the large rewards offered for mere physical successes, while the unselfish endeavour of men who have set their whole being to work for the benefit of others receives no recognition, though they merit the greater consideration. Athletic physique might be doubled without any benefit to others, while the public spirit of a single individual may bring profit to all who care to participate in it. Nonetheless I have not been discouraged or reduced to inactivity. In the assurance that the repute my words will win me is sufficient reward I come here to advocate a policy of war outside the bounds of Greece, and unity within. I am aware that many who claim to be men of intelligence have come forward to deal with this subject. But I make a double claim to it, first in the hope of establishing such a distinction from them that mine will be thought the first word on the subject, and secondly in the initial belief that the best oratory is that which deals with the greatest themes and combines a display of the of the speaker's powers with the interests of his audience, as this does. In addition, favourable circumstances still hold, so that the subject has not yet become obsolete. A theme should be brought to a close when the circumstances which gave rise to it are over and with them the need to consider it, or when the discussion can be seen to have reached its conclusion and nothing further is left for others to add.

There is some tendency to criticize speeches which are too highly elaborated for the ordinary man. Such critics make the great mistake of viewing a very elaborate discourse in the same light as a speech in a private suit, as though both should have the same character. They do not realize that one kind aims at accuracy, the other at display, that their own eye is on simplicity but that the power to command perfection in oratory would be incompatible with a simple style. There is no difficulty in seeing that they give their approval within their own familiar understanding. I am not concerned with them so much as with the view that will reject any looseness of expression and will irritably demand qualities in my work which will not appear in any other. To this I will speak a bold word in self-defence before embarking on my theme. In general, opening passages are designed to mollify the audience and make excuse for the discourse which is to follow, by claiming either hasty preparation or the difficulty of finding words to match the greatness of the subject. I take the opposite approach, and declare that, if I fail to do justice to my subject, to my reputation and to the length, not only of the time now occupied by it, but of my whole life, I ask for no sympathy, but ridicule and contempt. I deserve it in the fullest measure, if I have no more than ordinary qualifications for so lofty an undertaking.