BCE Timeline of Roman Declamation CE

100 80 60 40 20 0 20 40 60 80 100 120 140

 Cicero practices decl. Quintilian’s life *Decl. Min.*?

Decl. arrives at Rome Seneca’s declaimers Seneca’s *Controv.* Quintilian’s *Inst.*

 **School growth phase Public growth phase School growth phase**

Selections from Quint. 2.10

(1) Quintilian discusses the **pros** and *cons* of declamation (*Inst.* 2.10.1-6)

quarum antequam viam ingredior, pauca mihi de ipsa ratione declamandi dicenda sunt, quae quidem ut ex omnibus novissime inventa ita multo est **utilissima**. [2] nam et cuncta illa, de quibus diximus, in se fere continet, et **veritati proximam imaginem reddit**, ideoque ita est celebrata, ut **plerisque videretur ad formandam eloquentiam vel sola sufficere**. neque enim virtus ulla perpetuae dumtaxat orationis reperiri potest, quae non sit cum hac dicendi meditatione communis. [3] *eo quidem res ista culpa docentium reccidit, ut inter praecipuas quae corrumperent eloquentiam causas licentia atque inscitia declamantium fuerit*. sed eo, quod **natura bonum est**, bene uti licet. [4] sint ergo et ipsae materiae, quae fingentur, quam simillimae veritatis, et declamatio, in quantum maxime potest, imitetur eas actiones, in quarum exercitationem reperta est. [5] nam *magos et pestilentiam et responsa et saeviores tragicis novercas aliaque magis adhuc fabulosa* frustra inter sponsiones et interdicta quaeremus. quid ergo? nunquam haec *supra fidem* et **poetica, ut vere dixerim, themata** iuvenibus tractare permittamus, ut exspatientur et gaudeant materia et quasi in corpus eant? [6] erit optimum; sed certe sint grandia et tumida, non *stulta etiam et acrioribus oculis intuenti ridicula*...

Before I start down this path [explaining how to approach rhetorical themes], I have to say a little about the principles of declamation, which, just as it was the most recently invented of all the exercises, is also **the most useful** by far. [2] As it both contains everything I’ve talked about and **yields the most realistic image**, it follows that it is so popular that **many think it’s sufficient by itself for creating eloquence**. No virtue (at least of continuous oration) can be found which is not shared with this speaking exercise. [3] *However, this practice has fallen to such an extent (and this is the fault of teaching) that the licentiousness and ignorance of declamation is one of the main causes of the corruption of eloquence*. But it’s possible to make good use of **that which is good by nature**. [4] Therefore, let both the invented themes be as close as possible to reality, and let declamation imitate, as much as possible, those legal actions it was designed to be practice for. [5] We will look in vain for *the magicians and plagues and oracular responses and stepmothers crueller than tragedy and other more fantastical things* among the legal payments and court injunctions. What do we do then? Should we never allow young men to treat these *unbelievable* or, **as I really should say, poetic themes**, in order to let them digress and have fun with the material and get into character? [6] That would be best; but at least let the themes be grandiose and swollen, but not *stupid and ridiculous to discerning eyes*…

(2) On ways to fix declamation:

[9] utinamque adici ad consuetudinem posset, ut nominibus uteremur, et perplexae magis et longioris aliquando actus controversiae fingerentur, et verba in usu cotidiano posita minus timeremus, et iocos inserere moris esset.

I wish we could add to custom: 1) that we use actual names, 2) that we sometimes make up more convoluted and longer controversiae to work on, 3) that we be less afraid to use words from daily speech, and 4) that it would be the custom to insert jokes.

(3) General complaints about teachers and teaching practices:

2.2.12 (on coddling children with too much praise): at nunc proni atque succincti ad omnem clausulam non exsurgunt modo uerum etiam excurrunt et cum indecora exultatione conclamant. id mutuum est et ibi declamationis fortuna. hinc tumor et vana de se persuasio usque adeo, ut illo condiscipulorum tumultu inflati, si parum a praeceptore laudentur, ipsi de illo male sentiant.

But now, leaning forward and getting ready, they do not only stand up at the end of every period, but even rush forward and applaud with unseemly enthusiasm. This is a mutual benefit and is where the success of the declamation comes from. From this comes a swollen ego and a vain opinion of themselves, even to the point that, swollen by the uproar of their fellow students, they hold a grudge against their teacher if he applauds them too little.

2.11.1 (on declaimers who don’t learn rhetoric): aliquis interrogatus, quid esset schema et noema, nescire se quidem sed, si ad rem pertineret, esse in sua declamatione respondit.

Someone, when asked what a “rhetorical figure” and an “implication” were, replied that he didn’t know, but if it applied to the speech, it was in his declamation.

2.20.4 (on being good at a trivial task): his ego comparandos existimo, qui in declamationibus, quas esse veritati dissimillimas volunt, aetatem multo studio ac labore consumunt.

I myself think that this should be compared to those who spend their time in great study and labor on declamations that they want to be entirely dissimilar to reality.

(4) A few complaints about declamation:

4.3.2 (on declamation in the law courts): quod quidem natum ab ostentatione declamatoria iam in forum venit, postquam agere causas non ad utilitatem litigatorum, sed ad patronorum iactationem repertum est.

This practice came from declamatory showiness, but has come to the forum now, since advocates seek to plead cases not to help the litigant, but to show off for patrons

8.3.76 (on similes as ornamentation): quod quidem genus a quibusdam declamatoria maxime licentia corruptum est.

This sort of simile has mostly been corrupted by declamatory license

Select Bibliography

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