

Practicing epideictic today: paradoxical encomium in secondary school

Julie Dainville

Université libre de Bruxelles
julie.dainville@ulb.ac.be

Abstract The fact that epideictic aims at building a consensus, a “*homonoia*” among a community is well established since the first known rhetorical treatises. Making students exercise this rhetorical genre would then probably be of great interest to our society. I was teaching Latin and Greek in Belgian secondary schools during four years and decided to explore this hypothesis by making my students practice epideictic exercises. For they constitute the main model that may inspire us today, I took inspiration from exercises as they were practiced during classical Antiquity. After taking into account theoretical and practical aspects inherent to my teaching area, I decided to work on the so called ‘*paradoxical encomium*’. My students were then asked to write the *encomium* of a neutral, or blameworthy object or person. This paper presents the results of this experiment.

I will here focus on the concrete practice of such exercises, on the basis of my own teaching experience. I will broach benefits, but also technical and ethical problems that teachers and students may encounter while practicing them in a nowadays classroom and will illustrate my purpose with examples of productions written by some of my students, from 15 to 17 years old, in a Brussels school of the general secondary education in 2015.

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1. Introduction

Today, identity and integration are at the heart of preoccupations, and these questions are very important in education theories: teachers’ mission is not limited to instruction of pupils any more: they should also build the future citizens; teach them how to live together; how to respect each other. But teachers are often unarmed to face this new challenge.

When I was teaching Latin and Greek in Brussels secondary schools, I was working each week with a hundred and twenty five students, from twelve to seventeen years old. During my studies, I’ve been taught how to teach declensions, or to talk about Caesar’s life. Latin teachers know how to explain grammar and Roman civilisation. But what is really important today is to know how to make this information relevant to teenagers. Thanks to pedagogical studies, teachers have clues to help their students

with their civic development: the importance of mutual trust, of giving them complex tasks in order to develop their capacities to tackle a complex situation, but also the importance of being fair are now well established (VANHALME 2013, LAGGARIGUE 2001, DURU-BELLAT & VAN ZANTEN 2012). We also know that ancient languages courses are, namely due to the chronological distance they allow and the technical abilities they require, a good place to work on these concepts (VANHALME 2012, 2013, DELANNOY 2013, CLO 2013). The challenge is then to actually integrate them into the classes. I have been interested in rhetoric since my studies and the benefit of rhetorical exercises, like those practiced during Antiquity, has been proved by several studies (FERRY & SANS 2015a, 2015b, SANS 2015). For these reasons, I decided to initiate my students to this kind of exercises and see how they could help them.

The starting point of the exercise was a lesson on character sketch in ancient historiography.

In this sequence, I wanted to focus on the links that can be established between such a literary genre and rhetoric in general, especially the epideictic *encomium*. I purchased different aims in this sequence: I wanted to question the supposed objectivity of ancient historians, and to show that writing a character sketch could lead to a positive or a negative representation of him or her¹. At first, when I asked them what a historian is supposed to do, they all agreed on the fact that objectivity was the key. And this is the usual answer you get from students when you ask this question: they don't realise the persuasive strength of sketches. But after reading the character sketch of Catiline, by Sallust (*De coniuratione Catilinae*, 5), and of Hannibal, by Livius (XXI, 4, 2-10), they immediately felt that these descriptions were not neutral. The part of subjectivity of the authors appeared then obvious to them. By pointing the subjectivity in the writing of a sketch, I wanted them to know that writing history is a technical ability, that rhetoric is important to clearly understand Roman historians, but also to develop their critical mind.

From a technical point of view, my objective was the identification of the main patterns of this kind of texts. I choose to focus on the twofold dimension of the sketch (the characters are depicted from a physical but also from a psychological point of view), on *topoi* of the epideictic genre (birthplace, family, education, and so on; see for instance Menander Rhetor, *Divisions of Epideictic Speeches*) and on the main Roman virtues (see for example DUBUISSON 1985): *virtus* (expected qualities of a Roman citizen at their highest level), *fides* (moral foundation of the Roman order: trust and loyalty), *pietas* (respect of the will of gods and of the world order; sense of hierarchy), *gravitas* (respect of the traditional ethics) and *maiestas* (respect of the authority).

I choose to end the sequence with a particular kind of description: the paradoxical *encomium*², which is probably the ultimate technical exercise as far as sketches are concerned (SANS 2015: 6-10) and gave them *The fly* of Lucian, an *encomium* written for this insect.

¹ On the links between rhetoric and ancient historiography, see, for instance, KENNEDY 1972, WISEMAN 1979 & 1993, WOODMAN 1988, DEVILLERS 1994, MARINCOLA 2001, SANS 2012. For the rhetorical dimension of historical sketch, see BERNARD 2000. Some rhetoricians, like Rufus of Perinthus (2nd century AD), even consider historiography as the fourth rhetorical genre, the ἱστορικὸν εἶδος, “the species in which we narrate with ornament facts as they happened” (PEPE 2013: 303-304).

² For an introduction on this rhetorical genre, see DANDREY 1997 or PERNOT 1993.

At first, the students were surprised: why would an author of sound mind write a whole *encomium* for a fly? They didn't get the humoristic part of the text, and even less the technical dimension. I thought they would find it funny, but they were rather taken aback. Still after reading the text more carefully, most of them were able to identify the technical similarities that could be noted between The Fly and the former sketches we studied, on basis of the analysis frame built during the course. Finally, I told them that they would have to write their own paradoxical *encomium*.

I wanted to see how they would react to this new kind of complex task, and to give them time to tackle this new difficulty, so I gave them quite simple instructions: they were allowed to work on the subject of their choice, except physical persons of the school. Of course, they had to keep in mind that in order to be paradoxical, it had to be negatively or neutrally regarded.

In their composition, they had to integrate the technical patterns seen during the theoretical part of the lesson (twofold dimension, *topoi* and virtues). Finally, they were free to work alone (and then had to write at least 250 words), by group of two (at least 500 words) or three (at least 750 words) students.

I got several reactions. Some of them saw it as an opportunity to be creative through an unusual task; some wanted to attract attention by provocation (quite conventional, at the end); but others had their worries about leaving their comfort zone and undertaking a composition exercise.

2. Topic selection

In order to guide them into this work, I decided to devote an hour to the preparation of the exercise, and especially the selection of the topic.

During this time, students were sitting by groups and had the opportunity to talk about what they were going to do, to ask me questions and pieces of advices. I encouraged them to tell me their topics, so I could validate or dissuade them, but there was no obligation: it was important for me to let them to take their responsibilities, and make their own choices. Most of the students had perfectly understood the exercise. They often took inspiration from the Lucian's *encomium* and proposed well appropriate and quite conventional subjects (the bee, the wasp or the pigeon, for example). One group even showed more imagination and decided to work on nasal mucus. They were generally motivated by the exercise, and even paid attention not to talk too loudly, so the other groups couldn't steal their ideas. But some of them had more troubles defining their subject, and two groups hadn't achieved an agreement at the end of the hour. I also talked a lot with two students who wanted to work on perfume. From my point of view, such a subject was too positively regarded to match the required paradoxical dimension. But according to them, as well as other students in the classroom, perfume was a neutral product, and would then fit the exercise. As they had good arguments, I finally allowed them to keep their idea. In other respects, two groups tried to be provocative. The first one suggests to write an *encomium* for Marc Dutroux, a sadly famous Belgian paedophile, or for Adolf Hitler. I gave my consent: it was a technical exercise; they were free to choose whomever they wanted. They began to think about potential arguments, but they immediately reacted and told me they couldn't do that. They couldn't imagine positive aspects, and were even shocked at the thought that it was possible to do it. This group of three students finally chose to work on prostitutes ("*filles de joie*"). The second group tried a different kind of provocation: they asked me if they were allowed to write a paradoxical *encomium* for school. Once again, I

gave my consent. But that wasn't enough: they wanted to be sure that I wouldn't punish them for their topic choice. I promised, and they finally pursued their idea, and even added a section on Latin course. To sum up, the five concerned students wanted to be provocative, but had trouble assuming their idea to the end, either because of a self-imposed ethical principle, a kind of self-censorship, or because of the fear of a disciplinary sanction, possibly due to a negative opinion or a lack of confidence towards school and teachers, very common among teenagers (LAGARRIGUE 2001: 73-75; DURU-BELLAT, VAN ZANTEN 2012: 224-226).

At the end, none of them chose a physical person as topic, although it is a really common theme in Ancient treatises like those of Aelius Theo or pseudo-Hermogenes. Ten subjects were chosen: perfume, rain, pigeon, wave, prostitutes, loneliness, school, nasal mucus, bee and wasp.

3. Writing

After choosing their topic, students had to find arguments, and to actually compose their *encomium*. I will now focus on technical problems encountered by the different groups, taking the classical tasks of the orator (*inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*) as an analysis framework. Since the students were not asked to orally present their sketches, *memoria* and *actio* are irrelevant here.

3.1 *Inventio*

The technical frame mentioned above was there to help students in their task, and it is worth noting that some of them, who had trouble identifying the virtues or the twofold dimension in the historical sketches, perfectly integrated them into their works. Several students also made researches on their subject, to assist the *inventio* process, as if they were writing an academic presentation. Still, writing the *encomium* of a neutral or negative subject is not easy when you have no training.

In ancient models, defence is often the strategy (see for example Gorgias, and his *Encomium for Helen* or Synesius, and his *Encomium calvitii*, *Encomium for baldness*, in which he defends baldness by refuting Dio's *Praise of hair*; see PERNOT 1993: 682-689; SANS 2015: 25). Some groups adopted the same strategy. For example, the "*Encomium of rain*" begins with these words:

La pluie, bien que méprisée par beaucoup de citoyens, est honorable and further: Lors de sa chute, contrairement à ce que l'on en croit, elle émet un chant régulier des plus poétiques parmi les sons de la nature [Rain, although despised by a lot of citizens, is honourable (...). When it falls, rain, contrary to what we think, sings a regular song, one of the most poetical songs of nature³].

They also instinctively used the argument already considered as the most suitable for the epideictic genre in the Aristotelian treatise (see ARISTOTLE, *Rh.* I, 9, 1368a; III, 17, 1417b): amplification. For example, while praising the pigeon: "*Sans toi, nous n'aurions pas gagné la guerre!*" [*Without you [i. e. the pigeon], we wouldn't have won the war*]. This group took a historical fact: pigeons were used at war to transmit messages, and gave them an amplified role by attributing to them the victory, just like when Synesius attribute to baldness the victory of Alexander on the Persians:

³ The students wrote their compositions in French. I tried to provide translations as close to the original texts as possible.

But as matters were (for it was already destined that the Heraclids should deprive the Achaemenids of their scepters), speedily understanding the danger, he (= Alexander) orders the trumpets to sound the retreat, and when he has led his army as far away as possible, and has placed it in a good position, he lets loose the barbers upon it, and induced by the gifts of the king, they shaved the Macedonians en masse. As to Darius and the Persians, the campaign no longer proceeded according to their hopes, for as there was no longer anything to hold on to, they were condemned to struggle in armor against much superior adversaries (FITZGERALD, A., *Encomium calvitii*, 16).

But sometimes they also fell into the trap of blame and brought to light negative aspects of their subject, for example:

Le pigeon a par contre un grand défaut: ses fientes. En effet, celles-ci sont acides au point de détériorer nos plus beaux monuments. En se soulageant ainsi au-dessus de nos têtes, le pigeon détruit peu à peu le dur labeur des ouvriers du bâtiment. De plus il trouve un malin plaisir à déverser ses déjections sur les passants ce qui n'est pas très sympathique de sa part (the pigeon)
[The pigeon, however, has a huge flaw: its droppings. These are, indeed, so acid that they damage our most beautiful monuments. By relieving above our heads, pigeon gradually destroys the construction workers' labour. Besides, it takes a gleeful delight in discharging its faecal matter on passer-by, which is not very kind of it].

They did not realise that they weakened their encomium by doing so.

3.2 *Dispositio*

Generally speaking, the *dispositio* was the most problematic part of their works. Some groups, although they found interesting encomiastic elements, randomly arranged them, without any gradation or transitions between arguments. Examples:

(1) “Comme on est en permanence dans la solitude on ne fait jamais rien de déplacé ou d'interdit. Mais pas seulement, on n'a pas de responsabilités familiales et donc on vit assez souplement, on a assez d'argent pour vivre bien et on peut même se permettre plein de choses qu'on aimerait avoir ou faire même si elles sont très couteuses. Pour les vacances, c'est très simple : on peut aller où on veut, comme on veut et quand on veut, personne ne dira qu'il n'aime pas cet endroit ou le transport dans lequel on voyagera. La solitude fait qu'il n'y a jamais d'éléments ou d'événements qui viennent chambouler notre vie. Rien ne peut changer nos habitudes et nos règles de vie”. (the loneliness)

[Since we are living in a perpetual loneliness, we never do anything wrong or forbidden. Besides, we have no familial responsibilities, so we can live with flexibility. We have enough money to live well and we can even afford a lot of things we would like to have or to do, even if they are expensive. Concerning holidays, it's very simple: we may go wherever, however and whenever we want. Nobody will say that he doesn't like this place or the means of transport. Thanks to loneliness, no element or event will turn your life upside down. Nothing can change our habits or our living rules];

(2) “Vivifiante à souhait, elle pourrait faire revivre un homme, ainsi que soigner des maladies incurables ! La vague n'a ni jeunesse ni vieillesse car elle est tout simplement éternelle. Chacune d'entre elles détient un doux bruit unique et

agréable qui réjouit nos oreilles. La vague fait plaisir aux plus jeunes qui, grâce à elle, peuvent s’amuser facilement avec elle (...).”

[Incredibly invigorating, it can make a man live again, and even cure incurable diseases! Waves have no young nor old age: they are simply eternal. Each of them has a soft and nice unique sound that delights our ears. Waves please the youngest who, thanks to them, can easily have fun].

In the same vein, some groups didn’t carefully draw their conclusion, even though, once again, they had good ideas. E.g.: “*D’ailleurs le pigeon n’a même plus peur de l’homme contrairement à la corneille ou à la pie. Au quotidien, se faire nourrir par l’homme est une habitude pour le pigeon*” [Moreover, the pigeon doesn’t fear man anymore, contrary to the crow or the magpie. In everyday life, being fed by man is common for the pigeon]. Hopefully, some of them did feel the importance of managing a good conclusion:

(1) (talking about the seduction power of perfume): “Ce florilège de senteurs d’ailleurs qui soulève les hommes du sol pour pouvoir deviner lequel vous êtes en train de porter. C’est ce qui définit la femme, chaque femme est unique en son genre, en son odeur. Quelle femme n’a jamais rêvé d’avoir tous les hommes à leurs pieds ?” (the perfume)

[This list of the top exotic scents which make men rise up into the air so that they are able to guess the one [perfume] you are wearing. That’s what defines every woman, every woman is unique thanks to her perfume. Every woman dreams that all men are at her feet.];

(2) “En conclusion, lorsque vous vous promenez à l’extérieur, et que la pluie vous prend au dépourvu et vous dérange, pensez à tous ces bienfaits, à ses qualités et à ce qu’elle représente pour l’humanité, vous vous sentirez beaucoup mieux”. (the rain)

[To conclude, the next time rain takes you by surprise and bothers you while you are wandering outside, think about all the benefits it brings, about its qualities, about what it represents for humankind, and you will feel much better].

Some students also perceived the importance of attracting the lector’s attention at the beginning, and to keep it all along. For example, in the “*Encomium of the pigeon*”, some elements were underlined by their disposition in the document (spaced from the main text, in quotation marks and written in a larger font police); for example: “*Ô beau pigeon! Toi dont le nom véritable est colombe. Ton nom a été terni autrefois par tes vils propriétaires*” [O, beautiful pigeon! You, whose true name is “dove”. Your name has been tarnished by your vile owners]. Finally, a group also chose to end their *encomium* with a meta-textual conclusion, and deliberately left the frame of the paradox: “*Bien évidemment, tous ces propos ont été dits dans le cadre d’un éloge, nous ne pensons pas ce que nous avons dit ! Enfin en partie... :) (sic)*” [Of course, everything was written in the context of an *encomium*, we didn’t believe what we wrote! At least, not everything...].

3.3 Elocutio

Most of the students chose to write their *encomium* either with humour or with a poetic and precious style, sometimes almost incomprehensible.

(1) “*Nous sommes nés pour vivre également de nos souvenirs, alors si je devais donner un sage conseil, ces gouttes, ces larmes contenues dans cette paroi de*

verre si fragile sont à utiliser avec modération car lorsqu'émane la dernière goutte de ce flacon, celle-ci sera la dernière à vous offrir ces souvenirs, et donc l'ultime à nous faire vivre." (the perfume)

[We were born to live from our memories, so if I may give a wise piece of advice, these drops, these tears contained in this so fragile glass bottle have to be used in moderation, because when the last drop emanates from the bottle, these will be the last ones to bring you these memories, and so the last ones to make you live].

(2) "*Son plus grand ami reste cependant le soleil, avec lequel elle crée des arcs-en-ciel en parfaite symbiose.*" (the rain)

[Its closest friend is the sun, with whom it makes rainbow in perfect harmony].

Using in a poetic or humoristic style allowed them to take some distance with the text they were writing, and helped them in the realization of the exercise, probably because they then considered the sketch as a literary production, in which they could more freely indulge their imagination.

4. The teacher's point of view

It is difficult to draw a conclusion from so specific data's. I think, however, that observations can be brought into light and guide our reflexions on the interest of rhetorical exercises today.

Giving such an exercise to students without rhetorical formation was a challenge. During Antiquity, the paradoxical *encomium* was an advanced exercise (see for instance PERNOT 2000: 194-200, WEBB 2001: 289-315 or SANS 2015). Still, even though some technical processes were unknown to my students, and would have been useful to them, they globally did a very good job, and intuitively developed interesting rhetorical strategies: the concepts of *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio* are undoubtedly present, they used arguments based on *amplificatio* and they focus on the ethos of their subject, although these technical elements were not in the instruction I gave them.

Of course, they lack of exercising. However, I think that this exercise can be worth doing, even punctually and at this level. I didn't aim, in this sequence, to give my students a complete rhetorical formation. I wanted to get them used to the subjectivity and the technicality of historical sketch. In this context, paradoxical *encomium* has several advantages. The first one is its aspect of play. The point is not to say that this exercise is nothing but a game: it has to be governed by specific rules. But it is, nevertheless, a particular kind of text, with an undeniable humoristic dimension, which makes it more attractive to students than a simple sketch of a historical character, no matter how famous he is. Thanks to this specificity, the students' interest will increase and they will be more receptive to technical considerations. Besides its pragmatic advantage, practice is probably the best way to assimilate theory. By writing an *encomium*, students will more clearly understand the mechanisms at work in the composition of a sketch, because they will have to use them themselves. Teachers would then have the opportunity to explain rhetorical concepts with examples chosen in the students' compositions.

Finally, pedagogy showed that a frontal teaching is useless on this question (LAGARRIGUE 2001, VERDELHAN-BOURGADE 2001, NUSSBAUM 2010). It would then also be a good opportunity to indirectly approach the question of common values. Paradoxical *encomium* is indeed an exercise based on a voluntary transgression of a doxa, an ethical consensus. That means that to correctly realise it,

students have to take this doxa into account. It is not always easy for teenagers to explicitly assume these values in front of a group; an indirect approach, often correlated to a humoristic and/or poetic dimension, allow them to feel more at ease. It is undoubtedly easier to write a paradoxical *encomium* for loneliness than to admit we feel lonely. This way, personal feelings as well as common values of our society can be dispassionately expressed, with a certain distance due to technical constraints that facilitates the process.

A second point is that this exercise, often seen as artificial, is a way to clearly insist on the distinction between a person and the arguments he or she presents. This distinction is crucial if we want that people from different cultures, different ideologies, sometimes opposed to each other, may be able to tackle difficult questions, and be receptive to their opponent's arguments. From my point of view, what the students believe doesn't matter, but they must be able to make the difference between their personal beliefs and the matters studied at school, and most of all be respectful for the other, even if they see things differently. And as I already said, rhetoric is a good way to aim this.

But there is another side to the coin. If this exercise is not always easy for students, it is also difficult to manage for teachers. Many questions emerge. First, how can we evaluate the subjects?

Besides the technical aspects and the necessity to rightly direct students, to help them in the writing of their *encomium*, there is an ethical matter. Is it really reasonable, responsible, to allow teenagers to write an *encomium* for Hitler? The question deserves to be asked.

I chose to take the risk, because forbidding topics that are clearly in opposition with doxa hinders the paradoxical dimension of the exercise, which would then become pointless. Choosing a character like Adolf Hitler, who personifies absolute evil in our society, is therefore relevant in this context for the expression of common values.

I have been confronted to the opposite situation with the *encomium* for perfume. From my point of view, perfume is positively represented in the doxa. This *encomium* was not paradoxical. But the students did not agree. This topic is anecdotal, but the problem is important. Of course, it is a delicate issue. Nevertheless, I don't think that censure is the key.

During my teaching career, I have been working a few months in a school where 95% of the students were Muslims and came from deprived neighbourhoods. Teachers were therefore afraid of anti-Semitism and set up different strategies to tackle this phenomenon. Some of them decided to use censorship to achieve their objective. Unfortunately, this reaction increased the distrust towards teachers and authority on the one hand, and the influence of some controversial personalities on the other. I do not claim that rhetoric allows us to easily solve this complex and delicate problem, but I'm convinced that rhetorical exercises can be useful. First, because, as I mentioned here above, they allow a dispassionate discussion on sensitive issues. Besides, this place for personal expression, only governed by technical rules, enables a trust-based relationship between the teacher and the students; students feel free to express how they feel, and are more receptive to the teacher's answers. Strength is useless when the transmission of values is engaged; students have to have the opportunity to think about sensitive issues by themselves to really integrate them (VERDELHAN-BOURGADE 2001: 176). Secondly, provocation is a natural process among teenagers (VERDELHAN-BOURGADE 2001: 183). Being allowed to write an *encomium* for a controversial character

reduces the provocative and transgressive aspect of praising him or her in public, and could help reducing his popularity, which should be the goal to achieve.

5. Conclusion

In my experience, rhetorical exercises favoured discussions with some students who were on the edge, more by provocation than by conviction, and brought them to review their positions.

Of course, my experience remains isolated. But this path is worth exploring. The paradoxical *encomium* brings a line of approach, and the possibility for a discussion between students and teachers, whose authority is often an obstacle for considerations on things as essential as the values we share in our society.

To conclude, I would say that even if this exercise does not solve all problems, it allows us to make a diagnosis of the situation, and brings a crucial question into light: is it still possible to build consensus in our societies?

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