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The Latin *Declamatio* in Renaissance Humanism

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This article lays out the abundant and diverse material relating to the humanist *declamatio*. In their assessment of ancient declamation, the humanists stressed Cicero's practice of *thesis* as a rhetorical exercise, and the critique, formulated by Seneca the Elder and Quintilian, of the unrealistic *controversia* and *suasoria*. A common feature of the theory and practice of humanist school declamation is its highly moralistic and didactic tendency. In light of this evaluation of the material concerning humanist *declamatio* in general, it seems reasonable to argue that controversial *declamationes*, like Erasmus's *Declamatio de laude matrimonii*, share the same moralistic and didactic concern. Therefore it seems unlikely that those *declamationes* should be considered as nothing more than rhetorical exercises.

[I retained] only the Habit of expressing myself in Terms of modest Diffidence, never using when I advance any thing that may possibly be disputed, the Words, *Certainly, undoubtedly*, or any others that give the Air of Positiveness to an Opinion; but rather say, I conceive, or I apprehend a Thing to be so or so, It appears to me, or I should think it so or so for such and such Reasons, or I imagine it to be so, or it is so if I am not mistaken. This Habit I believe has been of great Advantage to me, when I have had occasion to inculcate my Opinions and persuade Men into Measures that I have been from time to time engag'd in promoting. And as the chief Ends of Conversation are to *inform*, or to be *informed*, to *please* or to *persuade*, I wish wellmeaning sensible Men would not lessen their Power of doing Good by a Positive assuming Manner that seldom fails to disgust, tends to create Opposition, and to defeat every one of those Purposes for which Speech was given us, to wit, giving or receiving Information, or Pleasure: For if you would *inform*, a positive dogmatical Manner in advancing your Sentiments, may provoke Contradiction and prevent a candid Attention. If you wish Information and Improvement from the Knowledge of others and yet at the same time express yourself as firmly fix'd in your present Opinions, modest sensible Men, who do not love Disputation, will probably leave you undisturb'd in the Possession of your Error; and by such a Manner you can seldom hope to recommend yourself in *pleasing* your hearers, or to persuade those whose Concurrency you desire.

SUCH WORDS AS THESE,¹ written by one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, could well have appeared as the introductory quotation in a book on the Latin *declamatio* of the kind written by Erasmus and some of his fellow humanists at the beginning of the sixteenth century, for they voice perfectly the mental attitude that these humanists tried to achieve in their writings: modesty without the complete absence of self-confidence, a strong desire for communication with intellectual equals, and a keen grasp of appropriate ways in which to bring about a fruitful exchange of thought, that is, a good feeling for the possibilities afforded by rhetoric. This fragment from the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin can furthermore be considered an adequate, albeit partial, characterization of many a humanist *declamatio* (for instance, Erasmus's *Declamatio de laude matrimonii*), for such texts are truly devoted to "those purposes for which speech was given us, to wit, giving or receiving information, and pleasure."

Many rhetorical texts dating from the early decades of the sixteenth century, often called *declamatio* and frequently highly controversial at the time they were written, are evaluated in strongly divergent ways by modern critics. Writings like Erasmus's *Declamatio de laude matrimonii* ("Declamation on the Praise of Marriage") and *Laus stultitiae* ("Praise of Folly"), and Agrippa von Nettesheim's *Declamatio de incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium* ("Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts"), are considered by some critics as serious essays, and by others as rhetorical exercises (like the didactic and epideictic declamation of the early Roman Empire) or as paradoxes (a rhetorical genre that also existed in antiquity, e.g., Fronto's *Laudes fumi et pulveris*, second century A.D.). That these writings are called *declamatio* by their authors seems at first sight an important reason to consider them as rhetorical exercises. However, the fact that some of these *declamationes* were defended vigorously by their authors (and by fellow humanists) after they had been attacked, suggests that they were intended as more than composition exercises. This is particularly the case of Agrippa's *Declamatio de incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium* and Erasmus's *Declamatio de laude matrimonii*.²

The problem of the nature and function of this group of rhetorical texts in the humanist intellectual environment and in a wider Latin-reading public calls for a thorough assessment of the abundant and diverse material relating to the humanist *declamatio*. This material can be broadly divided

¹Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, ed. L. W. Labaree, R. L. Ketcham, H. C. Boatfield, and H. H. Fineman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 65.

²H. C. Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Apologia adversus calumnias propter declamationem de vanitate scientiarum, & excellentia verbi Dei, sibi per aliquos Lovanienses Theologistas intentatas; Querela super calumnia, ob eandem declamationem sibi . . . illata*. (Cologne, 1533), and two elaborate defenses written by Erasmus of his own *Declamatio de laude matrimonii: Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, in LB IX, 105F–112A; and *Dilutio eorum quae Iodocus Clithovaeus scripsit adversus declamationem Des. Erasmi Roterodami suasoriam matrimonii*, ed. E. V. Telle (Paris: Vrin, 1968).

into three parts: the ancient sources of the humanist *declamatio*, the *declamatio* as a part of the humanistic educational program, and finally its appearance outside the field of formal education. Each of these aspects of the humanist *declamatio* must be considered before an answer can be ventured as to whether *declamationes* like those of Erasmus may be considered as mere literary exercises, or as serious writings.

First, it seems important to question, or rather to estimate, the humanists' attitude towards the practice and theory of ancient declamation: what and how much did they know about ancient declamation? It is striking to note that by the end of the sixteenth century, the humanists were able to give a fair account of the history of ancient, particularly Roman, declamation, at the core of which was Seneca Rhetor's first *prooemium*. They make use of all the major sources, including Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, the first chapters of Petronius's *Satyricon* and Suetonius's *De rhetoribus*. On the whole, it seems not unreasonable to say that philological essays like Pierre Pithou's *Praefatio in Quintiliani declamationes* and his letter to his nephew Pierre Nevelet (1580) and Andrew Schott's *De . . . declamandi ratione* (1603) are comparable with modern works in the field like Bonner's *Roman Declamation*.³ Two features are stressed by the humanists. They observe that the generation of Cicero, and especially the master himself, practiced the *thesis*, which was originally a philosophic and dialectic exercise mainly in the field of ethics, treating a subject in an abstract fashion and weighing all possible arguments *pro* and *con*, without immediate reference to a given person, place or time. Cicero practiced the *thesis* as a rhetorical exercise, that is, with the possibility of including references to concrete circumstances involving persons, places, and time. They also note that Cicero described the *thesis* as a most useful exercise. The testimonies they cite in this connection prove they had a good idea of the Ciceronian ideals concerning the union of eloquence and wisdom, for these become manifest, in, among other things, the importance Cicero attaches to the exercise of the *thesis*.⁴ The humanist writers on *declamatio* further observe that the well-known exercises of *controversia* and *suasoria* were introduced in Rome during the lifetime of Seneca the Elder and emphasize that important rhetoricians like Quintilian and Seneca criticize the practice of *controversia* and *suasoria*,

³M. Fabius Quintilianus, *Declamationes quae ex CCCLXXXVIII supersunt CXLV ex veteri exemplari restitutae . . . Ex bibliotheca P. Pithoei I.C.* (Paris 1580), (ajj^r-aviii)^v; modern edition in M. van der Poel, *De "declamatio" bij de humanisten. Bijdrage tot de studie van de functies van de rhetorica in de Renaissance* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1987), 255–65. *Ibid.*, (Ffvi)^r-(Ffviii)^v; modern edition in van der Poel, *De "declamatio" bij de humanisten . . .*, 266–77. M. Annaei Senecae rhetoris *Suasoriae, Controversiae, Declamationumque excerpta* (Heidelberg 1603), 1–6; modern edition in van der Poel, *De "declamatio" bij de humanisten . . .*, 301–32. S. F. Bonner, *Roman Declamation in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1949).

⁴See Cicero, *Tusc.* I, 4, 7, quoted by Schott in *De . . . declamandi ratione* (van der Poel, *De "declamatio" bij de humanisten . . .*, 310). Cf. also *Tusc.* II, 3, 9.

because of their lack of realistic reference and practical relevance, and because they were mainly practiced for purposes of pretentious display. In short, the account given by humanists like Pithou and Schott seems to make clear that their main interest is in Ciceronian declamation. They frequently observe that subjects should be ethically relevant, and that rhetoric is not for mere ostentation but for the development of a keen judgment in choosing the right arguments and an adequate style.

Secondly, the function of *declamatio* within the tradition of school education must be carefully considered. It is common knowledge that the humanists introduced a new arts curriculum.⁵ Their main source in doing so was Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. Since the *declamatio* was part of the rhetorical training Quintilian described, it is to be expected that it was also included in the humanist arts curriculum, and indeed, this feature is acknowledged in many monographs on humanist school education. However, when one undertakes a survey of school declamation in the different countries where humanism spread in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, one finds that declamation was not introduced at the same time everywhere and did not cover exactly the same exercise in the humanist schools in the different parts of Europe. A tentative survey includes three major currents through which *declamatio* was introduced into the school programs of early modern Europe. Aside from a number of fifteenth-century private schools throughout Italy where rhetorical exercises were held (e.g., the schools of Guarino Guarini [da Verona] and Vittorino da Feltre),⁶ declamation was introduced in the arts curriculum in 1523 by Philip Melancthon, a Lutheran, when the University of Wittenberg was reorganized.⁷ From there, it spread among other Lutheran universities and, in some cases, secondary schools inside and later also outside of Germany.⁸ As a part of the Lutheran contribution to educational

⁵A useful survey of the humanist pedagogical program and the spread of humanist schools throughout Europe is included in R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954, reprint ed. 1977), 329–69.

⁶An edition of the major sources concerning these two schools can be found in E. Garin, *Il pensiero pedagogico dell'umanesimo* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1958). See also N. Giannetto, *Vittorino e la sua scuola. Umanesimo, pedagogia, arti* (Firenze: Olschki, 1981), G. Müller, *Bildung und Erziehung im Humanismus der italienischen Renaissance. Grundlage, Motive, Quellen* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1969) and G. Müller, *Mensch und Bildung im italienischen Renaissance-Humanismus. Vittorino da Feltre und die humanistische Erziehungsdenker* (Baden-Baden: Köhner, 1984).

⁷See particularly G. Bauch, *Die Einführung der Melancthonischen Declamationen und andere gleichzeitige Reformen an der Universität zu Wittenberg* (Breslau: M. & H. Marcus, 1900).

⁸The number of surviving school programs in Germany is overwhelming. A rich selection is published by R. Vormbaum, *Die evangelischen Schulordnungen des sechszehnten Jahrhunderts* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1860). There exist numerous studies of German universities in early modern times, often comprising an edition of faculty statutes (a small selection is listed in van der Poel, *De "declamatio" bij de humanisten . . .*, 62, n. 191). Useful surveys of the history of German schools and universities are included in G. Mertz, *Das Schulwesen der deutschen Reformation im 16. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1902) and F. Paulsen, *Geschichte des gelehrten Unterrichts auf den deutschen Schulen und Universitäten vom Ausgang des Mittelalters bis zur Gegenwart*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Veit, 1919–1921, 3d ed.; reprint ed. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965).

renovation, one must take into account the institution of the *gymnasium* also, later called *academicum gymnasium*, or Academy. In this institution, secondary school education was combined with the Faculty of Arts, thus providing a complete arts curriculum; later on, depending on local circumstances, the other traditional faculties were to be added. The first institute of this kind was the *gymnasium* of Strasburg (1538),⁹ which served as a model for a number of Lutheran schools, all of which included *declamatio* as a rhetorical exercise.

Between 1520 and 1530, a new kind of educational institute was founded by Zwinglian communities in present-day Switzerland. This school was devoted to the formation of Reformed preachers, and thus theology and rhetoric (including the exercise of declamation) were the two main subjects studied.¹⁰ Later in the sixteenth century, this type of school was somewhat developed and became practically indistinguishable from the Lutheran *gymnasia* or academical *gymnasia*. The Calvinist Academy of Geneva is a good example of this special kind of institution, in which a general humanist arts curriculum was combined with the specific program of a Divinity School.¹¹ The Geneva Academy was a model for other Calvinist communities in Europe such as, for example, the French Huguenots, who founded a large number of Academies.¹² One could say that this large group of non-Lutheran Reformed schools formed a second pathway along which declamation spread throughout school education in Europe.

Finally, the educational program of the Jesuits, launched in the 1540s and reaching its definitive form in the *Ratio studiorum* of 1599, also contained the *declamatio*.¹³ Through the very widespread diffusion of the Jesuit institutions, this school program can be considered the third major factor in the dissemination of school *declamatio*, inside as well as outside Europe.

⁹See M. Fournier & Ch. Engel, *Les statuts et privilèges des universités françaises depuis leur fondation jusqu'en 1789. Deuxième partie . . . Tome 4. L'université de Strasbourg et les académies protestantes françaises. Fasc. 1 (unique). Gymnase, Académie, Université de Strasbourg* (Paris: Larose et Forcel, 1894; reprint ed. Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1970). See among the modern studies of the *gymnasium* of Strasburg especially A. Schindling, *Humanistische Hochschule und freie Reichsstadt: Gymnasium und Akademie in Strassburg 1538–1621* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977).

¹⁰The most important schools are initially those of Zürich and Bern, later also Lausanne and eventually Geneva. See U. Im Hof, "Die Entstehung der reformierten Hohen Schule, Zürich 1525, Bern 1528, Lausanne 1537, Genf 1559," in *Beiträge zu Problemen deutscher Universitätsgründungen der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. P. Baumgart, N. Hammerstein (Nendeln: KTO Press, 1978), 234–62.

¹¹See Ch. Borgeaud, *Histoire de l'université de Genève. L'académie de Calvin 1559–1798* (Genève: Georg, 1900).

¹²See D. Bourchenin, *Etude sur les académies protestantes en France au XVIe et XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Grassart, 1882; reprint ed. Genève: Slatkine, 1969).

¹³The documents on Jesuit schools until 1580 are published in *Monumenta paedagogica Societatis Jesu*, 4 vols., ed. L. Lukács S.J. (Rome: Institutum historicum S.J., 1965–1981). Documents concerning the *Ratio studiorum* of 1586 and 1599 are published in *Ratio studiorum et institutiones scholasticae Societatis Jesu per Germaniam olim vigentes*, vol. 2, ed. G. Pachtler S.J. (Berlin: Hofmann, 1887; reprint ed. Osnabrück: Biblio, 1968).

As to the exact nature of the exercise comprising *declamatio*, we can affirm the following. The *declamatio* was designed by Melanchthon as an exercise in the five tasks of the orator, the *officia oratoris*. After a series of preliminary exercises, the student was given a theme and asked to write a composition (comprising the finding, arranging and formulating of arguments, *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*), and subsequently to make the speech in front of an audience (comprising memorizing and delivery, *memoria* and *pronuntiatio*). These two phases were clearly distinguished by Melanchthon.¹⁴ In reviewing the relevant source material, one notes that there is sometimes an emphasizing of the first aspect;¹⁵ but it does seem that, as time progressed, the element of memory and delivery became gradually more important.¹⁶ A possible explanation for this remarkable development could be that the exercise of *declamatio*, especially the writing down in a convenient style (*elocutio*) of a full-scale argumentation (*inventio*, *dispositio*) (considered as the true Ciceronian heritage) appeared to be simply too difficult for the students it was originally designed for. Consequently, concessions were made in this field (e.g., by allowing the use of ancient orations or summaries thereof), and more attention was paid to the delivery of the text.¹⁷ All in all, it seems impossible to say that the word *declamatio* covers exactly the same exercise in all the sixteenth-century pedagogical documents.

Another interesting and important feature of humanist school declamation is its highly moralistic tenor.¹⁸ In the first place this is, of course, an echo of the ancient sources, Cato's theory concerning the orator as a good man (*orator est vir bonus dicendi peritus*), which became widespread among humanist circles through the writings of Cicero and Quintilian. More

¹⁴The statutes of the Arts faculty at Wittenberg, dating from 1546, state: "Et magistri qui Grammaticen, Dialecticen, aut Rhetoricen tradunt, item qui Latinos aut Graecos scriptores interpretantur, mandent auditoribus ut scribant et recitent declamationes" (Ph. Melanchthon, *Opera omnia*, vol. 10, *Corpus Reformatorum*, vol. 10, ed. C. Bretschneider [Halle: Schwetschke & Sohn, 1842], 994).

¹⁵See, for example, the programs of the schools in Württemberg, dating from 1559: ". . . und die Adolescentes also abgerichtet werden, das ihnen nachmals, ganze Declamationes zu schreiben minder schwär sei" (Vormbaum, *Die evangelischen Schulordnungen . . .*, 90) and Pommern, dating from 1563: ". . . Item ihnen befehlen, kurze Declamationes zu schreiben juxta ordinem partium orationis apud Rhetores . . ." (Vormbaum, *Die evangelischen Schulordnungen . . .*, 174–75).

¹⁶See the programs of the school of Bordeaux, dating from 1583: ". . . et in usum scribendo declamandoque transferantur (sc. the pupils of the highest grade) (A. Gouveia, *Schola Aquitana* Bordeaux 1583, XXXII) and the Academy of Sedan, dating from 1608: "Declamatiunculis memoria et actio excoletur" (P. Mellon, *L'académie de Sedan, centre d'influence française. A propos d'un manuscrit du XVIIe siècle* [Paris: Fischbacher, 1913], 221).

¹⁷See, for instance, the problems inherent in the exercise of *declamatio* at the Strasburg gymnasium, portrayed in J. Sturm, *Ad Philippum Comitem Lippianum de exercitationibus rhetoricis . . . liber academicus* (Strasburg, 1575).

¹⁸See J. Sturm, *De exercitationibus quotidianis communibus scholarum Argentoratensis et Lauinganae*, in *Classicae epistolae*, book 3, dating from 1565: "In declamationibus eadem debent extare indicia, quae in concionibus, doctrinae, morum, eloquentiae" (Vormbaum, *Die evangelischen Schulordnungen . . .*, 707, col. 1).

specifically, one finds indications that the humanists had a preference for the *thesis* as a subject for declamation (see, for instance, the themes for declamation in the deliberative genre suggested by Erasmus in his *De ratione studii* of 1511: “In opibus non esse felicitatem; litteris Graecis non esse dandam aut esse dandam operam; uxorem esse ducendam, aut non esse ducendam”).¹⁹ It seems reasonable to say that this apparent predilection for the *thesis* stems directly from Cicero’s remarks concerning the usefulness of the *thesis* as a rhetorical exercise.

The strong moralistic and didactic aspect of humanist rhetoric thus became manifest in school declamation. As to the *declamationes* outside the field of organized education, one is struck by the fact that, however divergent in subject matter and length they are, they all have the same strong moral and didactic aspect, which must also be traced back to the Ciceronian interest in *thesis*-handling within the confines of rhetoric. To this field belongs a series of texts, the most important of which consist either in plain *theses* or in rhetorical texts which are *thesis*-like, and whose theme can often be expressed in the form of a *thesis*. To the first category belongs for instance C. Cellarius’s *Oratio pro pauperibus ut eis liceat mendicare* (1530), coupled with his *Oratio contra mendicitatem, pro nova pauperum subventionem* (1531). To the second category belong the declamations mentioned at the beginning of this note.

Thus, the link between ancient didactic declamation and humanist declamation can aptly be identified with Cicero’s rhetorical exercise of *thesis*. This conclusion allows us to argue that texts like Erasmus’s *Laus matrimonii* and Agrippa’s *Declamatio de incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium* cannot be simply literary trifles or rhetorical exercises at best. The Ciceronian commitment to seriousness and moral values is strongly present in them. This note sets the tone for further research on the interpretation and function of these texts. Their rhetorical character, coupled with the moralistic and didactic features inherent in humanist rhetoric, must form the starting point for any interpretation on our part. A few interesting remarks on what a humanist *declamatio* is, and how it is to be read and understood, are made by Agrippa von Nettesheim in one of his apologiae of the *Declamatio de incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium*:

The declamatio does not formulate a definitive judgment, nor a dogma. Instead, the propositions of the *declamatio* are alternately put in a jocular or in a serious form, are formulated in a deceiving or a straightforward way. Sometimes it voices my own opinion, sometimes those of others, some things it declares to be true, others to be false, still others to be dubious. Sometimes it takes the form of

¹⁹Other *declamatoria themata* in the deliberative genre suggested by Erasmus are “statim optima discenda; matrem proprio lacte nutrire debet quod peperit; peregrinandum esse, aut non esse peregrinandum” (Erasmus, “Ratio studii”, in *Opera omnia*, 1:2, ed. J.-Cl. Margolin [Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co., 1971], 133).

straightforward reasoning, at other times of admonishing talk. It does not continually condemn, nor instruct, nor assert. It does not at all places declare my own ideas and it brings to the fore many invalid arguments, so that he who takes the counterpart will have something to reject and to refute. If the censor who wrote against me is not able to discern these different elements, he cannot but pronounce a stupid judgment on them.²⁰

In other words, the *declamatio* is not a plain text in which abstract truths are formulated for an audience expected to absorb the text uncritically, but a complicated text, in which the writer puts forward and discusses, in the tradition of rhetorical *theses*, more than one point of view. The author wishes to appeal to the intellect and independent judgment of the reader, but not necessarily without taking a position himself. It can thus be argued that the humanist *declamatio* is a genre that illustrates how the humanists used the ancient theory of eloquence as a means to open up serious discussion and public exchange of ideas about current problems which the authoritative intellectual circles of the day, the academic theologians, tended either to ignore completely, or to decide unconditionally by apodictic, *ex cathedra* pronouncements.

²⁰“Proinde declamatio non iudicat, non dogmatizat, sed quae declamationis conditiones sunt, alia ioco, alia serio, alia false, alia saevere dicit: aliquando mea, aliquando, aliorum sententia loquitur, quaedam vera, quaedam falsa, quaedam dubia pronunciat, alicubi disputat, alicubi admonet, non ubique improbat, aut docet aut asserit, nec omni loco animi mei sententiam declarat, multa invalida argumenta adducit, ut habeatur, quod improbet, quodque solvat declamaturus partem diversam, quae quum nesciat hic articulator discernere, nullam de illis nisi stultam poterit ferre sententiam” (H. Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Apologia adversus calumnias . . .*, IV^v).