# EXPERIMENTS IN OLD-SCHOOL RHETORIC

*by Christopher Schlect, New Saint Andrews College*

Cicero's orations against Catiline were not built in a day. A long, rich tradition of rhetorical instruction produced the likes of Hortensius, Cato the Younger, and Cicero. We who aim to recover this tradition, hoping to adapt its best insights to our own day, still have a great deal of heavy lifting ahead of us.

Of course, an initial step on the road to recovering the ancient art of persuasion is to examine the rhetorical treatises and great speeches that the ancients left behind. But these old writings, great as they may be, are barely a start. No student ever became eloquent by reading Cicero's *De Oratore* or even Aristotle's treatise on rhetoric. It's doubtful that ancient rhetoric teachers even gave much attention to such texts in their classrooms (or whatever you call the spaces where they met up with students). We do know that teachers placed greater value on a student's performance than on what a student read. This pedagogy of performance aligned with Cicero's description of orators as "players that act real life" (*De Oratore* III.214). It's one thing for us teachers to assign old texts, and another thing altogether for us to recover old teaching practices.

I have attempted to recover some ancient teaching practices by taking a page from the playbook of experimental archaeology. This method aims to understand ancient things by reconstructing them and putting them to practical use. For example, experimental archaeology can teach us how a Roman bath worked. We start with the remains of an actual Roman bath, which is a pile of old ruins, and thus puzzling and incomplete. We observe whatever design elements we can decipher from those ruins and then set about building an actual bath. As we build, we test our inferences and hunches against the real-world demands of function. We might learn that a group of stones we had initially thought to be a steam vent were actually pieces of a water pipe. This experimental process yields findings about Roman baths that deterioration over the centuries had obscured. I have been applying a similar method to the ruins of Roman rhetoric. I scour ancient texts for hints about bygone teaching practices, add some inferences and hunches, and test them with my students at New Saint Andrews College. My experiments are inexact; I have been assigning ancient exercises in a contemporary classroom setting that involves fixed meeting times, a dry erase board, handouts, and individual copies of books for each student. (I'm hardly a purist.) The results are promising. These ancient writings make far more

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sense to me now than they once did. The process also yields new questions about which ancient practices are worth adopting today, and which are better left behind. (After all, most of us would prefer today's baths, with copper plumbing and porcelain, to their ancient Roman counterparts.) The hard work of reconstruction and of present-day adaptation is messy, but also rewarding.

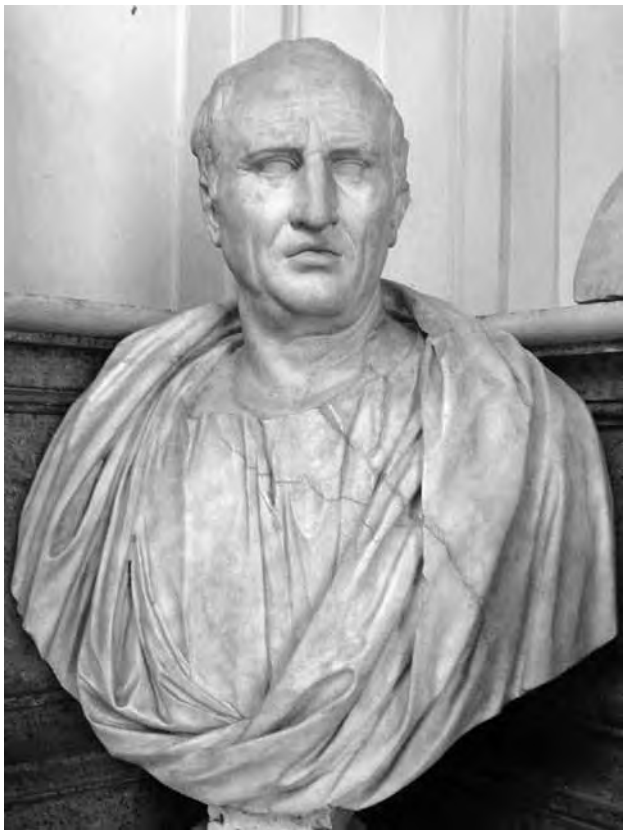
For two years I have applied this method to declamation exercises, which were the most important rhetorical exercises that Roman teachers assigned to their students. Declamations were the capstone of Roman rhetorical education. (Theses, which many of today's classical and Christian schools have adopted as a capstone exercise, were a much later development.) Through experimentation I have been trying to better understand how these exercises worked, and I am coming to see why the Romans held them in such high esteem.

Here is a sample declamation problem, taken from Seneca the Elder:

> Violating a tomb carries a penalty. While the city was at war, a hero lost his weapons in battle, and removed armor from the tomb of a dead hero. He fought heroically, then put the weapons back. He was rewarded for his prowess in battle. Now he is accused of violating the tomb (Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* IV.4).

This problem has two elements, as most declamation problems do: a statement of law and a brief fact pattern. Students must prepare and deliver a speech that either prosecutes or defends the hero. In the Roman world, these exercises became popular outside the schools, and some of the more proficient orators dazzled crowds with speeches that extended beyond an hour. Their expectations for students were more modest. My students spoke for about seven minutes.

The value of the exercise derives from the sparseness



of the problem scenario. Because it sets forth a fictitious law and a fictitious situation, there is no repository of information for students to research. This forces them to develop their skills in rhetorical invention. Without wads of facts to research, how do they come up with something to say? Students must turn to *stasis theory*, which for the Romans was the hallmark of rhetorical invention. Stasis theory involved creating systems for classifying the various issues that might arise in a courtroom. According to Hermogenes' classification system, the example above is a counterstatement. Counterstatements occur when the defense admits doing the act and accepts responsibility for it, yet defends the act on the basis of its beneficial consequences. Another system, set out in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, would classify this as an issue of comparison with the alternative. Once a student identifies the issue, stasis theories advise them on how to argue one side or the other for the given issue at hand.

Here are some more examples. My students had fun with this one.

> The law grants landowners exclusive right to take game on their own property. The state deems a certain animal to be a menace and advertises a bounty to anyone who kills one that is discovered within the realm. A man discovers one of these animals in his neighbor's field and kills it. Both the man and his neighbor claim the bounty. Students must advocate for either the man or his neighbor.

Most Roman systems classify the problem above as an issue of conflicting laws. The following problem calls for similar treatment; it is an issue of definition.

> The law forbids exporting wool from Tarentum. A Tarentine shepherd sells sheep from his flock to a foreigner. His punishment is sought (adapted from Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* VII.8.4).

The foregoing examples involve disputes over what the law says or how the law applies to the situation. This problem is different.

> A foreigner was discovered sneaking into the assembly while it deliberated over important matters of state security. As the bailiff seized him, the foreigner cried out that he was bearing an important secret. The bailiff cast him out so roughly that he died. A week later, the dead foreigner's people invaded the country. After the invasion was finally repelled after much difficulty and loss of life, the bailiff was accused of conspiring with the enemy. Students will either prosecute or defend the bailiff (adapted from Libanus, *Declamation* 44).

This is called a conjectural issue. Conjectural issues arise when both parties agree on the law and its application, but disagree over what actually occurred.

These problems forced my students to examine ancient rhetoric texts more closely than they have before. Passages that had seemed dry or obscure on an initial reading came to life in the context of practical application. Students scoured these texts for advice drawn from ancient stasis theory—that is, advice about how to devise arguments that suit the problems assigned to them. Stasis theory offered them powerful strategies of argument. They also honed their own skills in clarity and amplification.

My experimentation with declamation exercises has led me to a better grasp of the Roman curriculum as a whole. As the examples above show, most declamation exercises featured courtroom-type situations. Indeed, Roman rhetoricians framed their entire approach to rhetoric around the law courts. Why was this? Some scholars account for the Roman curriculum's emphasis on judicial oratory by supposing that courtrooms held preeminence in the Roman world. But this does not line up with we know about Roman society: while the Romans esteemed eloquent lawyers, they also esteemed eloquence outside the courtroom. The Romans valued great funeral orations and eloquent promotions of legislation just as highly as they valued strident advocacy in prosecution or defense of a person accused of a crime. So if lawyering was only one way among many that a Roman orator could distinguish himself, then why did Roman teachers give such lopsided attention to the law courts in their rhetorical instruction? A likely answer is that Roman educators saw the courtroom as the best training ground for eloquence in any arena. If you can persuade in a courtroom, they believed, then you can persuade anywhere. Declamation exercises confirm this notion. Each declamation problem forces a student to give careful attention to projecting ethos, narrating, arguing and arousing emotion. You would be hard-pressed to find all these elements coming together in

a single exercise.

Because declamations were the most advanced exercises in the Roman curriculum, they shed light on how the Romans approached earlier stages of instruction. Roman teachers introduced declamations after first working through preliminary exercises called *progymnasmata*, which are growing in popularity in today's classical schools. But the Romans would have been puzzled that we stop at these preliminary exercises without advancing to declamations. That's like practicing piano scales without ever moving on to play an actual song, or hitting balls at a driving range without ever playing a round of golf. By learning more about what *progymnasmata* worked up to, we can see more clearly how these preliminary exercises fit within the Roman curriculum. Classical educators should not decouple *progymnasmata* from declamation.

My ongoing project of experimental archaeology has deepened my appreciation for declamations. Students find these exercises to be as much fun as they are challenging. They build up a wide array of persuasive skills that can be deployed in just about any rhetorical setting. When Shakespeare cried out for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention, I can imagine no better way to find such a muse than through the diligent practice of declamation exercises.