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## **Political Crisis in Rhetorical Exercises of the Early**

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### **Roman Empire**

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#### **Abstract**

The ancient Romans experienced a great political crisis in the first century B. C. They fought many civil wars, which ended the republic and led to the establishment of the empire. The nature of these civil wars and the new regime was a politically very sensitive question for the next generation and could not be treated in a direct manner. In this paper I shall examine how literature in this age dealt with this sensitive problem. Special attention will be paid on declamations (rhetorical exercises on fictitious themes), which discussed repeatedly themes concerned with political crises such as domestic discord or rule of a tyrant.

*Keywords:* Latin Oratory, Rhetorical Training, Early Roman Empire, Roman Politics

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# **Political Crisis in Rhetorical Exercises of the Early**

## **Roman Empire**

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### **1. Politics in Rome in the 1st Century B.C.**

Rome experienced its greatest political change in the 1st century B.C. Since the latter half of the previous century, its Republican system, which was established in the late 6th century B.C. according to the tradition, proved to contain serious problems. This led to repeated fierce civil wars in Rome. In the middle of the 1st century B.C., Caesar fought against Pompey and other members of the senatorial nobility who tried to defend the traditional system and defeated them completely. After this war, he forgave his former enemies and restored them to their previous dignities; however, by becoming the permanent dictator, who could retain supreme power alone, he preserved only the appearance of a Republic. To those senators who did not support him, this situation was of course nothing but a monarchy. Therefore, some of them, trying to restore the Republic, conspired to assassinate him. However, though this was successfully accomplished on March 15th, 44 B.C., the situation regarding the old constitution did not become better because of that. The successors of Caesar, especially Antony and Caesar Octavian, continued to fight for their own dominance. They defeated first the Republicans, then fought against each other. This renewed civil war lasted for some thirteen years until Octavian defeated his rival decisively at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C., after which the latter fled to Egypt and committed suicide there. Octavian (later Augustus) was now the sole political leader in Rome. The Republican system was on the surface restored by him, but all the important offices were now retained by him or people recommended by him. He carefully represented his regime as the restoration of the tradition of the Republic, but everyone knew that it was in fact something totally different from it, that is, a monarchy.

Thus, under the reign of Augustus, who died in 14 A.D., and of Tiberius, his successor, a great problem for people in the Roman world presented itself: How should they comprehend and represent the new regime and the civil wars which led to it? Literature also faced this problem; poets like Virgil and Horace as well as historians like Livy had to mention—at least indirectly—this era in their works. They largely glorify the victory of Augustus and the new regime; this was, on the one hand, to some extent compulsory under the emperors but, on the other hand, the authors might have really felt that the current regime which brought the civil wars to an end was much better than the Republican system. However, they remember at the same time the dark side of this regime: people killed in civil wars by the victors and the loss of true liberty under a sole ruler. This ambiguity was expressed in many passages of Latin literary works preserved to us from this age. Modern scholars discuss it repeatedly. Here I shall focus on one particular literary genre that was very typical of this age: the rhetorical exercise called declamation.

## **2. The Function of Rhetoric and Rhetorical Schools in Rome in the 1st Century B.C.**

Let me make here a brief description of this practice of rhetoric in the ancient world.<sup>1</sup> Public speaking was a very important medium for ancient politicians. The art of rhetoric, which developed this medium, originated in the Greek world in the 5th century B.C. and was fully elaborated during the Hellenistic period. It was then introduced to the Romans in the 2nd century B.C. and integrated into their intellectual culture in the next century. Since the political struggles at the end of the Republican period gave great importance to oratory in the Senate and in the courtroom, its greatest achievements in Rome were accomplished in this period, most notably by Cicero. By the time of his old age rhetoric had become essential education for Roman elites. Boys belonging to the upper and middle classes went to rhetorical schools during their teens. They were taught rhetorical theory there and practiced speaking well according to the techniques of this discipline. The most advanced

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of rhetoric in the Greek and Roman world in general, see Kennedy (1963), Kennedy (1972), Kennedy (1994).

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exercises in these schools were the declamations, i.e., speeches on fictitious themes which imitate either deliberative or forensic oratory.<sup>2</sup> In a declamation, a declaimer would represent one side of a controversy and try to find and develop arguments favorable to his side.

Under the empire, however, declamation, which, as mentioned above, was originally developed as an exercise for young students, acquired another function.<sup>3</sup> It was now practiced not only by boys but also by adult men, both professional rhetoricians and amateurs, before a large audience which could include important politicians and sometimes even the emperor himself. As mentioned above, declamations were either deliberative (called *suasoriae*) or forensic (called *controversiae*). The former type was often taken from some real historical events, sometimes very recent ones like the civil wars. The latter one could have as its background some politically difficult situation, for example, tyranny. These elements in declamations were or could be connected to recent history or a contemporary political situation and so could be dangerous to those who declaimed on these themes in public. However, since declaimers argued for either side of one theme and tried to make use of any argument for their selected side, it was sometimes necessary for them to touch upon such sensitive questions in their declamations. It is thus interesting to see how they treated such matters in declamations at that time, in other words, how they represented political crises like civil wars or the danger of tyranny in fictitious debate when these were either recent past or contemporary problems. One may ask further why they continued to handle such materials in schools and before an audience. Was that only a continuation of the rhetorical tradition since the Hellenistic age, or was there any desire to criticize implicitly what was being done under the empire or in the struggles leading to its formation? In the rest of this presentation, in order to answer the first question, I shall make a brief sketch of relevant passages in the works of Seneca the Elder, father of Seneca the philosopher, which contain citations on various themes from declaimers of this age.<sup>4</sup> The second

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2 For a brief description of declamation as rhetorical exercise, see Kaster (2001); Bloomer (2007).

3 On the situation of declamatory practice under the first emperors, see Bonner (1949); Kennedy (1972) 312-322; Clarke (1996), 85-99; Bloomer (2007).

4 About his life and works in general, see Fairweather (1981); Sussman (1978).

question is difficult to answer here, but I hope some hints toward an answer will be given in this essay.

### 3. The Representation of Tyrants in the Works of Seneca the Elder.

The works discussed here contain four *controversiae* (i.e., forensic type of declamation) whose theme mentions a tyrant.<sup>5</sup> In one of them, a man killed one of his brothers because the latter was a tyrant.

Sen. Con. 1.7: (law: Children must support their parents, or be imprisoned.) A man killed one of his brothers, a tyrant. The other brother he caught in adultery and killed despite the pleas of his father. Captured by pirates, he wrote to his father about a ransom. The father wrote a letter to the pirates, saying that he would give double if they cut off his hands. The pirates let him go. The father is in need; the son is not supporting him.<sup>6</sup>

In another, a tyrant tortured the wife of a man who he suspected was preparing to kill him.

Sen. Con. 2.5: A wife, tortured by a tyrant to find out if she knew anything about her husband's plot to kill him, persisted in saying she did not. Later her husband killed the tyrant. He divorced her on the grounds of her barrenness when she bore no child within five years of marriage. She sues him for ingratitude.<sup>7</sup>

In still another, during his rule a tyrant permitted slaves to rape daughters of their master.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Berti (2007, 100 n. 2); Tabacco (1985).

<sup>6</sup> LIBERI PARENTES ALANT AVT VINCIANTVR. Quidam alterum fratrem tyrannum occidit, alterum in adulterio deprehensum deprecante patre interfecit. a piratis captus scripsit patri de redemptione. pater piratis epistulam scripsit: si praecidissent manus, duplam se daturum. piratae illum dimiserunt. patrem egentem non alit (all the translations of Seneca the Elder in this article are from Winterbottom (1974) and the texts in footnotes are from Håkanson (1989)).

<sup>7</sup> Torta a tyranno uxor, numquid de viri tyrannicidio sciret, perseveravit negare. postea maritus eius tyrannum occidit. illam sterilitatis nomine dimisit intra quinquennium non parientem. ingrati actio est.

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Sen. Con. 7.6: A tyrant gave permission to slaves to kill their masters and rape their mistresses. The chief men of the state fled; among them one who had a son and a daughter set off abroad. Though all the other slaves raped their mistresses, this man's slave kept the girl inviolate. When the tyrant had been killed, the chief men returned, and crucified their slaves. But this man manumitted his slave, and gave him his daughter in marriage. His son accuses him of insanity.<sup>8</sup>

In the fourth example, a tyrant forced two brothers to beat their own father.

Sen. Con. 9.4: (law: A son who strikes his father shall have his hands cut off.) A tyrant summoned a man and his two sons to his castle; he ordered the youths to beat their father. One of them threw himself from the height, the other beat his father. Later he became one of the circle of the tyrant, killed him and received the reward. His hands are sought; his father defends him.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have already noted some characteristics common to these themes.<sup>10</sup> One of them is that the tyrant does not participate in the trial which constitutes the declamation; in all these themes he belongs instead to a past event which caused the trial. This characteristic can be easily explained. Under a tyrant, a "democratic" trial which requires eloquence from advocates would be impossible; therefore, the tyranny must have been ended by the time of the trial. Another characteristic connected to this is that neither side has to defend the deeds of the tyrant. Although the two parties oppose each other, they criticize unanimously what was done by the tyrant. Accordingly, the tyrant is represented as having a totally bad character. This makes it possible to attribute whatever evil

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8 *Tyrannus permisit servis dominis interemptis dominas suas rapere. profugerunt principes civitatis; inter eos qui filium et filiam habebat profectus est peregre. cum omnes servi dominas suas vitiassent, servos eius virginem servavit. occiso tyranno reversi sunt principes; in crucem servos sustulerunt. ille manu misit et filiam conlocavit. accusatur a filio dementiae.*

9 *QVI PATREM PVLSAVERIT, MANVS EI PRAECIDANTVR.* Tyrannus patrem in arcem cum duobus filiis accersit; imperavit adulescentibus, ut patrem caederent. alter ex his praecipitavit se, alter cecidit. postea in amicitiam tyranni receptus occiso tyranno praemium accepit. petuntur manus eius; pater defendit.

10 Berti (2007) 99-100; Tabacco (1985) 9-14.

he has done to his wickedness and ignore all considerations concerning his political behavior. With these observations, scholars tend to think that the declamatory themes concerning a tyrant did not have much relevance to the contemporary feeling about the empire.<sup>11</sup> These are, they maintain, based only on stereotyped images about tyrants traditional in the Hellenistic world. When declaimers attacked such a tyrant, they had no intention to criticize the emperor. This conclusion is probably irrefutable; however, I would like to add two points which might indicate that these representations of tyrants could perhaps be connected to their contemporary situation.

First, the fact that tyranny is always represented as a past event in Seneca the Elder implies that it is associated not with the current regime of the emperor but with the brutal leaders in past civil wars, for example Antony.<sup>12</sup> Thus, even if the description of tyranny in declamations was not a direct criticism of the current monarchy, it was a reflection on the process through which that monarchy came into existence. Second, declaimers handling these themes made a contrast between the tyranny and the Republic; while tyranny is always a bad thing, the ideal opposed to it is the Republic, not any good king or emperor. This is in accordance with the political stance of the early emperors, who disguised their own supreme power with the appearance of Restored Republic. Both points

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11 This does not mean that the relationship between declamatory tyrants and Roman emperors was ignored by scholars; rather, the prosperity of declamation itself was regarded as a result of the establishment of the Empire (see Bornecque (1902, pp. 46-48); Bonner (1949, pp. 42-43); Sussman (1979, pp. 14-15), and it is observed that declaimers' descriptions of great kings, in particular Alexander, reflected their view on Roman emperors (for Alexander, see Migliario (2007, pp. 51-83). However, the observation of Tabacco and Berti (see the previous note) that this relationship should not be overestimated seems to me still reasonable, because, as mentioned above, tyrants appeared in rhetorical exercises already in the Hellenistic period, and declaimers arguing against tyranny were hardly critical to the Empire (a discussion of the political dimension of declamation in general is offered by Feddern (2013, pp. 67-75). My own observations should be read as small modifications of this view. The relationship between declamatory themes and the society declaimers lived in is interpreted in a more sophisticated way by Gunderson (2003), though his main concern is not tyranny.

12 For the description of Antony as a tyrant in declamation, cf Berti (2007, pp. 108-109); Migliario (2007, pp. 103-4). One may also compare a chapter titled 'Of arrogance and outrageousness' (*De superbia et impotentia*) in Valerius Maximus, who composed a compilation of historical examples under the reign of Tiberius. In this chapter Antony, Alexander, and Xerxes are mentioned in a sequence (V. Max. 9.5.4-ext.2). Since the latter two were typical Eastern monarchs for Romans, it is possible that the former was also regarded as such.

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indicate that the relationship between the declamatory tyrants and the contemporary emperors was not so simple.

### **4. The Representation of Civil Wars in the Works of Seneca the Elder.**

The second element in declamations which allows us to speculate about their relationship to their age is civil wars. Compared to an imaginary tyrant, an imaginary civil war is rare in Seneca the Elder; it is only once mentioned in this theme:

Sen. Con. 10.3: (law: An action may lie for madness.) In the civil wars, a woman refused to desert her husband, though her father and brother were on the other side. Her own side defeated and her husband killed, she came to her father; he would not admit her into his house. She said: "How do you want me to make amends to you?" He replied: "Die!" She hanged herself before his door. The father is accused of madness by his son.<sup>13</sup>

There are instead three other themes which, unlike those concerning tyranny, mention real civil wars in Rome in the recent past. All of them are concerned with the death of Cicero. In one of them, Cicero's murderer is accused of a criminal act of ingratitude.

Sen. Con. 7.2: (law: An action may lie for misconduct.) Cicero defended Popillius on a charge of parricide; he was acquitted. When Cicero was proscribed, Popillius was sent by Antony to kill him, and he brought back his head to Antony. He is accused of misconduct.<sup>14</sup>

The other two (Sen. Suas. 6, 7) are suasoriae, i.e., deliberative speeches,

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<sup>13</sup> DEMENTIAE SIT ACTIO. Bello civili quaedam virum secuta est, cum in diversa parte haberet patrem et fratrem. victis partibus suis et occiso marito venit ad patrem. non recepta in domum dixit: 'quemadmodum tibi vis satisfaciam?' ille respondit: 'morere!' suspendit se ante ianuam eius. accusatur pater a filio dementiae.

<sup>14</sup> DE MORIBVS SIT ACTIO. Popillium parricidii reum Cicero defendit; absolutus est. proscriptum Ciceronem ab Antonio missus occidit Popillium et caput eius ad Antonium rettulit. accusatur de moribus.



in both of which Cicero deliberates whether he should save his life by obeying Antony.

Sen. Suas. 6: Cicero deliberates whether to beg Antony's pardon.<sup>15</sup>

Sen. Suas. 7: Antony promises to spare Cicero's life if he burns his writings: Cicero deliberates whether to do so.<sup>16</sup>

In these themes the responsibility for one of the tragic deaths of Republican Romans during the civil wars is directly discussed. That responsibility, however, is always put on Antony, who in the next stage of these civil wars would fight against and be defeated by Octavian. The fact that the latter also contributed to the death of Cicero was, so far as we know from the extant text of Seneca the Elder, never touched. Thus, in these themes declaimers could handle the dark side of their recent history without blaming the new regime established through it. One might ask here why themes like these, which certainly required cautious argumentation in order to avoid political danger, were actually practiced in rhetorical schools at that time. Unlike in the case of tyrants, Greek tradition here offers no adequate explanation because they treat recent Roman history. One possible reason for this was the famous status of Cicero, by far the greatest Roman orator, for the students of rhetoric; one may say that they liked to discuss the tragic death of this famous figure despite the political danger. Another interpretation would be that his death was ideal to create the impression that everything bad in the last civil war was committed by Antony—or someone else—but not Octavian because of the orator's renowned last 'Philippic' speeches against Antony. If this is true, the handling of these themes in rhetorical schools was also in accordance with the official representation of the civil wars and the new regime; civil wars were for the Republic a misery, in which a villain like Antony could kill a hero like Cicero, but Octavian defeated the villain and restored the previous status of Republic for which Cicero gave his life.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Deliberat Cicero, an Antonium deprecetur.*

<sup>16</sup> *Deliberat Cicero, an scripta sua comburat promittente Antonio incolumitatem, si fecisset.*

<sup>17</sup> Plutarch tells us that Augustus showed his sympathy to Cicero and made some effort to rehabilitate him (Plut. Cic. 49.5-6). His attitude may have influenced the way declaimers treated the orator under his reign (I owe this reference to an anonymous reviewer of *INTERFACE*).

## 5. Conclusion

At the beginning of the Imperial period in Rome, rhetorical schools were not only the place for the education of young men but also for communication among the elite class of the empire. The declamatory themes argued there contained some topics, like tyranny and civil wars, which were politically sensitive. Neither the inclusion of these topics in declamations nor their treatment in these can be explained only from the influence of rhetorical tradition. They were, rather, affected by the official representation of the recent past and the new regime at that time and, even when declamatory practice allowed or required declaimers to argue matters diligently from both sides, their argumentation was on the whole in line with this representation.

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