

‘The problems of being praised’

Time doesn’t allow me to be anything but cursory in considering the problems associated with literary praise-giving in the Roman world.

1. Constantine seated on a throne, contemplating, it seems, his cross-shaped sword (*in hoc signo vinces*). I invite you to imagine him as *laudandus* listening to a panegyric, and to wonder what he is thinking.

Very briefly: the performance context [2, 3] itself is occasionally mentioned by orators as a cause of anxiety for them; basilica or forum or town hall or theatre location, with an intimidating gallery of listeners; their time is tight, the emperor is a busy man, yet there is so much to be said, the orator is too inexperienced, or past his best, or too Gallic, and other speakers are waiting their turn ... . Alan Ross’ recent chapter on audiences to panegyrics - how the dynamics of praise can be marshalled to take into account the context of performance.

But if performance was problematic, the form itself was even more so. 4.

Lies (Tacitus *Ann.*1.1, *Hist.* 1.1; Lucian *de Hist Conscr.* 38-41), sincerity (Pliny *Pan. PanLat.* II(12), not to be boring (Pliny *Ep.* 3.18; formulaic (Menander *Basilikos Logos*), literary innovations (Pliny – a prose panegyric to be re-worked, published and then re-read: 4<sup>th</sup> century trajectory of increasingly stylised/aesthetically heightened prose speeches; Claudian, Sidonius – hexameter panegyric).

Regular disavowal of epideictic as not really or originally Roman but Greek (Cicero *De Orat.* 2.341, Quint. *Inst. Orat.* 3.7.1-2) This can become implicitly or explicitly racist (Juv. *Sat.* 3.86-87; Lact. *Diu. Inst.* 1.15.13, Isidore *Etym.* 6.8.7). [Ironically of course, by late antiquity, to such an extent had Latinate panegyric (prose and verse) become recognised as a mark of Roman cultural identity, that Gallic orators and the Greek poet Claudian used it.]

But about the challenge of being praised, of being the *laudandus* [excuse the gendered term throughout, sorry!], imperial panegyric, prose and verse, Greek and Latin yields little; there are some occasional fleeting in-text 5. details about the behaviour or anticipated behaviour of

the *laudandus* in reaction to what is being said (*PanLat* X(2)4.4, VI(7)14.1, II(12)44.3, Libanius *Or.* 45.11; these tend to be understood as indicators of the text as a ‘live’ transcript or at least an affectation of a live transcript, but they also reveal hints of *modestia / clementia* – of a reluctance or even disinclination to hear exhaustive replays of the bloody deaths of enemies in battle or execution. At *PanLat* II(12)44.2-3, for example, Pacatus Drepanius is recalling to Theodosius the moment when Magnus Maximus confessed his usurpation, the standard punishment for which was death. The orator says to Theodosius: ‘you had already begun to waver about his death, and you had lowered your eyes and reddened your face with a blush and were beginning to speak with pity. But it is well that you cannot do everything: your men avenge you even against your will. Therefore, he is snatched from your eyes, and so that nothing be granted to clemency, he is carried to his death amid countless hands. See, again, Emperor, you turn away, and you are vexed at the account of the tyrant’s death. Now, now, be at ease. I will acknowledge the nature of your clemency: what you did not wish to see you will not hear’. In instances like this, the *laudandus* is revealed as a moral being by the very effect on him of the praise itself, a sort of genre-specific version of the *recusatio* convention. Libanius *Autobiography* 129 is unusually revealing. ‘I spoke last, with the Emperor himself [Julian] thinking that as many people as possible would gather; they said that in his care for his attendant, Hermes touched each member of the audience with his wand so that no word of mine would pass without its share of admiration. The Emperor accomplished this, first by mentioning his pleasure at my style, then by his tendency to get to his feet, then (when he could not restrain himself even when trying his hardest) he leapt from his seat, opened his cloak out fully with hands outstretched’). This is very odd – Julian is revealed by the praise as an excitable aesthete, animated so it seems by literary style rather than, say, ethical content.

But outside of these few examples, we have little insight into how an Emperor might behave when being praised, but it is clearly of ethical interest. How should he behave? Would he adopt the stony-faced posture of Constantius II in his *aduentus* at Rome, as narrated [and condemned] by Ammianus (16.10.4-10)? Would he even show interest in what was being said? Might he just stare at his sword? And how would he be judged for that?

However, albeit neither of them was an Emperor, in Seneca the Younger and Augustine, we have two sources about the challenges of being praised. Both highly educated, teachers of rhetoric no less, each a *laudator* to an Emperor (Nero and Valentinian II respectively); what

they have to say about being a *laudandus* might therefore prompt us to reflect on imperial panegyric.

In a recent *AJPh* article on Seneca's thoughts about praise in *NQ IVA* (Preface), Chiara Graf has shown how his articulation of the inescapable attractiveness of being praised constitutes a faultline in his characteristic differentiation throughout many of his works between appearance and reality; [6] for even rejected praises can bring pleasure to the intended *laudandus* and so by definition, not be totally rejected. His solution 'When you want to be praised sincerely, why be indebted to someone else for it? Praise yourself' *ipse te lauda* is in keeping with another passage [7] he wrote at about the same time, *Ep.* 102.15-16

(15) 'Besides, praise is one thing, and the giving of praise another; the latter demands utterance also. Hence no one speaks of a "funeral praise," but says "praise-giving"—for its function depends upon speech. And when we say that a man is worthy of praise, we send to him not the kind words of men, but their judgment. So the good opinion, even of one who in silence feels inward approval of a good man, is praise. [16] Again, as I have said, praise is a matter of the mind rather than of the speech; for speech brings out the praise that the mind has conceived, and publishes it forth to the attention of the many. To judge a man worthy of praise, is to praise him.'

I will pass very quickly over whether or not *laus* can denote praise-giving as well as praise in classical Latin (I think it can actually), to perhaps the more significant point here: in insisting both that adequate praise can be given to the self and that praise and praise-giving are different such that praise from others is their attitude not their words, Seneca is denying the essentially performative nature of praise; his recommendation *te lauda*, 'praise yourself' or the definition of praise as attitude not expression of attitude strips praise of its communicative, social function. That guard seems to me to be dropped at 18 when the question is posed about the beneficiary of praise – the *laudator* or the *laudandus*? – Seneca's answer is both, but that requires communication to have taken place. Uneasily, therefore, in these works of Seneca, we seem to have situation where praise is an unvoiced attitude or even self-reflection but is also a communicative process between good people that effectively incubates virtue.

Note the important modifiers at 18, though, are the ethical terms in 'this praise rendered to a good man by good men'. For Seneca as *laudandus*, in these circumscribed conditions of good moral virtue characterising both *laudator* and *laudandus*, the praise seems not to need to be rejected (which as we saw in *NQ* does not work anyway) but celebrated as a good.

[8] In 392CE Augustine wrote to Bishop Aurelius of Carthage (*Ep.* 22). He mentioned the problems of competitiveness and envy that were associated with the praise of men and cautioned not to rejoice in it, but to discard it; if any must be accepted, it needed to be conferred back to the benefit of those who gave it; this can be difficult because although ‘it is easy to do without praise, when it is denied us, it is hard not to take pleasure in it, when it is offered’ and his confession that closes the quotation ‘Yet, strenuously as I struggle with the adversary, I often receive wounds from him, since I cannot rid myself of delight in the praise that is offered me’ *delectationem oblatae laudis mihi auferre non possum* (‘I cannot rid myself of the delight I feel when I am offered praise’) [*delectari, delectatio*]. In between these references to anxiety at delight in praise, Augustine refers to the Christian God as the ultimate origin of the praiseworthy, while asserting that the *laudandus* should correct any unmerited expressions of praise, and when it is merited, should congratulate those who take pleasure in it (i.e. the *laudatores*).

There is some point of contact with Seneca here: like Seneca, Augustine acknowledges the pleasure of praise, despite oneself; where Seneca seems to assume a situation where the praise is appropriate, Augustine differentiates between merited and unmerited praise, and advises accordingly. In both men, the reception of the praise is an opportunity to reflect upon the moral qualities of the *laudator*.

We fast forward several decades to 429 and a letter from Augustine (*Ep.* 231) [9] to Darius. Darius, had written to Augustine asking for a copy of the *Confessions*, and had praised him; Augustine took great pleasure in the letter and its praise of him. This expansive reply bears particular witness to the importance that could be invested in identity in praise-giving: Augustine confesses that he had taken great pleasure in Darius’ letter, not for its style nor for the praise of Augustine that it contained (*Ep.* 231.1-2). This arresting observation leads to reflection on the dangers of delight in praise for its own sake:

‘But in the case of praise of myself, though certainly I don’t find pleasure in it all or from every man, but only in the sort you consider me worthy to receive and from men like you, that is who on Christ’s account love his servants, even then I cannot deny that I was delighted by the praise of me in your letter’ (2).

Later in the same letter, Augustine revisits this insistence on the importance of the good character of the praise-giver if praise is to have value (4): *cur ergo me non delectet laudari abs te, cum et uir bonus sis, ne me fallas, et ea laudes quae amas et quae amare utile ac*

*salubre est, etiam si non sint in me?* ('And so, why should it not be delightful for me to be praised by you, since you are a good man (unless you deceive me) and you praise those qualities you love and which it is useful and wholesome to love, even if I don't have them?', 5).

For Augustine, the affective value of praise-giving depends upon its ethical (and Christian) context – the same praise, given to Augustine by someone else, would not have had the same effect. If the *laudandus* is good, they have no need of praise, but the *laudator* can have the benefit of moral improvement through the giving of praise of the good. And again, we see Augustine's differentiation between merited and unmerited praise (depending on whether or not he has or lacks the qualities being praised – in the latter case a prompt to Augustine to acquire them, in the former to rejoice in them).

I turn at this point to the practice of praising the Roman Emperor and note that many of the *PanLat* are not anonymous. I say 'now' as I assume the name of, say, the orator addressing Maximian and Constantine in 307 (*PanLat* VII(6)) was announced before he spoke, or was even generally known in Trier. (I suspect the speeches were deliberately anonymised by an ancient editor, in fact, but that is an argument for a different day). But these anonymous speeches give very little sense of familiarity between the *laudator* and the *laudandus* – hence perhaps the heightened anxiety the orators felt. There are speeches of course where we can assume even quite close familiarity between *laudator* and *laudandus*, such as in Ausonius' *gratiarum actio* to Gratian, his own pupil. If an emperor did not know his *laudator* – and how could he always or often do so? – he would not be in a position to evaluate his moral authority, and so Augustine's conditions do not or might not apply.

Both Seneca and Augustine acknowledge the delight/ pleasure in being a *laudandus* as problematic. Perhaps each man's reflection on the experience of being a *laudandus* was a direct result of or at least heavily informed by their experiences of being a high profile *laudator*. In his *Confessions* Augustine recalls with a degree of shame his participation in imperial praise-giving (6.6.9), to Valentinian II in Milan in the mid 380s; the Emperor was about 15 years old at the time); Seneca *De clementia* to Nero in 55-56 when Nero was 18. We do not know how these teenage emperors reacted, but I wonder about the levels of oxytocin that must have been surging through their neural pathways as they heard what they heard about themselves. But as a result of those experiences as *laudator*, each of Seneca and Augustine were clearly better placed to evaluate the social function of praise-giving and

praise-receiving. Both of them craft praise-giving and praise-receiving as communicative acts from which to effect moral improvement; at once this renders praise-giving as more than ostentatious or superficial flim-flam and freights praise-receiving with ethical responsibility.

In a sense, in their thought about praise, Seneca and Augustine describe an eco-system of moral improvement, with both *laudator* and *laudandus* active participants in an exchange or mutual recognition of the other's moral worth and potential. This stands in contrast to the typical protocol of contemporary Roman imperial panegyric, structured around ceremony, convention and power, shackles that are very difficult to shake off. Certainly, imperial panegyric communicates – *ascendente* and *descendente* as Guy Sabbah so helpfully put it - and certainly, much of its content orbits around moral qualities the emperor is said to have; but for its realisation it does not depend upon the validation of *laudator* and *laudandus*, each of the other, as moral authorities, and it was certainly susceptible to the delights of belletrist artifice. As such the thought of Seneca and Augustine critiques standard contemporary practice in praise culture, and offers a different model; they recognised the opportunities and the problems of praise – and so, present panegyric as a two-edged sword, as Constantine might be thinking.