

Declamation, Paternity, and Roman Identity

Authority and the Rhetorical Self

ERIK GUNDERSON



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DECLAMATION, PATERNITY, AND ROMAN IDENTITY

This book explores the much maligned and misunderstood genre of declamation. Instead of a bastard rhetoric, declamation should be seen as a venue within which the rhetoric of the legitimate self is constructed. These fictions of the self are uncannily real, and these stagey dramas are in fact rehearsals for the serious play of Roman identity. Critics of declamation find themselves recapitulating the very logic of the genre they are refusing. When declamation is read in the light of the contemporary theory of the subject a wholly different picture emerges: this is a canny game played within and with the rhetoric of the self. This book makes broad claims for what is often seen as a narrow topic. An appendix includes a new translation and brief discussion of a sample of surviving examples of declamation.

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For Jason

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Preface

Acheron

The learning of the Sophists is thus directly the opposite of ours, which only aspires to acquire information and investigate what is and has been – it is a mass of empirical matter, in which the discovery of a new form, a new worm, or other vermin is held to be a point of great importance.

Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*¹

Not even the most febrile fits of authorial vanity would incline me to believe that the world eagerly awaits the present volume. Relatively few know what declamation is, and of those who know something about it, most are satisfied with their knowledge, and do not care to know more. Perhaps the author of a full-length study on such a topic possesses an admirable dedication to the production of knowledge in its own right, to the documenting of every scrap about the past no matter how tattered and uninteresting. Or perhaps such an author is merely dedicated to the production of verbiage and to wallowing in the mire. General readers can be excused from perusing the first sort of text; sensible ones will avoid the second.

Producing knowledge and producing verbiage, though, are themselves – or at least they should be – issues within declamatory criticism. They are not mere metacritical issues. Can seemingly empty speech from antiquity really have been all that empty? Just try to say something and have it mean nothing. Have you come up with a clever bit of non-meaning? Remember, its meaninglessness is still governed by the condition that it be meaningful. It means, then, precisely nothing. And even if you can produce that one meaningless thought, you must also accept that others did the same over the course of centuries. It would be easier just to admit that something might be in such a corpus than to insist doggedly that scores of hands had so successfully managed to speak empty volumes. Worse still, they were

¹ Hegel 1974: 352.

not obviously trying to mean nothing. To read declamation should not be considered deigning to calculate a sum that always yields zero as its result. Nor are we condescending to know more about an empty rhetoric. Instead let us call it descending into the rhetorical underworld.

Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* strikes the eye as follows:² one sees the title page and upon it in large print and all capitals the words DIE TRAUMENDEUTUNG; turning the page reveals on its obverse a single Latin line in small capitals and set in quotation marks. Specifically one sees: „FLECTERE SI NEQUEO SUPEROS, ACHERONTA MOVEBO“. The next page is headed “Vorbemerkung.” The Latin thus comes before the remarks that come before the argument. “If I can not sway the gods, I will move Hell.”

Who is speaking? Juno, of course (Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.312). In a famous scene she promises suffering for Aeneas in Italy and thereupon engenders the crises that will propel the second half of the epic's plot much as her anger structured the first half. The story of finding Italy and founding Rome is always also the story of an angry godhead. The netherworld she set in motion cannot be forgotten when we contemplate the hero and the favor of the Olympians. The refusal of Juno, of Dido, of Carthage, and of the powers below is a necessary and not an adventitious element of the grand tale proper.

Who is speaking? Freud, of course. Freud prefaces his epic adventure into the workings of the psyche by insisting that one must visit the underworld. He implicitly argues thereby that we must pass through the ivory gate of false dreams if we are ever to reach our destiny of true self-knowledge. That is, Freud is both the outraged goddess and the architect of a vision that goes beyond the merely subterranean ways of passion. Freud sees the way as including its own detour, *Weg* is also *Umweg*. Similarly, the story of Rome is not merely the story of the Roman empire any more than the story of the *Aeneid* is simply the story of Aeneas, or even of the emperor Augustus. And those who cannot trace the genealogy of the present are condemned merely to puppet the fascistic dictates of the superego as a law willfully blind to its own genesis.

In the following study declamation is consistently viewed as the dream state of rhetoric. A fallacious detour from the dream of true, full and authentic speech, it nevertheless reveals truths about “rhetoric proper” that would otherwise remain forever hidden. A journey towards understanding

² I am looking at Freud 1942: v–vii. It is possible, though, to doubt that v and vi are “properly” numbered pages: vii is the first page to actually bear a number at its foot.

the discourses of Rome cannot exclude a journey into the world of shadows, monsters, and passions found below. Certainly the ancients themselves almost invariably visited the Acheron of declamation. Some drank of the river of forgetfulness and never left. Others shrugged it off as merely a dream. To still more it was a real hell and one to be scorned in the name of a heavenly sublime. And some few discovered therein the Isles of the Blessed and lingered among the finest company. In the past one had a variety of relations to the genre. Today we seemingly have no relation at all; but that is a mere semblance.

Let us no longer silence declamation. A genre that is itself so canny about speech and silence awaits our return. In the land of declamation we will no longer be able to formulate the staid proposition that “I am that I am.” Actually, it were better to avoid such as an impiety. Speech is here never self-presence, it is always role playing. Nor is rhetoric any longer mere strategy, an instrument of the will deployed to achieve crass ends: Milo must go free! Declamatory rhetoric is never “mere rhetoric,” words both hiding and revealing some governing intention. Declamatory rhetoric never intends to acquit or to convict. It argues, but never to persuade us to act. In so doing, it reveals all of the dimensions so routinely forgotten when we read for the “conscious” intentions of the rhetorical subject at the expense of the literary unconscious of rhetorical discourse.

Moreover the discourse on rhetoric is itself a rhetoric. Comically it is also declamatory on the question of declamation without realizing that it is such. If we would know ourselves, we ought first to realize the path we have traveled. If our destiny is truly to be manifested in an empire of reasoned criticism, we would do well to meditate on where such empires come from and what gets lost in the process of their formation. We need to look at the rhetorical force of the Latin inscription that comes before and yet within the dream of sublime political oratory. What do we stand to lose if we hearken to declamation’s specious sophistry and participate in its baroque culture? I would answer that we thereby surrender our own pedantry and penchant for cleaving unto the simple maxim that the things that we see in the canonical texts are, and that they are the only reality.³

This book represents the fruits of a variety of moments where various people were willing to take declamation seriously. The project began life as a seminar in the spring of 1997. Few enrolled. It was nearly canceled. But I thank both my then chair Will Batstone and my three graduate students

³ This is a riff on Hegel’s portrait of the pedant (Hegel 1974: 353).

for taking a risk. I wrote a significant portion of the manuscript while on leave. Here again my department and chair were extremely generous. While not teaching I was residing as a metic at the Center for Hellenic Studies. I very much enjoyed having access to their excellent Latin resources, even if a study of Roman declamation did at first appear to them to be a bit ἄστοπον. Thomas Habinek offered a warm welcome to the completed first draft of the manuscript and encouraged me with both his advice and his support. My colleagues Will Batstone and Kirk Freudenburg have been similarly generous with their time and counsel. John Henderson and the anonymous reader at Cambridge University Press offered a wealth of sage and thoughtful criticism in their turn. And my readers owe them a particular debt of gratitude: they rightly advised a less windy and wordy treatment of this all too garrulous genre. Finally, Victoria Wohl has been unfailingly generous with her ideas and patience over the span of several years. That is a long time to spend weeding in rhetoric's hothouse. Fearing the censor's mark if I say more, with Cato I will pray instead that Jove should thunder.

INTRODUCTION

A praise of folly

The battle of reason is the struggle to break up the rigidity to which the understanding has reduced everything.

Hegel, *The Science of Logic*¹

One understands all too well what a declamation is, and yet a reasoned account of the genre is perhaps still wanted. A declamation was a rhetorical piece on an invented theme. If one imagined a judicial proceeding, the resulting speech would be known as a *controuersia*. An exhortation to a fictive interlocutor was called a *suasoria*. The following proposition might form the foundation for a *controuersia* and produce accusations and defences: “A married woman gave birth to a black baby. She is charged with adultery.”² A *suasoria* might encourage or discourage a historical or mythological figure. One was given a theme such as “Should Cicero beg Antonius to spare his life?”³ Theoretically the same speaker might engage one side and then promptly reverse himself and plead the opposite cause. Though I will argue that we need to take declamation more seriously, clearly one cannot argue that everything said was said “in earnest.” Such word play could be used to train schoolboys who dreamed of one day becoming politicians and public speakers, or these exercises might be pursued by mature men who sought to entertain a circle of friends or even a broader public with a display of verbal dexterity.⁴

¹ Hegel 1975: 54

² *Matrona Aethiopem peperit. arguitur adulterii.* Calpurnius Flaccus, *Declamationes* 2. Notice that “matron” equals “non-black” for the community of speakers.

³ *Deliberat Cicero an Antonium deprecetur.* Seneca, *Suasoriae* 6.

⁴ Beard does well to emphasize entertainment against the endless focus upon education in other authors: “[T]he world of the *Controuersiae* is a world not of hack humdrum teenage instruction, but a world of well-known, glamorous rhetoricians, enjoying a sparkling reputation among the Roman elite.” (Beard 1993: 53) For Goldberg declamation is “a spectator sport for engaged and experienced spectators.” (Goldberg 1997: 174) Heath offers a nearly identical assessment (Heath 1995: 18). Sussman offers a similar portrait, but he finds such a zeal for declamation to be “strange.” (Sussman 1994: 4–5) Sussman elsewhere argues that declamation’s raciness is attributable to titillation that panders to the base interests of the audience. See Sussman 1987: ii and v.

Though I am interested in its Roman incarnation, this genre neither begins nor ends at Rome. Russell rightly notes that the association of declamation with Rome is really merely an accident of the preservation of our sources.⁵ These exercises became prominent in Greek rhetorical education in the third century BCE,⁶ although earlier works such as Antiphon's *Tetralogies* and even Plato's dialogues reveal that fictions of rhetoric are more or less as old as systematic thought about rhetoric itself.⁷ Scholars have been too eager to confine Roman declamation to the imperial era. Here they follow Seneca the Elder's assertions that the practice is as old as he is.⁸ However it is clear that Seneca can only mean a certain version of the practice, since he depicts Cicero as engaged in proto-declamations. Moreover Cicero himself portrays the men of the generation preceding his own playing with fictitious cases.⁹ As far as the later history of declamation goes, Libanius himself wrote an *Apology of Socrates*, and he was still producing declamations in the fourth century CE. Libanius was by no means alone in his efforts.¹⁰ In fact declamation persisted in both the Greek East and the Latin West into and beyond the Middle Ages. Declamation was hardly an aberrant fad. Declamation was a durable player on the rhetorical scene.

If the historical time-frame of declamation is frequently distorted and compressed with an eye to critiquing it as the inconsequential product of a fallen Rome, the age of the participants becomes another occasion for dismissing the case of declamation unheard. Those who would slight the genre stress that it was a school-boy exercise – which it was – while failing to

⁵ Russell 1996: 6.

⁶ For examples of third-century activity one can refer to POxy 2400 which gives a list of declamatory topics, Berl. Pap. P. 9781 which plays with Demosthenes' *Leptines*, and PHibeh 15 which is also a historically-minded rhetorical exercise. See Russell 1983 for a detailed account of Greek declamation.

⁷ On the varieties of proto-declamaion see Russell 1996: 5.

⁸ *Controversiae*, 1.pr.12. See Sinclair on evaluating Seneca's claims as programmatic and not documentary (Sinclair 1995a: 102). Winterbottom encourages the identification of declamation with the fall of the Republic (Winterbottom 1974: ix). Compare Clarke 1953: 89 and Leeman 1963: 226.

⁹ Cicero, *De Oratore* 1.149. See Winterbottom for other "declamatory" portions of the Ciceronian corpus and the zeal with which later declaimers spotted and reused them (Winterbottom 1982: 60). Winterbottom also offers a concise overview of the early history of declamation from its arrival at Rome up to Seneca's day (Winterbottom 1974: vii–x). For a more detailed treatment, see Bonner 1949: 1–26. Compare Jenkinson 1955. Quintilian reads the *De Oratore* similarly at *Institutio Oratoria* 2.4.42. He also notes that the Greek practice of treating "fictional material in imitation of public and policy debate" (*fictas ad imitationem fori consiliorumque materias*; 2.4.41) began with Demetrius of Phaleron who was born around 350 BCE.

¹⁰ For example, a papyrus fragment from the fifth century CE contains a declamation against Alcibiades. See Lewis 1936: 79–87. See Schmitz 1999 and his bibliography for a portrait of the lively interest in declamation during the Second Sophistic.

note that it was not merely a school-boy exercise.¹¹ A contemporary analogue might be to confuse the Hardy Boys series with detective fiction as a whole. Certainly there are many mysteries written with young readers in mind, but not all are intended for an immature audience. Similarly, like declamation, detective fiction is not usually seen as a high-brow form, but nevertheless numerous works are viewed as serious fare for the mature reader. And much as a snide critic eager to establish his own superior taste might deride such fiction as fundamentally puerile in the face of a masterpiece like *War and Peace*, one notes that *The Brothers Karamazov* itself is a sort of whodunit.

Other than the *Minor Declamations* it is not clear that any of what remains of the Latin declamatory corpus was part of school practice. And those declamations are composed as models specifically designed to inculcate the habits of mature oratory. The *Major Declamations* are very long and polished. They appear to be best suited to performance rather than the inculcation of detailed precepts via specific examples.¹² Similarly Seneca the Elder in the *Controversiae* mentions the schoolhouse only infrequently, and he often depicts scenes where it is hard to imagine that classes were being held.¹³

Moreover, declamatory training was offered to youths roughly as old as contemporary undergraduates: these are not elementary school “Dick and Jane” exercises. Elementary exercises are learning how to read, write and do math with the *grammatistes*. Then in what we might call “middle school” one was taught grammar while reading literary classics with the *grammaticus*. Some time well into the teen years – but certainly after the youth is no longer considered a boy (*puer*) and is now a young man (*iuuenis*) – students move over to the *rheto*r who offers specifically rhetorical training. This is itself gradated: first there are *communes loci* or “rhetorical commonplaces” such as the denunciation of an adulterer; and similarly there are *theses* or “propositions” such as “Is city or country life better?” Ultimately the well-practiced student moves over to declamation proper where all of the

¹¹ Bloomer goes perhaps too far in this direction. His arguments as to the fit between youthful psychology and declamatory fantasy invites reduction of the genre to schoolboy antics (Bloomer 1997b: 64). See also the comment that there is a parallel with “the nonsense songs learned by children” (Bloomer 1997b: 70).

¹² Sussman assumes that all of the *Major Declamations* were written by schoolmasters for their students (Sussman 1995: 191–92). But compare the position of Sussman 1987: ii, and Sussman 1987: v, “One wonders how MD 18 and 19 could find room in a school curriculum.”

¹³ See Chapter 4 below for prominent Romans speaking and in the audience. Calpurnius Flaccus’ works are so truncated that it is impossible to guess what their full shape would have been and what sort of audience they had in mind.

elements of forensic oratory can be pursued simultaneously.¹⁴ Declamation is not, then, etymologically speaking, puerile literature.

Declamation is not much read. Let me refine this bald statement by asking a series of questions. Why do relatively few people read declamation? Why do specialists in Latin studies – people who ought to be eager to study any of what little remains of the glory that was Rome – why do these people tend to ignore declamation? What does it mean for something to be not worth reading? Why was declamation once worth so much trouble to so many, whereas now its stock has fallen so low that we have become used to hearing of the bankruptcy of the genre in more than one sense of the term? We know that almost every man of letters in antiquity had had some truck with declamation at one time in his life and was perhaps even for a long while a devotee of the form.¹⁵ Even so, we act as if declamation did not really matter. Or worse, such declamatory indulgences were like so many trips to a brothel – embarrassing episodes despite which one may still admire the remainder of the man.¹⁶ Besides, at the time everybody was doing it...¹⁷

For an example of declamation-hating scholarship on declamation see the remarks of Winterbottom: “The modern will find a good deal of the elder Seneca’s material unreal, unfamiliar and even tedious. He will skip many of the epigrams, and concentrate on the lively prefaces and the incidental anecdote. But anyone, lay or scholar, who wishes to understand the essence of Silver Latin will have to take the rough with the smooth and nerve himself to read at least a fair sample of the whole.”¹⁸ The “rough” would appear to be declamation itself, while the “smooth” is everything else. One is little inspired to read on. We do only because we need to take our bitter medicine. And the goal is itself a dreary one: now we can better appreciate why the rest of Silver Latin was not Gold. Indeed Leeman sees in Seneca

¹⁴ See Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* Books 1 and 2 for a portrait of the ideal course of study. Compare the outline of Greek practice offered by Heath, and see his bibliography (Heath 1995: 17–18).

¹⁵ See Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.20.4 for a critique of men who have a taste for the outlandish in declamation and who spend all their time and energy on such exercises. Though lampooned by a “proper authority” like Quintilian, nevertheless these speakers may have had their own reasons for lingering in their chosen genre beyond mere folly.

¹⁶ Against this compare Suetonius, *Nero* 10.2. The biographer takes the following as one of his illustrations of the good early reign of Nero: at that time the emperor would practice declamation publicly. See also Suetonius, *De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus* 25.3 for the declamatory histories of other notable figures.

¹⁷ For example, Kraus 1994: 3 n.8 records the heated debate surrounding Livy and declamation wherein the scandal of declamation is repeatedly either denied or excused. Kraus herself describes declamation as being “fashionable” at the time (Kraus 1994: 3–4), and hence she would seem to be a member of the “everyone was doing it” camp.

¹⁸ Winterbottom 1974: xxiii.

little beyond a report on “the origins of the *Argentea Latinitas*.”¹⁹ Fantham asserts that the modern reader will be amazed to learn that serious, famous Romans listened to “declamatory performances on hackneyed and fictitious themes by Porcius Latro or Cestius or Haterius.”²⁰ Note, then, the tone of “[Seneca] knows prose writings (surely not declamations!) of Virgil.”²¹ And see also her characterization of the influence of declamation upon poetry as a “problem.”²² Examples paralleling Winterbottom and Fantham could be multiplied *ad infinitum*.

Why should one have to apologize for declamation? Why is it important that declamation be insignificant? How has declamation with its sound and its fury failed to signify anything? Has it failed? What would it mean to listen to this tale told by an idiot? I ask these questions of both the ancients and the moderns. They each offer roughly the same answer. Or, rather, most of the moderns would agree with some of the ancients: “Declamation is bunk.” And if Henry Ford was too busy making history to believe in it, perhaps declamation’s critics are themselves too busy being declamatory to bother assessing their own rhetoric.

Mine is a literary reading of a body of texts that relatively few would grace with the exalted title of “literature.”²³ By a literary reading I mean to indicate that I will be looking for themes, for motifs, for allusions, and for what goes unsaid or is left implied amidst so much verbosity. But by literary reading I also mean to indicate that I will be following the play of language itself and not just the purported intentions of a variety of authors and authorities. The result will frequently be less a high-modern praise of Literature than a postmodern meditation on the questions of language and identity. And lest anyone think such contemporary musings have been foisted upon the declaimer, I hope to argue that such issues preoccupied the ancients as well. Rhetoric and identity were closely aligned categories in antiquity, and declamation is no exception to this rule. And finally the declamations also ask the question of what “empty speech” signifies. Thus, rather than offering the empty negation of rhetoric stripped of its functional content, declamation restores to rhetoric a space within which to speak on that which is otherwise refused to rhetoric.

I take it then, that declamation is not failed oratory languishing beneath the weight of febrile fantasy, nor does it embody juvenile antics awaiting

¹⁹ Leeman 1963: 237. ²⁰ Fantham 1996: 10.

²¹ Fantham 1996: 92. ²² Fantham 1996: 94.

²³ See Walker for a revindication of oratory in general as a literary practice (Walker 2000). And note especially his assertion that a genre like declamation was one of “the chief media for eloquence on culturally resonant questions” and a place where consensus and community could be forged (Walker 2000: 108). See also Webb’s survey of the connections between rhetoric and poetry (Webb 1997).

the sound judgement of more mature years.²⁴ Such a verdict has contented many. As will be seen below, it is also a meta-declamatory judgement against declamation. Ridiculous and funny, infuriating and trite, declamation is not forensic oratory. And yet every speaker knew that he was not in the forum or in the Senate house, and critics of this rhetoric would do well to remember that the occasion and audience of any speech in antiquity had a profound impact on its form and contents. Declamation needs a new *mode* of reading that knows how to make a break with critical tools designed for a different kind of speech. Declamation is not “failing” to be Cicero any more than Lucan fails to be Virgil.²⁵ There is a relationship, but it is governed as much by the idea of rivalry as it is by notions of debt. These men are playing with the idea of Ciceronianism, not fumbling to produce their own *Pro Milone*.²⁶

These often ephemeral speeches not only reveal a great deal about the narrow circle before whom they might have been delivered, but they also offer us insights into the emplotting of Roman identity. By this I mean that we find in declamation a constant engagement with the “rules” of Romanness, an endless tracing of the contours of the licit and the illicit. These speeches are predicated upon a hypothetical transgression against society. The fantastic character of the sin and the often playful treatment of its exculpation nevertheless reveal a zone of intellectual engagement where serious questions are elaborated in a pointedly frivolous context. None of this is ever literally true. Still, the real keeps on intruding: political allegory, individual advancement, and the nature of authority in general return endlessly to the scene of declamation. Sometimes a play is the only thing to catch the conscience of the king. In declamation we will even find that truly disturbing themes otherwise unapproachable can be handled under the aegis of irrelevance, mere play, and idle fantasy. My guiding questions are accordingly rather broad and bold: How are we to read declamation? What will we find there? How deep can this genre get?

The foundation for such an investigation has been laid by the work of a number of other scholars. Though it remains a topic of interest today, an earlier generation of scholars was particularly engaged in exploring the

²⁴ For example, Winterbottom describes Cicero as one who “matured, and grew away from the schools.” (Winterbottom 1982: 60)

²⁵ See Johnson on what it takes to find a technique of reading Lucan that escapes from the orbit of Virgilian studies wherein Lucan transcribes an endless ellipse and his critics drably note his non-progress (Johnson 1987).

²⁶ See Seneca, *Controversiae* 3.pr.16 for Cestius as the author of an *In Milonem*.