

‘The problems of being praised’

Roger Rees, rdr1@st-andrews.ac.uk

Panegyric texts from Antiquity tell us various things about the problems of performing praise; other types of text tell us about some inherent problems of the form of praise-giving; but both are less forthcoming about the problems of being praised. But in Seneca the Younger and Augustine we have two of the great minds of Latin antiquity. Both men were successful teachers of rhetoric, and both wrote panegyrics for their Emperors. But both men also philosophised about the agency and value of praise-giving – not from generic or rhetorical or racist perspectives, as we sometimes see in other texts, but from a desire for the moral improvement that it could foster, in both *laudandus* and *laudator*. They lived in different socio-cultural contexts, with for example, their very different religious affiliations, but their similar challenges to praise-discourse offer valuable insights: the sense of self, and in Augustine’s case, of the Christian self, is essentially at odds with the performative nature of panegyric. The discussions of these two giants of Roman thought suggest that praise-giving and praise-receiving were problematic for a social individual, but had potential for cultivating moral improvement.

1. Statue of Constantine, enthroned (Yorkminster, England).



2. *PanLat V(8)2.1 nunc itaque cum in hac urbe, quae adhuc adsiduitate praesentiae tuae ... fruitur ... totus tibi amicorum tuorum comitatus et omnis imperii apparatus adsistat, [ac] ... omnes homines omnium fere ciuitatum aut publice missi aut pro se tibi supplices adsint*

‘In this city which still enjoys your continuous presence ... the whole contingent of your friends and the complete apparatus of empire stands by your side and ... all men from almost every city are here, either sent on public duty or as suppliants to you on their own account’.

3. *PanLat* V(8)9.3 *neque enim parui negotii est imperatorem totius orbis pro se peculiariter rogare, sub tantae maiestatis adspectu perficere frontem, uultum componere, confirmare animum, uerba concipere, intrepidanter dicere, apte desinere, exspectare responsum.*

‘It is not easy to ask the Emperor of the whole world for a favour for oneself, to embolden one’s front before face of such great majesty, to compose one’s features, to settle one’s mind, to conceive of the words, to speak bravely, to stop at a suitable moment, to wait for a response’.

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, 4th century trajectory: Claudian, Sidonius etc);

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).

5. ‘Live’ reaction? *PanLat* X(2)4.4, VI(7)14.1, II(12)44.3, Libanius *Or.* 45.11; Libanius *Autobiography* 129. ‘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.’

6. Seneca *NQ IVA* 4 *habent hoc in se naturale blanditiae: etiam cum reiciuntur placent. saepe exclusae novissime recipiuntur; hoc enim ipsum imputant quod repelluntur, et subigi ne contumelia quidem possunt. ... [6] Crispus Passienus, ... saepe dicebat adulationi nos non claudere ostium, sed operire, et quidem sic quemadmodum opponi amicae solet, quae, si impulit, grata est; gratior, si effregit. ... [14]. cum cupieris bene laudari, quare hoc ulli debeas? ipse te lauda.*

[4] ‘Flattery has in it this natural appeal: even when it is rejected it is pleasing. Often refused it is finally accepted; for flattery considers it a merit even to be repulsed and cannot be subdued even by insults. ... [6] ... Crispus Passienus often used to say that we do not slam the door on flattery, we only close it gently, the way a door is usually closed on a mistress. If she shoves against it we are pleased, more pleased if she breaks it down. ... [14] When you want to be praised sincerely, why be indebted to someone else for it? Praise yourself’.

7. Seneca *Ep.* 102.10 *ad summam dicite nobis, utrum laudantis an laudati bonum sit: si laudati bonum esse dicitis, tam ridiculam rem facitis, quam si adfirmetis meum esse, quod alius bene ualeat. sed laudare dignos honesta actio est; ita laudantis bonum est, cuius actio est, non nostrum, qui laudamur. ... [14] ... “sed laus,” inquit, “nihil aliud quam uox est, uox autem bonum non est.” cum dicunt claritatem esse laudem bonorum a bonis redditam, non ad uocem referunt, sed ad sententiam. licet enim uir bonus taceat, sed aliquem iudicet dignum laude esse,*

laudatus est. [15] praeterea aliud est laus, aliud laudatio, haec et uocem exigit. itaque nemo dicit laudem funebrem, sed laudationem, cuius officium oratione constat. cum dicimus aliquem laude dignum, non uerba illi benigna hominum, sed iudicia promittimus. ergo laus etiam taciti est bene sentientis ac bonum uirum apud se laudantis. [16] deinde, ut dixi, ad animum refertur laus, non ad uerba, quae conceptam laudem egerunt et in notitiam plurium emittunt. laudat qui laudandum esse iudicat. ... [18] “cuius,” inquit, “bonum est claritas, id est laus bono a bonis reddita? utrum laudati an laudantis?” utriusque. meum, qui laudor; quia natura me amantem omnium genuit, et bene fecisse gaudeo, et gratos me inuenisse uirtutum interpretes laetor; hoc plurium bonum est, quod grati sunt, sed et meum. ita enim animo conpositus sum, ut aliorum bonum meum iudicem, utique eorum, quibus ipse sum boni causa. [19] est istud laudantium bonum, uirtute enim geritur; omnis autem uirtutis actio bonum est. hoc contingere illis non potuisset, nisi ego talis essem.

‘Finally, tell us whether the good belongs to him who praises, or to him who is praised: if you say that the good belongs to him who is praised, you are on as foolish a quest as if you were to maintain that my neighbour’s good health is my own. But to praise worthy men is an honourable action; thus the good is exclusively that of the man who does the praising, of the man who performs the action, and not of us, who are being praised. ... [14] ... “But praise,” says the objector, “is nothing but an utterance, and an utterance is not a good.” When they say that renown is praise bestowed on the good by the good, what they refer to is not an utterance but a judgment. For a good man may remain silent; but if he decides that a certain person is worthy of praise, that person is the object of praise. [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. [18] The retort comes: “But whose good is this renown, this praise rendered to a good man by good men? Is it of the one praised, or of the one who praises?” Of both, I say. It is my own good, in that I am praised, because I am naturally born to love all men, and I rejoice in having done good deeds and congratulate myself on having found men who express their ideas of my virtues with gratitude; that they are grateful, is a good to the many, but it is a good to me also. For my spirit is so ordered that I can regard the good of other men as my own—in any case those of whose good I am myself the cause. [19] This good is also the good of those who render the praise, for it is applied by means of virtue; and every act of virtue is a good. They could not have found this good, if I had not been who I am’.

8. Augustine *Ep. 22.7 de contentione autem et zelo quid me attinet dicere, quando ista uitia non in plebe, sed in nostro numero grauiora sunt? horum autem morborum mater superbia est et humanae laudis auiditas, quae etiam hypocrisin saepe generat. ... [8] magnum est de honoribus et laudibus hominum non laetari, sed et omnem inanem pompam praecidere et, si quid inde necessarium retinetur, id totum ad utilitatem honorantium salutemque conferre. ... non enim huius hostis uires sentit, nisi qui ei bellum indixerit, quia, etsi cuiquam facile est laude carere, dum denegatur; difficile est ea non delectari, cum offertur. et tamen tanta mentis in deum debet esse suspensio, ut, si non merito laudemur, corrigamus eos, quos possumus, ne arbitrentur aut in nobis esse, quod non est, aut nostrum esse, quod dei est, aut ea laudent, quae quamuis non desint nobis aut etiam supersint, nequaquam tamen sint laudabilia. ... si autem*

merito laudamur propter deum, gratulemur eis quibus placet uerum bonum, non tamen nobis quia placemus hominibus, sed si coram deo tales sumus, quales esse nos credunt, et non tribuitur nobis sed deo, cuius dona sunt omnia quae uere meritoque laudantur: haec mihi ipse canto cotidie uel potius ille cuius salutaria praecepta sunt, quaecumque siue in diuinis lectionibus inueniuntur siue quae intrinsecus animo suggeruntur. et tamen uehementer cum aduersario dimicans saepe ab eo uulnera accipio, cum delectationem oblatae laudis mihi auferre non possum.

‘Then again, concerning strife and envying, what right have I to speak, since such sins are more serious among ourselves than among the laity? These evils are the offspring of pride and eagerness for the praise of men, which often begets hypocrisy as well. ... [8] It is a great matter not to rejoice in human praise and honours but to discard all empty ostentation, and, if any of it must be kept, to turn it all to the use and the well-being of those who honour us. ... Only one who has declared war on that foe realizes his power, for, 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 yet our minds ought to be so completely uplifted to God that, if we are undeservedly praised, we may correct those we can, lest they should think we possess gifts that are not ours, or that the gifts we have from God are our own, or praise qualities we do possess and even possess in a marked degree, but which are in no way matters for praise. ... But if we are deservedly praised for God’s sake, we should congratulate those who find pleasure in what is truly good, and not ourselves for pleasing men, and that only if we are in the eyes of God what they take us to be and offer the praise not to us, but to God; for everything that is truly and deservedly praised is a gift from Him. This is what I keep on saying to myself each day, or rather He does, from whom come whatever salutary counsels are found in Scripture readings or are suggested to the mind from within. 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’.

9. Augustine *Ep.* 231.1 *quid igitur dicam nisi delectatum me esse litteris tuis ualde ualde? ... [2] meis autem laudibus cum profecto nec omnibus delecter nec ab omnibus, sed eis qualibus me dignum esse arbitratus es, et ab eis qualis es, id est qui propter Christum diligunt seruos eius, etiam laudibus meis me delectatum in litteris tuis negare non possum. [3] ... quod ait Ennius: “omnes mortales sese laudari exoptant,” partim puto adprobandum, partim cauendum. ut enim appetenda est ueritas, quae procul dubio est, etiam si non laudetur, sola laudabilis, sic ea quae facile subrepat, uanitas in hominum laude fugienda est; haec est autem, cum uel ipsa bona quae laudatione digna sunt, non putantur habenda, nisi laudetur ab hominibus homo, uel ea quoque uult in se multum quisque laudari, quae aut exigua laude aut etiam uituperatione digniora sunt. ... [4] ... etenim cum laudantur boni, non laudatis sed laudantibus prodest. nam illis, quantum ad ipsos adinet, quod boni sunt sufficit; sed eis, quibus expedit imitari bonos, gratulandum est, cum ab eis laudantur boni, quoniam sic indicant eos sibi placere, quos ueraciter laudant. ... 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? neque hoc tibi tantum sed etiam mihi prodest. si enim non sunt in me, salubriter erubesco, atque ut sint, inardesco. ac per hoc, quae agnosco mea in laude tua, gaudeo me habere et abs te illa ac me ipsum diligere propter illa; quae autem non agnosco, non solum ut ipse habeam, desidero consequi, uerum etiam ne semper in mea laude fallantur qui me sinceriter diligunt.*

‘So what shall I say but this, that I was very, very pleased with your letter? ... [2] with the praise of myself, however, though certainly I neither find pleasure in every kind nor from every man, but only in such as you consider me worthy to receive and from men such as you are, who for Christ’s sake love His servants—even with the praise of myself contained in your letter I cannot deny that I was very well pleased. [3] ... I hold that the saying of Ennius that “All mortal men are eager to be praised,” is partly to be approved of, partly to be taken as a warning. For just as truth is to be sought after, as being without a doubt the only thing deserving of praise, even if praise be withheld, so is the easily and furtively developing pride in the praise of men to be shunned. And that is the case when, on the one hand, those good qualities that are worthy of being praised are thought not worth possessing unless a man is praised by his fellows, or, on the other hand, when a man desires great praise for things which are worthier of either slight praise or even censure. ... [4] For when good men are praised, the praise confers a benefit on those who give it, not on those who receive it. For as far as concerns the good, the fact that they are good is sufficient, but the others, whose interest it is to imitate the good, are to be congratulated when they bestow praise on the good, since by doing so they show that they are pleased by those whom they praise in sincerity. ... 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? This benefits not only you, but me too, for if they are lacking in me, it is wholesome for me to be shamed and inflamed with desire to acquire them. And so the qualities I recognize in your praises as my own I rejoice in possessing and in having you love them and me for their sake; those on the other hand that I fail to recognize as mine I yearn to acquire, not only in order to possess them for myself, but also to keep those who have a genuine love for me from being deluded when they praise me’.