



Research project

Aspects of the divine and religious forms in Latin declamations of the imperial age

Dottorando: Francesco Scozzaro

Tutor: prof. Alfredo Casamento

What is the role of the divine and religious forms in Latin declamatory texts of the imperial age? In the impressive bibliography that has characterised declamatory studies over the last thirty years, there is a lack of systematic analysis that focuses on these aspects. And yet, on closer inspection, interest in such matters appears fully legitimised by the criticisms that the ancients already levelled at declamatory texts, naming them as empty exercises in rhetoric, distant from the events that characterised real life; among the elements that would have contributed to these defects were precisely oracles and sacrifices. Famous in this sense is the well-known Petronian page (1, 3), which, through the mouth of Encolpius, condenses, in a tight catalogue of declamatory arguments, the following criticisms; pirates lurking on the beaches with chains, fathers who, on the orders of tyrants, cut off the heads of their sons, and oracles that demand the immolation of three or more virgins. If we exclude the tyrannical edicts against fathers (Lentano, 2018), these are certainly present in the declamatory texts. Particularly with regard to oracles and virgin sacrifices, the question has been raised whether Encolpius' is not an excessive criticism (van Mal-Maeder, 2012), based on the presence of the latter (van Mal-Maeder, 2012); one might also ponder whether topics of a central nature in Roman socio-cultural history, such as oracles and the divinatory sphere in general, can really be considered so far removed from reality. In this regard, the investigation conducted by Lentano 2018 is exemplary, which, starting from Encolpius' criticisms, traces the presence of virgin sacrifices in particular in the *Minores* and in the excerpts of Calpurnius Flaccus, conducting an analysis from a mythological and anthropological point of view and in fact confirming, on the one hand, the maliciousness of the ancients' criticisms and, on the other, the preponderant importance of such topics that would in any case require even more extensive investigative reflections, especially from a more strictly religious perspective. As for divination in general, Poulle's 1995 study sought to analyse the presence of the world of divination in Seneca the Elder and Quintilian. The scholar came to the conclusion that by the above mentioned authors the *scientiae futuri* are rejected and reduced to a minimum; yet this work does not take declamations into particular consideration and if it does for Seneca the Elder it reduces everything to declamatory colouring, to that 'colouring', that is, which would not involve *inventio*, but only *elocutio*. Also relevant is Stramaglia's 2013 study of *Declamatio Maior 4*, in which astrological divination plays the leading role. The scholar observes the inconsuetude of divination as the main subject, noting on the one hand the ambivalence with which it is treated in relation to Quintilian's thought, but also emphasising how the distinctive features of divination were in line with the tastes of the time. In contrast to a certain interest in divination-related themes, there seems to be a lack of specific studies on other manifestations of the divine, such as lightning (this is the case in *Decl. min.* 274,



cited above), usually considered a manifestation of the power of the gods, or on the functions of priestesses and priests with all the imagery of elements connected to them. From this point of view, if the figure of the Vestal Virgins has been much studied since Seneca the Elder 1, 2 and 6, 8, texts rightly known for their anthropological, political and social issues, however, the more purely religious aspects do not seem to have been sufficiently focused on. Similarly, there is a lack of specific studies involving the pseudo-Quintilian *Minores* and *Maiores*, as well as the excerpts of *Calpurnius Flaccus*. Thus, the prospect of a research project analysing these aspects in Latin declamatory texts of the imperial age could advance the panorama of declamatory studies, allowing for a greater and more careful focus on the relations between declamation and religion, without neglecting, where necessary, the necessary comparisons with Greek rhetorical texts. In this sense, the aim of this research project is to conduct a systematic and exhaustive study on the roles, meanings, and representation of the divine and religion in Latin declamatory texts of the imperial age in order to show the importance of these themes, as the outcome of a cultural heritage characterised by the changes and demands of new times, which the declamators prefigure in their scholastic exercises, also bearing witness to the various ways of thinking about religion in Rome between I and II AD. Therefore, starting from a careful selection of Latin declamatory texts from the imperial age in which the presence of elements connected to the divine and the religious dimension is recorded, we intend to operate on several fronts: on the one hand, to observe the set of mythical, political and social elements that constitute the cultural background of the declamators, and on the other hand, to recover the space that rhetorical treatises, from Aristotle to Quintilian, had theorised on the treatment of religious elements. If we make a list, albeit a provisional one, of declamatory texts that deal in various ways with cases more or less related to the divine, it will be possible to document the wide range of themes that this type of investigation prefigures. Already in Seneca the Elder's *Oratorum et rhetorum sententiae, divisiones, colores* the *controversiae* 1, 2 (*Sacerdos casta e castis purae e puris sit*); 1, 3 (*Incesta saxo deiciatur*); 6, 8 (*Versus Virginis Vestalis*) and the *suasoriae* 3 (*Deliberat Agamemnon an Iphigeniam inmolet negante Calchante aliter navigari fas esse*) and 4 (*Deliberat Alexander Magnus an Babylonia intret, cum denuntiatum esse illi responso auguris periculum*) provide ample reflections on aspects of a divine and religious nature, so in the *Minores* topics of a divine and religious nature recur instead in *decl.* 252 (*Parasitus raptor candidatae*), 265 (*Ignominiosi pulsatur in templo*), 274 (*Tyrannus fulminatus*), 284 (*Adulter sacerdos*), 326 (*Legati filius victima pestilentiae*), 372 (*Virgo immolata pestilentia*), 384 (*Pulsatur educatoris expositus*). There is no lack of similar themes in the *Maiores* either: apart from the already mentioned *Decl. Maior* 4 (*Mathematicus*) aspects related to the divine and religious sphere appear in 10 (*Sepulcrum incantatum*) and 12 (*Cadaveribus pasti*). And again, in Calpurnius Flaccus we find this kind of argument in extracts 26 (*Tria praemia sacerdotis*) and 44 (*Soror infamis immolanda*). The proposed stages of the research work could be divided as follows:

- 1) Scrutiny of the four main collections of Latin declamatory texts from the imperial age (*Oratorum et rhetorum sententiae, divisiones, colores* by Seneca the Elder; *Declamationes Minores et Maiores* attributed to *pseudo-Quintilianus*; *Excerpta* by *Calpurnius Flaccus*), in which religious elements and aspects of the divine emerge (divination, astrology, magic, lightning, priests, priestesses, religious manifestations etc.).
- 2) Comparison with secondary literature (editions, commentaries, essays or articles). The aim of this analysis will be to take a broader view of the declamatory texts in order to then go deeper into the themes being researched.
- 3) Analysis of the chosen themes from different points of view: rhetorical, anthropological, mythological,



historical, political, legal and social.

4) Analysis of the results and perspectives that this study can bring to the advancement of knowledge on the declamatory phenomenon: to the areas of research that have traditionally characterised the studies to date (declamations and literature, declamations and law, declamations and myth, declamations and anthropology), the ambition is to be able to flank the investigation of the religious components.

Therefore, the main results expected from this research project could be the following:

1) A greater understanding of the different aspects of a religious and divine nature within the Latin declamatory texts of the imperial age, which will lead to broader historical-legal, political and social observations regarding the declamatory cultural landscape.

2) The possibility of using our knowledge of the evolution of religion in Rome between I and II AD to advance some hypotheses on the chronology, which has always been problematic, of the pseudo-Quintilian collections.

3) Given the nature of declamatory texts - a fundamental node in the educational curriculum of young people in the Rome of the early imperial age - we believe we can work on the relationships between ancient declamatory exercises, aimed at elaborating the best arguments to persuade or dissuade regarding a decision or a choice to be made, and today's practice of debate speech, which is increasingly current and widespread in the educational landscape as a pedagogical form aimed at guiding students in the refinement of logical-argumentative skills (De Conti - Giangrande 2017). In this sense, it is hypothesised to constitute exercises to be submitted to the students taken from the declamatory cues on a religious theme.

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