Contemporary critics of rhetoric regularly assert that rhetoric, after centuries of vitality, has finally died. The precise date of this demise varies, but the end of rhetoric is usually believed to have occurred sometime in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. While the death of rhetoric is often simply assumed, the causes of the expiration receive considerable attention. It often seems that the causes of rhetoric’s death are more readily established than the fact that rhetoric has, indeed, died. One commonly assigned cause of this event is the rise of Romanticism. Thus in The Ends of Rhetoric John Bender and David Wellbery declare “the Romantic destruction of rhetoric” resulting from the “Romantic organization of the world of letters along national historical lines.”

They further maintain that:

The rhetorical paradigm was international in character, tied to the Latin language… This quintessentially international character of classical rhetoric came to an end in the period of Romanticism because the destruction of rhetoric was linked to the rise of the modern nation-state. National identity was grounded in the linguistic identity of the Volk; the national language replaced the international Latin koine, cutting off civic and cultural consciousness from its Roman roots.

The argument that rhetoric was severely damaged by the decline of a Latinate universalism and the subsequent rise of national particularism is plausible and yet perplexing. After all, rhetoric had survived many paradigmatic shifts in the centuries prior to the ascendency of romanticism and nationalism. Rhetoric had moved from Athens to Rome, from Greek to Latin, from antiquity to the Middle Ages, from Medieval to Renaissance, from pagan to Christian, and from Catholic to Protestant. Moreover, rhetorical texts had been undergoing a steady

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2 Id., 21.
vernacularization since at least the fifteenth century. Given rhetoric’s resilience and adaptability it is indeed remarkable that it could have survived for nearly two millennia only to be suddenly undone by the rise of the European nation-state.

While it is certainly true that nationalism presented challenges for the rhetorical tradition, it does not necessarily follow that rhetoric was incapable of responding and adapting to nationalist sentiments. Indeed, I will argue that not only was rhetoric not dispatched by nationalism, but rather that rhetoric was reinvigorated by the nationalistic challenge. The present study, therefore, is an inquiry into the relationship between nationalism and rhetoric, especially religious rhetoric, as it developed in Great Britain during the long eighteenth century. I have chosen to focus on pulpit oratory because eighteenth-century rhetoricians regarded preaching as a uniquely modern genre, largely unencumbered by classical traditions.

In *The Rise of English Nationalism* Gerald Newman contends that between 1750 and 1830 England “witnessed the birth of modern nationalism, the transformation of an older ‘patriotic consciousness’ into something of a tremendous new force of lasting importance.” Thus the development of nationalism in Britain coincides approximately with the new developments in rhetoric which began around the middle of the eighteenth century. It would appear inevitable, then, that this new ideology would have a significant effect on the development of rhetoric in England – the question is just what the nature of this effect is.

I. *The Decline of Eloquence in Britain*

The detrimental effects of nationalism on British eloquence seem, at first glance, to be supported by eighteenth-century writers on rhetoric. Those writers often complained that eloquence in their time had declined from the heights it had achieved in antiquity. In “Of Eloquence” David Hume observes that despite all of the “refinements” of the English they remain “much inferior in Eloquence” to the Greeks and Romans. This inferiority is puzzling because, says Hume, “Of all the polite and learned

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