Bernstein, N.W.


Roman declamation is enjoying quite a hype. Apart from a steady series of texts, translations, and commentaries, and numerous journal articles that keep appearing, a number of monographs with promising theoretical approaches has begun to appear. To Gunderson’s psycho-analytical reading and Van Mal-Maeder’s influential literary analysis,1 Neil Bernstein has now added a survey of social and ethical issues in the _Major Declamations_ ascribed to Quintilian. This is a most welcome addition for several reasons. In the first place it is the first volume which offers sustained analyses of no fewer than sixteen of these nineteen declamations, which are the only complete Roman declamations we have left from antiquity. Secondly, Bernstein’s work both fits and enriches a developing tradition of smaller studies of socio-cultural issues broached in (individual) declamations, such as father-son relationships, rape, and torture. Finally, and most importantly, it is simply a good book: it contains a wealth of information and acute analyses, and it will appeal to both specialists and laymen who want to learn more about the genre of declamation, its literary intertexts and its socio-cultural contexts.

The book is recommended by the publisher as “the first book exclusively devoted to the pseudo-Quintilianic “Major Declamations” and their reception from late antiquity through the 18th century” and accordingly consists of two parts. In all fairness, these are somewhat unequal. The reception of the declamations is given only a single chapter which does not, as the publisher’s recommendation might lead one to expect, contain a survey of the reception of the _Major Declamations_, but concentrates on two declamations by imitators of Pseudo-Quintilian and gives a brief account of their contemporary contexts. Both wrote an antilogy to DM 1: Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540) wanted to equal Quintilian;2 Lorenzo Patarol (1674-1727) wanted to outdo Vives. Bernstein gives a good account of both, consistently comparing them with each other and with the approach of the original declaimer. The chapter is interesting, well-written and solid, but makes it very clear that this subject merits a study of its own. It is followed by a postscript containing a useful survey of ancient criticism of declamation and a sensible plea for introducing _controversiae_ in the modern

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2 Vives was convinced that Quintilian was the author of the _Major Declamations_. He even refers to his fictive opponent as Marcus Fabius, and addresses him as Quintilian (154).
classroom, not just to train composition skills, but also to confront students with situational ethics in fictitious, abstract cases.

The first and larger part of the book, “Law, Ethics, and Community in Sophistopolis”, is what makes up its great strength. For each of its four chapters Bernstein has chosen a concept that is of social, cultural, ethical, and/or psychological significance both within Sophistopolis and outside it, so that he can discuss a number of Major Declamations in which it plays a substantial role. These are never discussed in isolation. Quite the contrary: in his accounts Bernstein does not limit himself to declamation, but consistently refers to other genres—philosophy, tragedy, historiography—which have provided important intertexts for declamation. He has moreover a sharp eye for the socio-historical context. Altogether he thus manages to uncover a coherence that goes beyond the individual argumenta of the declamations, which sometimes at first sight seem to have nothing in common.

Bernstein departs from the assumption that “[t]he Major Declamations self-consciously disrupt Roman master narratives of identity and community, virtue, paternal authority, and political hierarchy,” and that their authors “attempt to reorder their audiences’ epistemologies by asking them to choose among competing sources of authoritative knowledge” (13). This assumption does not hold, however, as Bernstein himself admits repeatedly (see e.g. pp. 43, 113). Declamation may question traditional values and types of knowledge, but it is rarely subversive: in most cases it poses a terrible dilemma or an outrageous act, but in discussing it, it safely returns to a confirmation of the status quo, i.e., the superior position of the male elite and its norms and values. Each of Bernstein’s chapters contains striking instances of this inclination.

The first one, “Authority”, could be a good subheading for the majority of declamations—one has only to think of the many controversiae in which sons are pitted against fathers. But Bernstein’s selection of two declamations in which the authority of generals is at stake is a felicitous one. Both show the dangers of the subversion of authority in a community and meet the challenge to negotiate it. In DM 11 the people, normally the guardians and guarantors of a functioning democracy, have formed a mob and stoned the children of a rich general to death, thus demonstrating the violent and wanton behaviour normally associated with declamatory tyrants. The general is faced with the near-impossible task—the rich are declamation’s prototypical bad guys—of having to damage the mob leader’s ethos (the familiar invidiam facere) and bolster his own. DM 3 is the only known declamation treating of a case genuinely attested:

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3 Together, the chapters cover sixteen of the nineteen extant texts. Not included are DM 14, 15, and 17.