

Declamation was the most advanced skill taught in an educational system that was rhetorical in nature but intended primarily to promote traditional values. A substantial number of the surviving exercises feature female character types derived ultimately from Greek New Comedy. One unfortunate consequence of this is that successive generations of elite young men were being instructed in acceptable gender roles through school texts and exercises based on a limited set of misogynistic tropes, many of them centuries old. However, the evidence of Greek declamation suggests that these traditional values were not being passed on uncritically. By using a feminist analysis to examine one important point at which declamation seems to be revising received literary traditions about gender—namely, the nature of marriage—we can garner a unique insight into how educators in late antiquity adjusted canonical texts to meet the needs of modern students. This paper extends the research on declamation and gender begun by R. Hawley (1995) and R. Kaster (2001). Hawley argues that the women of Greek declamation represent nothing more than the same negative stereotypes preserved in classical literature. Stereotypes, however, can be useful. We commonly see stereotypes in the stock characters of New Comedy, which has nevertheless proven to be a fertile source for the study of gender in the ancient world. Kaster focuses on the prevalence of rape themes in Latin declamation to argue for the particular danger rape presented to Roman social fabric. His reading of Latin rhetorical tropes to illustrate broader social issues should be emulated in the study of gender in Greek declamation. While declamation transmitted some ancient literary stereotypes about women uncritically and unchanged, others it seems to have modified, updated, or rejected outright. For example, in Greek literature, wives were represented by their wretched husbands or inveterate bachelors as necessary evils, often described as loud, talkative, argumentative, wasteful and careless with money. Students faced this characterization of women in their school exercises at every level. In their most elementary stages, they copied *sententiae* reflecting these stereotypes as they learned to read and write. At the intermediate stage of the *progymnasmata*, they began to challenge these stereotypes as they learned to compose theses on the question of whether or not to marry. Advanced students then incorporated this type of speech into the trial settings of declamation. Hermogenes cites a favorite declamatory subject about young men who refuse to marry (*Stas.* 44.4-5), and Libanius *Decl.* 26 features a man who seeks to commit suicide to escape his talkative wife. These declamations forced the student to turn the accepted stereotype on its head and argue against it. Hermogenes’ young men are charged with immoral living, and Libanius’ unhappy husband is such a misanthrope that when he enumerates his wife’s flaws, he ironically reveals more about his own vulgarity. The teachers of rhetoric, therefore, gave their students the tools to negotiate the lessons purveyed through the literary tradition with the pragmatics of adult life. They encouraged their students to reject the negative stereotypes about marriage and to allow for the possibility that it was both important and desirable.