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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

QUALITIES OF INDIAN ELOQUENCE

Thomas Jefferson thought that the best explanation of Indian oratory was to be found in the non-coercive nature of their system of social control. Members of the tribe were not forced to engage in any enterprise, but were led to duty by persuasion or in emulation of the personal example of others. Hence, eloquence in council and bravery in battle became the chief means of leadership. He who could make a better speech than his fellows was highly esteemed. And if, perchance, a brave was equally gifted in physical prowess, like Keokuk, he was doubly certain of prestige.

Under such favorable conditions the Indians developed a distinctive style of oratory — forceful, dramatic, and possessing rare beauty of allusion, yet wholly natural and in harmony with native ideals. There was nothing imitative about Indian eloquence. Probably the most conspicuous characteristics of speeches that have been preserved are the rich imagery, the metaphorical references to natural phenomena, and the pathos of a vanquished race.

But these are not the only qualities of Indian oratory. The recorded speeches are invariably simple in structure, direct, logical, and dignified. Sentences are simple and terse, as emphatic as pistol shots, and as final. The Indian orator was serious: he had a

cause to plead and he proceeded straight to the point, wasting no effort on frivolity. While his speeches may have lacked humor, they were by no means devoid of wit. When the Sioux claimed that the Sacs and Foxes were deaf to the advice of the government and suggested that the commissioner bore their ears with sticks, Keokuk retorted that the ears of the Sioux were so closed against hearing anything good that they ought to be bored with iron, and emphasized his meaning by brandishing his spear. For sheer adroitness, the annals of oratory might be searched in vain for a discourse more perfectly adapted to its purpose than Keokuk's speech at the war council on the Iowa.

With all of their dignity and gravity, however, Indian orators appealed to the emotions more than to reason. To arouse the passions of painted warriors, they spoke in stealthy tones of cunning plots; recounted mighty deeds of valor, suiting pantomimic gesture to the thought; portrayed the red man's tragic plight by vivid repetition of unnumbered wrongs; proudly proclaimed with folded arms and gleaming eyes the ancient glories of the tribe; or, striding to and fro, with many a savage flourish of scalping knife and tomahawk, demanded bloody vengeance. In the presence of the white men they were more restrained and circumspect, yet their words revealed unfathomed depths of feeling. Whenever the Indian spoke he bared his soul, but he never lost his poise.

J. E. B.