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(Re)discovering a Rhetorical Genre : Epideictic in Greek and Roman Antiquity

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Abstract

Epideictic rhetoric has been traditionally stigmatized as flattery or empty show without any practical goal. Where does such attitude towards epideictic come from? To answer this question, we explore the ancient debate about the nature and the function of the epideictic genre. In the second part of this paper, we discuss the recent reappraisal of the epideictic among classical scholars and finally focus the attention on a promising field of research: epideictic speeches in honor of women.

Key words

Greek and Roman rhetoric, epideictic, Aristotle, female eulogy

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(Re)discovering a Rhetorical Genre: Epideictic in Greek and Roman Antiquity¹

1. Introduction

In the first book of *Rhetoric* Aristotle introduces his well-known division of rhetoric into three genres: deliberative, judicial and epideictic (*Rhetoric* 1.1358a 36-b8). This triad of genres, which was already enormously influential among Aristotle's successors, is undoubtedly one of the most successful remains of ancient rhetoric, alongside concepts like the proofs or means of persuasion, the *partes orationis* and the *officia oratoris* (Hoppman 2011, 34). Recognized as timeless, abstract and universal categories, the three genres figure in all the most influential works of contemporary rhetoric (Pepe 2013, 519-542).

The nature of the deliberative and judicial genres is clear and undisputed. The deliberative comprises speeches of advice for or against a particular initiative, presented before a person or a group of people who are deliberating on future actions; the judicial includes speeches of accusation or defense presented before a juror or an assembly of jurymen who are judging on actions that happened in the past. Any theorist, ancient and modern, would approve these definitions.

What about the epideictic genre? In modern languages, the expression "epideictic rhetoric" corresponds to a plurality of terms: for example, in English, we have "praise," "eulogy," "encomium," but also "panegyric", "demonstrative" and "ceremonial" (Pernot 2015, 8). These variations in vocabulary are the first sign of a certain confusion that surrounds the nature of epideictic, its boundaries and its function. Furthermore, a widespread belief has relegated the epideictic to a position of marginality (Walker 2000, 7). In his important book entitled *An Introduction to Aristotle's Rhetoric, with Analysis Notes and Appendices* and published in 1867, E.M. Cope describes epideictic as "inferior" to judicial and deliberative rhetoric because it is "demonstrative, showy, ostentatious, declamatory" and with "no practical purposes in view" (Cope [1867], 1970, 121-122).

1. Texts by ancient authors are cited according to the standard way of referencing. When we refer to specific modern editions and translations, we give the modern editor's name, both in the text of the article and in the References list entry.

Modern attitudes of uncertainty and disregard toward epideictic, as we shall see, find their roots in Antiquity.

2. Epideictic in Greek and Roman rhetoric

Aristotelian classification into three genres has an empirical grounding and derives from the observation of the contexts and conditions of oratorical practice in the 5th and 4th century BC Athens (Pepe 2013, esp. 133-134). In addition to speeches delivered every day in the democratic institutions such as the Council, the Assembly and the law courts, sources attest the birth of a series of compositions in prose having their key element in praise during this period (Pernot 2015, 1-2).

A funeral oration (*epitaphios logos*) was delivered as the last act of the ritual of public burial for soldiers fallen in war. From a rhetorical point of view, funeral oration is a complex entity combining exhortation and consolation with eulogy, which represents the essential part of the speech. The praise of the deceased always goes hand in hand with a generalized tribute to Athens, its history and its institutions².

With the *Encomium of Helen* Gorgias inaugurated the practice of composing encomia of mythological subjects. We also know of an *Encomium of Clytemnestra* by Polycrates³, and the *Helen* and *Busiris* by Isocrates. Sophists also wrote paradoxical encomia of objects and animals: a praise of salt is mentioned by Plato and Isocrates (*Symposium* 177b; *Helen* 12), a praise of bumblebees is recorded by Isocrates (*Helen* 12). In the same vein, Alcidamas wrote a praise of poverty, and another of death. These compositions, generally considered “witticisms or trifles” (*paignia*), could contain philosophical and moral teachings (Pernot 1993, 19-20).

In the publication of his *Evagoras* around 365 BC, Isocrates introduces a new form of praise speech. The first element of novelty lies in the choice of a contemporary figure (Evagoras, the deceased king of Salamina in Cyprus) as the subject of the eulogy, a significant departure from the sophistic encomia and his own *Helen* and *Busiris*, which praised mythological heroes. On the one hand, by celebrating a dead person, *Evagoras* remains within the compass of the *epitaphios logos*; on the other hand, being a eulogy addressed to an individual, it differs from funeral oration, where the deeds and value of single men were entirely subservient to the collective praise of the fallen. Isocrates’ innovation was soon adopted: several eulogies were composed in honor of Gryllus, Xenophon’s young son, on his death in 362⁴, and a few years later Xenophon, in turn, eulogized the Spartan king Agesilaus (Pernot 1993, 20-22).

2. Loraux (1981) is the reference work on *epitaphios logos*.

3. Quintilian, *Education of the Orator [Institutio Oratoria]* 2.17.4.

4. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent philosophers* 2.55.

Validating this development in oratorical practice, Aristotle gives the eulogy a notable place in his *Rhetoric*. He creates a special category – the epideictic genre⁵ – and assigns to it the highest moral aims of praising virtue and condemning vice (*Rhetoric* 1.1366a23-25).

When the Stagyrite introduces, in Book 1, chapter 3, the division in genres, he attributes to epideictic genre a full third of the rhetorical field (*Rhetoric* 1.1358a39-b8: “The genres of rhetoric are three in number [...] deliberative, judicial, epideictic”). He defines the identity of epideictic according to a number of criteria, which are the same as those used for the other two genres (*Rhetoric* 1.1358a39-1359a5; 1.1368a26-33; 3.1414a8-19). The resultant classificatory scheme can be summarized in the following table⁶:

	Hearer	Content	Time	End (telos)	Main argumentative form	Style
Deliberative genre	Judge, for example, the assemblyman	Exhortation Dissuasion	Future	Useful Harmful	Example	Agonistic
Judicial genre	Judge, for example, the juror	Accusation Defense	Past	Just Unjust	Enthymeme	Agonistic
Epideictic genre	Observer	Praise Blame	Present (primarily)	Honourable Disgraceful	Amplification	Written

Despite Aristotle’s effort to build a balanced system in which each genre has an autonomous and equal status, an attentive analysis shows that the position of epideictic is not perfectly symmetrical in comparison with the two other forms of oratory.

The first criterion for defining the three genres is the hearer, whom Aristotle presents as the “end” (*telos*) of any rhetorical activity (*Rhetoric* 1.1358a36-b2). In both judicial and deliberative genres, he says, the hearer is a “judge” (*krites*) who is asked to pronounce judgment on past and future facts respectively, while epideictic hearer is a “spectator” or “observer” (*theoros*) who evaluates the “ability” (*dynamis*) shown by the orator in his performance (*Rhetoric* 1.1358b2-8)⁷. Aristotle returns to discuss the function of rhetorical judgment (*krisis*) in Book 2, casting light on the reasoning he uses in formulating the initial division between *krites* and *theoros* (*Rhetoric* 2.1391b8-23). The *krites* in the proper sense of the

5. Buchheit (1960); Pernot (1993, 25-30). Already among the ancients, the introduction of the epideictic genre was linked to the name of Aristotle: cf. Cicero, *On the orator [De oratore]* 2.43.

6. Cf. Pernot 1993, 28; Pernot 2015, 4; Pepe 2013, 136.

7. On the interpretation of this passage, largely debated in scholarship, see Pepe (2013, 140-159).

word is only he who has to pronounce a judgment on “controversial questions” (*amphisbetoumena*) at issue in the “political debates” (*politikoi agones*), where judicial and deliberative speeches are delivered. As for the *theoros*, he is, at best, “a sort of judge” since epideictic speeches concern things that benefit from common consensus (*homologoumena*).

The nature of the question treated has a decisive effect on the argumentative structure of the speech. Deliberative and judicial speeches, having in common the attempt to persuade concerning disputed questions, should have recourse to examples and enthymemes⁸; “amplification is most suitable in those that are epideictic; for these take up actions which are not disputed, so that all that remains to be done is to attribute beauty and greatness to them” (trans. Kennedy 1991; *Rhetoric* 1.1368a 26-33; cf. 3.1417b31-34)⁹. In these passages, the tripartite division of genres is reduced to a bipartition where deliberative and judicial are joined together to form a group, from which the epideictic is left out. This separation is endorsed in the third book, when Aristotle picks out the style appropriate to each genre: epideictic uniquely requires a “written style” (*lexis graphike*), suitable for reading, whereas the other two genres have an “agonistic style” (*lexis agonistike*), suitable for an oral performance (3.1413b3-22; 3.1414a8-19).

Aristotle seems to be inspired by the antithesis between *agon* and *epideixis* well-attested in the previous tradition (Buchheit 1960, 125): *agon* was used to designate the discourse in the form of debate to be delivered in the law court or assembly in view of arriving at a decision; *epideixis* was a discourse pronounced during an oratorical exhibition, a brilliant improvisation, or a carefully prepared reading of a text, devoid of any immediate practical goal¹⁰. The *epideixeis* were a well-known practice of the Sophists, as we know from numerous allusions in Plato, who also coined the expression *epideiktike techne*, which he calls “a ridiculous name” for negatively stigmatizing the art of sophistic (Sophist 224b). It is noteworthy that in the 4th century neither the noun *epideixis* nor the adjective *epideiktikos* were strictly related to eulogy. In their standard meaning, they denote a form of discourse without any reference to a precise content: the myth of Protagoras, for example, is an *epideixis* in the same way as the encomium of *Helen* or *Busiris*. By naming *epideiktikos* the third genre, Aristotle took a word used in a broad sense and made it a technical term with a clear outline and welldefined field of reference: that of praise (and its counterpart, blame; see Pernot 1993, 27-30).

8. Enthymeme and example are the means of rhetorical demonstration corresponding, respectively, to deduction and induction, i.e. the argumentative means of dialectical reasoning (*Rhetoric* 1.1356a38-b6).

9. On the association between epideictic and amplification, see Pernot (1993, 676-678).

10. Cf. Isocrates, *Panegyric* 4 and 11; *Antidosis* 1; *Panathenaic* 271. In the *Rhetoric to Alexander* (1440b13), a treatise contemporary with *Rhetoric* and falsely ascribed to Aristotle, the author affirms that speeches of praise and blame are made not for debate (*agon*) but for display (*epideixis*).

One cannot fail to recognize the opposing polarities that traverse the presentation of epideictic genre in Aristotle. On the one hand, he has assigned to it the lofty moral task of eulogizing virtue and blaming vice. On the other hand, by rendering the traditional notion of *epideixis* coextensive with that of praise, he has associated epideictic with the idea of exhibition and has cast doubt on its utility. The birth of the genre has occurred under the sign of this ambiguity that was to weigh heavily on the history of the genre (Pernot 1993, 30).

As a consequence of such ambiguity, two conceptions of the epideictic developed in post-Aristotelian doctrine, associated with two different interpretations given to the term *epideiktikos*.

In the strict sense, an epideictic speech is one featuring praise and blame. This narrow conception of the genre is shared by those who relate *epideiktikos* to the active voice of the verb *epideiknunai* which means “to show, to prove”¹¹. This is also the orientation of the Latin theoreticians who adopt the expression genus *demonstrativum*: praise and blame demonstrate the nature of the object with which they are concerned (Cicero, *On Invention* 2.13; Quintilian, *Education of the Orator* 3.4.13).

The more common interpretation links *epideiktikos* with the noun *epideixis* (“exhibition”) and the verb in the middle form *epideiknusthai* (“to show oneself, to give a display”). The Greek term *epideiktikos*, states Quintilian, “seems to me to connote display rather than demonstration” (Quintilian, *Education of the Orator* 3.4.13; Cicero, *Orator* 37). In line with this interpretation, the third genre takes a new identity, which departs from the model outlined by Aristotle in *Rhetoric*. The divergences concern:

- the domain of relevance: the epideictic is a wide-ranging and various; genre and praise and blame are thus only two of the possible forms it embraces;
- the nature and goals: the objectives of display and the audience’s pleasure are absolutely predominant with respect to the ethical function. To achieve these objectives the epideictic orator develops all the resources of eloquence and deploys all its ornamentation. Stylistic ornamentation becomes the distinctive characteristic of the genre (Pepe 2013, 271-272).

Since the category of epideictic is loose, some further extensions of its referential spectrum are possible. Each speech designed for exhibition and the pleasure of the audience, through its aesthetic qualities above all, can be qualified as epideictic. Quintilian states that declamation, even though its forms strictly speaking belong to the judicial (*controversiae*) or deliberative genre (*suasoriae*), “has an epideictic element”, because “it must assume a degree of elegance” (*Education*

11. Sopatros (4th cent. AD), *Commentary on Hermogenes’ On Issues* 192.25-27.

of the Orator 2.10.12). The greatest extension occurs in the influential doctrine of Hermogenes of Tarsus. Here the epideictic genre – that he calls *panegyrikos* (“panegyric”) – includes the works of poets, philosophers, logographers and historians (Hermogenes, *On Types of Style* 388.17-389.1; 386.16-388.17; 389.7-395.2). It has come to cover the whole field of literature¹².

The general uncertainty on the identity, function and boundaries of the epideictic genre leads to frequent oscillations in vocabulary, which prefigure the modern ones.

Epideiktikos was often replaced with *enkomiastikos* (“encomiastic”), together with its Latin correspondent *laudativum* (*genus*). On the one side, this solution stresses the ethical nature of the genre and avoids the risk of assimilation between the notions of praise and that of mere exhibition. For this reason, Stoics philosophers adopted it (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.42.). On the other side, *enkomiastikos* and *laudativus* encompass the speeches of praise and blame under a name that usually belongs solely to the praise, and this led rhetoricians to explain that the genre was designated as a whole a *meliore parte*, i.e., from its better part (Pepe 2013, 273-274). The hierarchical superiority of the praise over the *psogos*, thus suggested in rhetorical theory, reflects the former’s clear predominance in oratorical practice, in which blame is often confined to the scholastic context, as well as a certain awkwardness in dealing with this type of speech, which involved verbal aggressiveness and deprecatory procedures (Pernot 1993, 481-490).

Another term adopted as a substitute for *epideiktikos* was *panegyrikos* (“panegyric”). This usage, attested for the first time 1st cent. BC, is widespread in the Imperial Age and Late Antiquity. As a synonym of *epideiktikos*, *panegyrikos* can alternate between a more specific and a more extended meaning: in some cases, “panegyric” refers to a speech of praise and blame; in others, it includes speeches conceived for exhibition and delivered in any festivity or gathering without a practical goal (Pepe 2013, 275-276). The original meaning of *panegyrikos* as “speech given on the occasion of a public festival (*panegyris*)”¹³ is only preserved in the *Rhetoric* of the Pseudo-Dionysius of Halicarnassus and in the treatises ascribed to Menander the Rhetor, where “panegyrics” are a subclass of the epideictic genre (see *infra*). As for the Latin equivalent *panegyricus*, in the Imperial Age it came to be specialized in the sense of a *laudatio* of the emperor, praise of the latter being the predominant theme in public festivities (Pernot 1993, 38 and 507).

Finally, echoing the Platonic pairing, an equivalence was sometimes established between epideictic rhetoric and sophistic rhetoric, this expression usually involving, as in Plato, a depreciative nuance (Gaines 2009).

12. The notion of epideictic has known a comparable extension among modern scholars, see *infra*.

13. Examples of *panegyrikoi* for the Classical Age are the *Olympic orations* by Gorgias and Lysias, the *Panathenaic oration* and *Panegyric* by Isocrates (the two latter being speeches imagined to be delivered in a *panegyris*).

Epideictic genre gets bad press among the majority of Aristotle's successors. They emphasize the gap, sketched in *Rhetoric*, separating it from the other two genres. The deliberative and judicial speeches were bracketed together under the label of "pragmatic speeches" (*logoi pragmatikoi*) which highlights the way in which they involve concrete interests and are a stimulus to immediate action. Its exclusion from this set implies a devaluation of epideictic which is denied any practical utility (Walker 2000, 7-10). Similarly, they insist on the opposition between the "real debates" (*alethinoi agones*) delivered in the law courts and assemblies and the gratuitous and artificial character of the epideictic or sophistic rhetoric, fulfilling a purely aesthetic purpose (Pepe 2013, 294-298). This criticism emerges at various times in Cicero. In the *On the orator* (2.35), while Crassus recognizes the ethical and social function of praise and blame – they encourage men to virtue or reclaim them from vice – Marcus Antonius dismisses *laudationes* as "not essential" since composed "more for reading and entertainment or to give an ornament to a particular person than for their utility in public discussions" (*On the orator* 2.341). In the *Orator* Cicero describes epideictic speeches as showpieces unconnected with civic debate and designed to give pleasure (*delectatio*) to the audience¹⁴. Quintilian echoes Cicero's position:

Epideictic, devised for display, seeks nothing but the pleasure of the hearer; it therefore openly displays all the arts of speech and puts its ornament on view, because it does not lay traps or plan to win a case but addresses itself solely to the end of praise and glory (*Orator* 37; trans. Russell 2001, vol. 3, 347)¹⁵.

In addition to the critique of being useless and using empty verbiage, a second reproach leveled in Antiquity against epideictic eloquence was that of lie and flattery. Philosophers, starting from Plato, claim that eulogies contain falsehoods and overstatements, because the eulogizer seeks favor from those whom he praises¹⁶. The orators themselves are often pledged to claim the truth of their words and to prevent the charge of adulation, especially when they are committed in praising political rulers (see e.g., Pliny, *Panegyric of Trajan* 3; Julian, *Panegyric in Honor of the Empress Eusebia* 1-2).

Disregard and suspicion toward the epideictic genre contribute to explain its peripheral position within rhetorical handbooks¹⁷. Already in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* the

14. Cf. also *Orator* 42. However, he adds immediately after that epideictic genre "may be called the nurse (*nutrix*) of the orator". Cicero's judgement on epideictic is flowing; see Vickers (1988, 57-58).

15. *Education of the Orator* 8.3.11; cf. 3.4.6; 3.4.13. Like Cicero, Quintilian gives conflicting evaluations of epideictic. At 3.7.1, for instance, he reproaches Aristotle and his disciple Theophrastus for having divorced the genre from the practical business, relegating its aim to mere ostentation (*ostentatio*). Romans, he claims, have restored the dignity of epideictic oratory by reattaching it to public affairs.

16. Plato particularly criticizes eulogies in *Menexenus* and *Symposium*. The problem of whether praise can ever be distinguished from flattery is at the center of Plutarch's treatise *On Flattery and Friendship*. See Pernot (1993, 499-515).

17. Pernot (1993, 67 and 106); Pepe (2013, 337-339).

analysis of the *topoi* appropriate to each genre reserves a long and detailed exposition for the deliberative (chap. 4-8) and judicial (chap. 10-14), whereas epideictic is treated much more briefly (chap. 9). This disparity of treatment increases in the Hellenistic and Imperial Age. In the *Rhetoric to Herennius* and in Cicero's *On Invention* praise and blame are relegated to a sort of appendix. In imperial *Technai* epideictic is usually mentioned in passing, in connection with encomiastic passages included in speeches of the other two genres¹⁸.

3. Modern scholarship and the reappraisal of epideictic

For a long time epideictic rhetoric has been an area of research little explored among classical scholars.

At the beginning of the 20th century, T. Burgess (1902) devoted his PhD dissertation to the epideictic: in this work, which was original for its time, he deals with the subject from the Classical Age through to the end of antiquity, paying attention both to the theory of rhetoric and to the practice of oratory. Nevertheless, the notion of “epideictic” that Burgess assumes is too wide, including a large number of genres and literary forms, such as military addresses, philosophical works, diatribes, exhortations, and sermons. In this respect, the title of the work is significant, as it is called “Epideictic Literature” and not “Epideictic Rhetoric”¹⁹. Furthermore, references to Greek and Latin sources are often collected and listed without supplying any commentary.

In 1960, V. Buchheit provided a study of the epideictic from its origins to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. By undertaking a thorough analysis of the sources, he shed light on the role played by Gorgias, Isocrates and Plato in the gradual process, leading to recognize the praise as a fully formed and autonomous form of speech; he also pointed out both the originality and the complexity of the notion of epideictic in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Buchheit's enquiry, whose conclusions are still valid, is, however, limited to 5th and 4th century authors and does not consider Hellenistic and Imperial rhetoric.

This lack was filled, thirty years later, by L. Pernot with his monograph in two volumes: *La rhétorique de l'éloge dans le monde gréco-romain* (1993). This work is the first of a long series of contributions by the French scholar who has opened up many new avenues in research on the epideictic genre²⁰.

18. An exception is Quintilian (*Education of the Orator* 3.7) who dedicates a chapter to the epideictic genre offering precepts to compose praise of a person, gods, cities, monuments, places and every kind of object.

19. A similar extended conception of epideictic has been recently adopted by Walker (2000, 7): “*Epideiktikon*, in sum, came to include everything that modernity has tended to describe as literature”.

20. See the list provided in Pernot (2015, 147-148).

Firstly, Pernot underlines the necessity of considering rhetorical praise as a historical object, of describing it in its contexts, and retracing its evolution across time (Pernot 1993, 12-14). By focusing on the Imperial Age, he shows how it was marked by a “veritable triumph” of epideictic eloquence (Pernot 1993, 55-112; Pernot 2015, 9-20). The new political conditions of peace and prosperity ushered in under the Empire favored the proliferation of ceremonial discourses, which regularly punctuated public events – celebrations for a victory, inaugurations of monuments, arrivals or departures of the emperor or governor – as well as circumstances of private life such as weddings, birthdays, and funerals. Numerous examples of these discourses survive in the corpora of the representatives of the so-called Second Sophistic, like Dio of Prusa and Aelius Aristides. Epideictic oratory developed further during Late Antiquity: it resisted the political crisis of the third century and took on a new luster in the fourth century, with Julian, Himerius, Themistius, Libanius, and the Church Fathers²¹. This extraordinary flowering in oratorical practice was not devoid of consequences in rhetorical theory: even though most theoreticians concentrated their attention on deliberative and judicial discourses, the Imperial Age saw the appearance of treatises devoted solely to the epideictic genre. These treatises classify different kinds of epideictic speeches either according to subject of praise (gods, cities, men, animals, inanimate objects)²² or the occasion on which the speech is delivered (arrival speech, farewell speech, epithalamium, funeral oration, panegyric, etc.)²³. Pernot has the merit of analyzing in depth all these aspects of the historical development of the epideictic, which had been neglected or handled quickly in previous studies.

Furthermore, Pernot proposes a more correct approach in assessing the function and significance of epideictic rhetoric. Without denying the importance of the aesthetic dimension of eulogies, he rejects the bias, common among ancients and moderns, which stigmatizes them as useless, gratuitous, or art for the sake of the art. Epideictic speeches in Antiquity – he explains – were generally delivered as part of ceremonies, such as religious and civic celebrations, organized by political authorities, or family celebrations. Rarer were the cases wherein the speech was a simple reading or reciting delivered, outside of all official protocols, before an auditorium of listeners gathered for the event. In the majority of texts, the epideictic orator is a distinguished person who has received an official invitation or mandate and who does not speak only for himself, with the intention of demonstrating his talent but who is committed to achieving the mission entrusted to him: to render

21. A chapter in Kennedy (1983, 23-45) was already devoted to epideictic rhetoric in Late antiquity.

22. This is the case of the first of the two treatises ascribed to Menander the Rhetor (3rd cent. AD), *Division of Epideictic Speeches*.

23. The first seven chapters of the *Rhetoric* by the Pseudo-Dionysius of Halicarnassus and the second treatise ascribed to Menander the Rhetor (*On Epideictic Speeches*) are based on this division.

explicit the values shared by the community and promote them; and by reinforcing the adherence of the group to the common beliefs, to guide its behavior and actions. Thus, epideictic speech has a social and ideological function²⁴. In reasserting the importance of epideictic rhetoric within society and the serious role of the orator as *porte-parole* of the community, Pernot seems to exploit systematically the interpretation already proposed by Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca in the *New rhetoric. A treatise on Argumentation*:

[...] epideictic (*sic*) oratory has significance and importance for argumentation, because it strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds. [...] the speaker readily converts into universal values, if not eternal truths, that which has acquired a certain standing through social unanimity [...] He is, so to speak, the educator of his audience, and if it is necessary that he should enjoy a certain prestige before he speaks, it is to enable him, through his own authority, to promote the values that he is upholding. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 50-52)²⁵

The Epideictic affirms values and, by doing this, suggests a conduct. Encomium provides models of virtue to admire and imitate. From this point of view, it performs a function of advice and it is not reducible to flattery. Behind sweet words, the listeners and the subject praised are both invited, implicitly or not, to follow the model of excellence proclaimed. Even when it seems that they already act as they should, the oration works as a reminder, encouraging them to not forget it and to carry on in the right direction (Pernot 1993, 710-724). In Antiquity, Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1.1367b36-1368a9) and Quintilian (*Education of the Orator* 3.7.28) noted that in principle there is a similarity between praise and advice but they did not elaborate on this observation which could have led them to better understand epideictic rhetoric's useful purpose.

Freed from the traditional prejudices associated with it since its origin, and finally taken seriously, the epideictic has enjoyed a growing interest in the last two decades. Several collections of studies have been published, dealing both with general issues (Urso 2011) and circumscribed corpora of texts (Roche 2011; Smith and Covino 2010). Many contributions have been devoted to epideictic practice in Late Antiquity, largely unexplored before (Whitby 1998; Hägg and Rousseau 2000). These advances in our knowledge of the subject notwithstanding, much remain to be done. There are new avenues of research which are opening up today and demand an in-depth study²⁶. In the last part of the paper we would suggest that

24. Pernot (1993, 607-621 and 720-724); Pernot (2015, 78-86). Carter (1991) connected epideictic rhetoric with ritual, both having a special role in constituting and promoting community.

25. Another significant avenue of research has developed in the field of linguistics and philosophy of language. Here the Aristotelian genres, and epideictic in particular, are approached in light of what J.L. Austin, in his famous *Speech Act Theory*, called "performative utterance". It is noteworthy that also this approach leads to recognize the significance of epideictic as a social act. See Beale (1978); Dominicy and Frédéric (2001).

26. Some of these avenues are discussed by Pernot (2015, 101-120).

one of these fields of investigation is offered by the epideictic speeches in honor of women.

4. How to praise a woman: rediscovering a chapter of ancient epideictic

At first glance, this topic does not appear promising. Indeed, ancient evidence of speeches in praise of women is by no means abundant. In classical Athens both collective and individual eulogies are addressed to men: as seen, funeral orations honor the soldiers who died in battle; Isocrates and Xenophon celebrate male sovereigns (Evagoras and Agesilaus). Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* and Isocrates' *Helen* are only apparent exceptions because Helen is a mythical heroine. A Eulogy was closed to respectable women: this reflects the common opinion that merely to be mentioned in public would compromise their reputation. In the *epitaphios logos* that Thucydides puts into his mouth, Pericles explicitly marks as off-limits the subject of female excellence claiming that "greatest glory will be hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or bad" (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.45). Therefore, it is not surprising that the only 'real' woman known to have been eulogized in Athens is a courtesan (Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 13, 592c).

In Rome women were not completely denied access to public praise. Indeed, after their death, they could be celebrated with a funeral eulogy (*laudatio funebris*; on female *laudationes funebres* see Pepe 2015). Nevertheless, some substantial constraints in praising a woman remain. In the *Dialogue on the Orators* (28) Tacitus says that a "mother could have no higher praise than that she managed the house and gave herself to her children". A passage of the *Laudatio Murdiae* (1st cent. AD) – one of the most important specimens of funeral eulogy, addressed by a son to his departed mother (preserved in epigraphic form)²⁷ – is even more remarkable. Reflecting on the content of his speech, the author draws out general guidelines for anyone who has to compose praise for a woman (lines 20-25):

The eulogy for all good women is wont to be simple and similar, because their natural qualities preserved under their own charge do not require variations of phraseology, and it may be enough for all of them to have done the same good deeds worthy of a good reputation, and, because it is hard for a woman to find new praises since their lives are upset by fewer variations, it is necessary for us to commemorate their common values so that nothing may be lost from just precepts and besmirch the remainder. (trans. Lindsay 2004, 93)

In the fourth century, praising a woman was still considered an unusual task. In the *Panegyric in honor of the empress Eusebia*, Julian feels a certain apprehension in approaching it. In the introduction, he appears to be concerned by the accusation

27. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VI 10230. On *Laudatio Murdiae* see Lindsay (2004); Pepe (2015, 113-145).

of flattery, but mostly by the gender of the person he is eulogizing. Thus, after discussing the worth of praise, he defends his choice of a female protagonist (§ 2):

Now I should think it strange indeed if we shall be eager to applaud men of high character, and not think fit to give our tribute of praise to a noble woman, believing as we do excellence is the attribute of women no less than of men. (trans. Wright 1962 [1913], vol. 1, 279)

As suggested by these statements, female eulogy never achieved in Antiquity an importance comparable with other forms of epideictic eloquence. However, we can recognize a development of this practice from classical Greece to Late Antiquity (a short survey in Wieber Scariot 1999). In the Hellenistic Age, we have some fragmentary evidence of eulogies celebrating oriental princesses from Egypt²⁸. A major step occurs in Roman oratory where, as said, a *laudatio funebris*, reserved to males in the earliest stage, became customary for women as well. In *laudationes*, delivered in the Forum at the climax of the funeral, the women eulogized were members of prominent noble families and the orators were relatives of the deceased but also (actual or future) leading men. Thus, for example, Caesar commemorated his aunt Julia and his wife Cornelia (Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar* 6.1; Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 5.1-3). Under the Principate, *laudationes* were delivered during the funeral of the ‘first ladies’ of the Imperial family and often spoken by the emperor himself (Pepe 2015, 51-64). One of the most famous is Hadrian’s speech for his mother-in-law Matidia (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XIV 3579; see Pepe 2015, 147-191). In parallel with this solemn and official *laudatio*, there were also *laudationes* pronounced among relatives and friends at the pyre or gravesite even for women of lower social status. Two instances of this private eulogy are the so-called *Laudatio Turiae* – addressed by a husband to his deceased wife²⁹ – and the already cited *Laudatio Murdiae*.

This Roman practice seems not to have known a parallel growth in the Greek part of the Empire. Funeral oration for an individual is a kind of epideictic rhetoric well attested for the representatives of the Second Sophistic, but the subjects eulogized are uniquely men³⁰. The satirist Lucian broke the reticence of Greek authors on female praise in a diptych of dialogues dedicated to the eulogistic portrait of Panthea (*Essays in Portraiture, Essays in Portraiture Defended*). But it is not coincidental that the woman in question, Panthea, is – once again – a courtesan (a native of Smyrna, she was the mistress of the emperor Lucius Verus).

The 4th century AD was a turning point in the history of female eulogy. The texts preserved, written both in Latin and Greek and by both Pagan and Christian

28. A Xenocrates wrote a speech in praise of the queen Arsinoe II, deceased in 270 BC (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 4.15). In the realm of poetry, Theocritus praised the queens Berenice I and Berenice II.

29. *Laudatio Turiae*: *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VI 1527 = 31670 = 37053 = VI² 41062. See Durry (1950) 1992.

30. Two *epitaphioi logoi* for the boxer Melancomas are transmitted in the corpus of Dio of Prusa (Or. 29-30); Aelius Aristides wrote a funeral oration for his teacher Alexander and one for his pupil Eteonaeus (Or. 31-32).

authors, suggest that it became more esteemed and prominent. Gregory of Nyssa delivered funeral eulogies for the empress Flacilla, wife of Theodosius II, and for their daughter Pulcheria³¹; Gregory of Nazianzus for his own sister Gorgonia (Or. 8). In the same period, Julian composed his *Panegyric in Honour of the Empress Eusebia* and Claudian wrote the *Laus Serenae* (in verses) celebrating Serena, wife of Stilicho and niece and adoptive daughter of Theodosius I. Julian and Claudian's eulogies, for the first time, praise women who are still alive³².

Modern scholars have analyzed female eulogies either individually or in special collections (*laudationes funebres*, eulogies of Late Antiquity, etc.), without paying due attention to the gender dimension which characterizes them. However, when we precisely look at this material through the gender perspective, some relevant issues arise.

In Greco-Roman culture, rhetoric was a “manly pursuit” (Connolly 1998, 149). Oratory shaped male identity and affected body posture and language, the gaze, and the whole conduct of a man, which was constructed in stark contrast to female and slave-like behavior³³. Greek and Roman women were not allowed to learn the discipline and were barred from making public speeches. Female figures credited to have rhetorical competence or to have made an oratorical performance are very rare. In rhetorical treatises, the rules were laid out only by men and with only men in mind. Greek and Roman handbooks give precepts for praising gods, cities, monuments, places and every kind of object but not for praising a woman. Therefore, a first question arises: how does the orator adapt the standard pattern to deal with his ‘special’ subject?³⁴ Is it possible to discover a list of common *topoi* used in drawing the encomiastic female portrait? At the core of the epideictic speech, there is the description of the virtues and qualities of the person eulogized: which are the most suited for a woman?

Certainly, these qualities have been selected by men, in accordance with their own views about what is in a woman that makes her significant. Nevertheless, we should not forget that almost everything that we know about ancient women derives ultimately from a masculine source. As in any other literary text, we cannot know how women's treatment in eulogies, filtered by the male voice, match historical reality. These encomiastic portraits, however, may tell us more than many other sources on what sort of life and behavior *were expected* (my emphasis) of a Greek and Roman woman according to her status and role in society. The task of epideictic orator is, as said, that of enhancing values and amplifying qualities

31. 475-490 (Flacilla) and 461-472 (Pulcheria) in Spira's edition (Spira 1967).

32. Sometimes a little space in male panegyrics was devoted to praise emperor's wife or female relatives. For example, in his *Panegyric* Pliny describes the qualities of Trajan's wife Plotina (83.4-8) and of his sister Marciana (84.1-8). Also Menander the Rhetor (376.9-13) advises inclusion of the empress in the *basilikos logos* ('imperial oration').

33. See Gunderson (2000).

34. Some observations in Rohr (2006).

traditionally recognized as positive by the community. This implies that Matidia's virtues enumerated by Hadrian must correspond neatly with what would be expected of a female member of the elite and of the Imperial family. The same is true for Eusebia and for all the other women eulogized: their behavior, as the orator describes it, must fit social norms as a necessary condition to receive the approval of the audience. As a corollary, when a variation of the standard female image occurs in these texts, this likely reflects a cultural change regarding common beliefs about a woman's role and prerogatives.

In the short space available in this paper, we limited ourselves to merely indicating some of the reasons that make the extant female eulogies of great interest. In particular, our aim was to suggest that a comprehensive and in-depth study of these texts could enable us not only to reconstruct a chapter unjustly neglected in the history of ancient rhetoric but also gain some insights on the cultural dynamics of the Greek and Roman societies.

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