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Demosthenes (384 B.C.-322 B.C.)

We have seen already that the growth of oratory was an important element in the increasingly public, litigious, and politically complex society of first the classical century, and then of the more modern fourth century which is the golden period of Greek oratory and philosophy. It was into the center of this kind of fervent political/cultural environment that Demosthenes grew up.

He was the son of a prosperous swordmaker, and grew up comfortably and well educated. (From early in life he studied the texts of great predecessor orators.) At the age of twenty he faced his first legal/oratorical challenge. His Father having passed on, guardians were appointed to care for Demosthenes' inheritance, but as it happened they squandered all but a small remnant of the inherited money, slaves, and possessions. At the age of twenty Demosthenes undertook to recover his due inheritance, and successfully prevailed in an Athenian law court. From that moment he found his vocation, and yet he was not yet filled with a mission, nor was he ever, actually, to be a great extempore speaker. (His preference was for carefully prepared written texts.) He turned to the role of *logographe*r, which, as we have seen, was the job of preparing legal cases for others, who would read, in court, the texts lawyers like Demosthenes put before them. By 354 B.C., however, Demosthenes had been drawn out into the public light by the increasing pressure of politics; Athens was called on to resist the encroaching Macedonian threat from northern Greece, and especially the power hunger of King Philip. From 354, when Demosthenes delivered his first 'Philippic,' an attack on Philip who seemed voracious to swallow Athens, Demosthenes emerged as a forceful public figure. From that point on his oratorical skills were blended with political intensity, and indeed that blend seems to have provided the *je ne sais quoi* which rendered him the ultimate in reputation for oratory, and the figure to whom posterity turned as to the finest of speakers.

The coda to this tale further deepens the drama of Demosthenes. After Philip's death, his son Alexander unleased a subordinate, Antipater, to get rid of the thorn that Demosthenes was. Antipater moved in on Athens, pursued Demosthenes, and in the end this greatest of Greek orators killed himself.