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Civil War and the Late Roman Panegyric Corpus

Adrastos Omissi

It is a fact rarely remarked upon that the late Roman panegyric corpus displays a recurrent and sustained interest in the subjects of usurpation and civil war. Never, in English, has the apparent fixation of late Roman orators upon their emperors' domestic enemies been made the subject of sustained enquiry, nor has much attempt been made to understand the basis for this obsession or the profit that it can be made to yield for modern historians.¹ This may be, in part, because the topic of civil war in the late Empire has itself not proved a particularly congenial one to historical research.² The problem, ultimately, is historiographical. When an emperor fell from power, his name was erased from inscriptions, his statues were mutilated, and his legal enactments cancelled.³ Those close to him — those who escaped the executioner — would take action to distance themselves from the taint of his association, for to have allied oneself to a usurper was a dangerous thing.⁴ For those who wrote history, to extend their narrative into the reign of the emperor under whom they wrote was thus too dangerous a thing to do, for history's forensic gaze had no place in the life of a living emperor.⁵ Thus, our sources for moments of political conflict are clouded by intentional forgetting and by the *ex post facto* rationalisation of later realities. Winners become heroes, losers become villains.

Ironically, this problem finds its best exposition in the pages not of a modern historian, but in those of fourth century author of a biography of the second century usurping emperor Pescennius Niger (193-94) (*HA Pesc. Nig.* 1.1-2):

Rarum atque difficile est ut, quos tyrannos aliorum victoria fecerit, bene mittantur in litteras, atque ideo vix omnia de his plene in monumentis atque annalibus habentur. primum enim, quae magna sunt in eorum honorem ab scriptoribus depravantur, deinde alia supprimuntur, postremo non magna diligentia in eorum genere ac vita requiritur, cum satis sit audaciam eorum et bellum, in quo victi fuerint, ac poenam proferre.

¹ This statement was true at time of initial writing, though now see Omissi 2018. In general, disinterest in this theme is detectable in much of the translated material relating to the panegyric corpus. Nixon and Saylor Rodgers 1994, have much to say on the emperor's interaction with his barbarian enemies, but far less on civil war. Heather and Moncur 2001, in their translation of some of Themistius' panegyrics, chose not to translate either Them., *Or.* 2 and 4, both of which contain interesting material relating to the war between Constantius and Magnentius, or the fascinating *Or.* 7, which describes the revolt of Procopius in 365. Symmachus' *Or.* 1 (which is likewise concerned with the rebellion of Procopius) is only available in English in an unpublished online translation (admittedly, an excellent one) by Barbara Saylor Rodgers. Explicit considerations of the way in which usurpers are dealt with across more than one panegyric can be found Lassandro 1981; Grünewald 2004, 80-86; Szidat 2010, 25-42. Notably, these works all originate outside Anglophone scholarship (though Grünewald has, helpfully, been translated by John Drinkwater). See also Barnes 1996 and Neri 1997.

² Wardman 1984 is perhaps the only dedicated text on the subject in English (though see Elbern 1984 and Szidat 2010 in German). Note also Wienand 2015, and Omissi 2018.

³ Varner 2000 and 2004; Hedrick 2000; and Flower 2006.

⁴ E.g. Sogno 2006, 68-76.

⁵ As witnessed by numerous late Roman historical texts, which explicitly end their narrative with the commencement of a living emperor's reign: Amm., XXXI.16.9; Eutr., X.18; *HA Quad. Tyr.* 15.10; Fest., 30; Jer., *Chron.* praef.

It is an unusual thing, and a difficult one, to set fairly in writing the deeds of those made tyrants by the victory of others, and thus few things concerning them are kept in the records and histories. For in the first place, the great deeds that did them honour are perverted by authors; secondly other things are suppressed; lastly no great care is taken in researching their ancestry and life, since it seems enough to mention their effrontery, the battle in which they were conquered, and their punishment.

This complaint is a reasonable one. Pescennius Niger was an imperial legate in Syria, who seized imperial power when he heard of the murder of the emperor Pertinax. His reign lasted little more than a year, for he was defeated in a series of bloody battles by another usurper, the former governor of Pannonia Superior, Septimius Severus, who, like Niger, had seized power when he heard of Pertinax's death. Severus' victory made him an emperor, and thus populated the historical record with a wealth of source material concerning his life and reign; Niger's defeat made him a usurper, creating a wall of silence around him that, at a remove from events any greater than a single human lifetime, was difficult if not impossible to penetrate.

Septimius and Niger were long dead by the beginning of the period with which this volume is concerned, but the pattern of usurpation and civil war that they played out, and which made itself felt so starkly in the historical record, was one regularly repeated during the fourth century. Of the fifty men who, between 284 and 423, claimed the title of Augustus, thirty five of them — nearly three quarters — died at Roman hands, whether killed in civil war, executed by their conqueror, or assassinated by their subjects.⁶ Three of the late Empire's four great dynasties — the tetrarchy of Diocletian, the house of Constantine, and the house of Theodosius — were (or at least can be plausibly argued to have been) established by the usurpation of their founding member, and during forty eight of the 140 years between 284 and 423, there was open civil war between regions of the Empire; that is to say, on average, a little more than one year in three in the late Empire saw Rome's armies engaged in fighting one another.

The processes that the biographer of Pescennius Niger laments are at work nowhere more clearly than in panegyrics, which praise the victors of civil war and blacken the names of their enemies. The message of panegyric was always tuned to the song of the victor, and

⁶ Twenty three of these emperors are generally thought of as 'legitimate': *Carinus*, Diocletian, *Maximian*, Constantius I, Galerius, *Severus*, *Maximin Daia*, Constantine I, *Licinius*, *Constantine II*, Constantius II, *Constans*, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian I, Valens, *Gratian*, Valentinian II, Theodosius I, Arcadius, Honorius, Theodosius II, Constantius III (with emperors killed by Romans in italics). We might add to this count that Valentinian II may well have been murdered by his general Arbogast, and if not was driven to suicide by him. The other twenty seven are generally considered illegitimate usurpers, and all died at Roman hands: Sabinus Iulianus (284-85?), Iulianus (286?-97?), Carausius (286-293), Allectus (293-296), L. Domitius Domitianus (297?296?), Aurelius Achilleus (297-298?), Eugenius (303), Maxentius (306-12), L. Domitius Alexander (308-10), Calocaerus (333/4), Magnentius (350-53), Nepotianus (350), Vetrano (350), Silvanus (355), Procopius (365-66), Marcellus (366), Firmus (372?-375?), Magnus Maximus (383-88), Eugenius (392-94), Marcus (406-7), Gratian (407), Constantine III (407-11), Maximus (409-11), Priscus Attalus (409-10, 414-15), Jovinus (411-13), Sebastianus (412-13), and Heraclianus (413). To these, furthermore, we might add a shadowy rank of subordinate Augusti and Caesars, men (and boys) created by this or that emperor as pawns to be used in the game of power politics: Valens (316), Martinianus (324), Decentius (351-53), Flavius Victor (384-88), and Constans II (409-11).

we possess no panegyric delivered to someone who was later blackened as a tyrant.⁷ Yet it is precisely this feature of the panegyrics that make them the most fertile source possible for the study of civil war in the later Empire. Panegyrics may not allow us to view the reigns of a fallen emperor (like Niger) with the same clarity with which we can view that of his conqueror, nor can they permit us to understand civil war and usurpation from anything other than the victor's perspective. What they do give, however, is two very important insights that are otherwise generally lacking from other sources: firstly, an abundance of detail on the subject of civil war, and, secondly, an enviable contemporaneity to events that they describe, events which always took place within the living memory of speaker, honorand, and audience, and to which, in many instances, the panegyrists were first-hand witnesses. In the remainder of this chapter, we will explore these two facets of the panegyric corpus and how they manifest themselves in relation to the topics of civil war and usurpation.

Panegyric: a genre obsessed with civil war

Given that it was the business of panegyrics to praise emperors, smoothing away or simply ignoring potentially controversial details to be found in their past, and given the stated distaste which many Romans claimed to feel concerning the issue of civil war, one might expect that the emperor's civil wars would be a subject rarely touched upon by panegyrics.⁸ In fact, quite the opposite is true. The corpus of panegyrics delivered between 284 and 423 may be said to contain a total of seventy one speeches.⁹ Of these, no fewer than twenty four, very nearly one third, directly describe usurpations and civil wars, distributed as follows (with panegyrics listed in chronological order of delivery):

- The British Empire of Carausius and Allectus against the tetrarchs, 286-96: *Pan. Lat.* X(2) and VIII(4);
- Maximian against Constantine, 310: *Pan. Lat.* VI(7);
- Maxentius against Constantine, 312: *Pan. Lat.* XII(9), IV(10), and *Lib., Or.* 59;
- Constantine against the tetrarchs and Licinius: Euseb., *Laus Const.* and *Vit Const.*;
- Magnentius and Vetranio against Constantius, 350-53: *Jul., Or.* 1, *Them., Or.* 2, 4, 3; and *Jul., Or.* 2;
- Julian against Constantius, 360-61: *Pan. Lat.* III(11), *Lib., Or.* 13, and 12
- Procopius against Valens, 365-66: *Them., Or.* 7, *Symm., Or.* 1, and *Them., Or.* 8;
- Magnus Maximus against Theodosius, 387-88: *Pan. Lat.* II(12); *Claud., de. III Cons. Hon., de IV Cons. Hon., de VI Cons. Hon.*

These twenty four speeches reach across both the chronological span of the period and across the Empire's two official languages. Of the eight named authors who have left panegyrics to

⁷ Perhaps the only partial exception to this rule is Maximian, who received *Pan. Lat.* X(2) and XI(3), but whose reputation was later — temporarily — blighted under Constantine.

⁸ Note that though Menander Rhetor advises both the inclusion of *foreign* enemies and the comparison to *hypothetical* tyrants, he gives no advice for dealing with enemy emperors: Russell and Wilson 1981, 87, 91.

⁹ For a full list of these, see the Appendix.

us among their collected works — Eusebius, Himerius, Libanius, Julian, Themistius, Symmachus, Ausonius, and Claudian — six delivered speeches that dealt directly with the theme of civil war, and Ausonius' *gratiarum actio* (as we will see below) touches upon the question of usurpation, if more obliquely. Of the eleven speeches in the *Panegyrici Latini* collection, seven discuss the subject of civil war directly. Between them, these panegyrics thus constitute a record, however circumspect, of a significant minority of the major civil wars that took place in the period 284-423.

This obsession with the narration and recollection of civil war is visible at a macro level, but it is also visible when we tighten our focus to the level of an individual narrative. Panegyrics not only return to the theme of civil war with surprising tenacity, but when they do so, they frequently provide us with a level of detail that make our surviving historical texts look frankly impressionistic. To give a single example: as can be seen, two speeches from the *Panegyrici Latini* (X(2) and VIII(4)) concern themselves with the British Empire of Carausius and Allectus (286-296), which held Britain and (intermittently) parts of northern Gaul against first the dyarchy and later the tetrarchy. Any student of the political history of this period, whatever their own particular area of interest, will know that whilst the tetrarchy stands out in sharp historiographical contrast to the shadowy years of the third century crisis that preceded it, nevertheless we are painfully ill-supplied with concrete historical detail and often flounder on even fairly straightforward points of chronology. Our main historical witnesses to the reign of the two British usurpers are the attenuated and confused summaries to be found in the pages of Aurelius Victor's *de Caesaribus* and Eutropius' *Breviarium*. Together, these two texts devote a total of 308 words of Latin text to their (overlapping and occasionally contradictory) narratives of the British Empire, its origins, the course of its history, and its eventual destruction.¹⁰ By contrast, the two *Panegyrici Latini* devote more than 2,200 words to their accounts of the period, about a sixth of this in *Pan. Lat.* X(2), the remainder in *Pan. Lat.* VIII(4). This is approaching an order of magnitude more.

More words, of course, do not necessarily equate either to more detail or to more valuable detail. Certainly, the narratives given in the panegyrics and in the histories are of a very different character. The former are decidedly opaque in comparison to the latter and, at least on first contact, seem to prove little more than a turgid knot of rhetoric, of polemic, and of flattery. An example of this may be helpful to give a flavour of the problem we encounter when attempting to interpret the panegyrics (*Pan. Lat.* VIII(4).12.2):

Nam et accesserat diuturna sceleris impunitas quae desperatorum hominum inflarat audaciam, ut illam inclementiam maris, quae victoriam vestram fatali quadam necessitate distulerat, pro sui terrore iactarent, nec consilio intermissum esse bellum sed desperatione omisum crederent, adeo ut iam communis poenae timore deposito archipiratam satelles occideret et illud auctoramentum tanti discriminis putaret imperium.

For, in addition, long impunity for the crime had enflamed the audacity of these desperate men, so that they put it about that that inclemency of the sea, which, by some necessity of fate had delayed your victory, was instead fear

¹⁰ Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 39.20-21, 39-41; Eutr. 9.21-22.

of them, and they believed that the war had not been interrupted by a deliberate decision, but abandoned in despair, to such a degree that, fear of a common punishment having been set aside, one of the accomplices of the archpirate killed him, thinking imperial power to be recompense for such a crime.

The clauses here heap one upon the other with great rhetorical flavour, but seemingly without much concern to convey information or even meaning. Even at the level of basic narrative, however, this apparent objection does not stand up to close inspection. Though the information that the historians and the panegyrists provide is certainly different (details like Carausius' Menapian origins, or the reasons for his original usurpation, are not to be found within the speeches), nevertheless, we are able to build a far more detailed narrative of the interaction between the two rival Empires and the military campaigns that they waged against one another from the account given in the panegyrics. Victor and Eutropius give us a bald account indeed, and from them we learn only the outline of Carausius' reason for usurping power, that he held power for either six or seven years, that an attempt to defeat him resulted in a peace treaty, that he was murdered by his subordinate, Allectus, and that Allectus was himself overthrown a little later by Constantius. These accounts are rich with chronological inaccuracies, not least that both place Carausius' initial rebellion at the same time as the usurpation of Aurelius Achilleus in Egypt (it actually occurred eleven years earlier) and that Eutropius places Maximian's promotion to Caesar after Carausius' usurpation (it actually occurred two years earlier). By contrast, the panegyrics provide a rich and detailed narrative, albeit one that can only be properly interpreted in coordination with the historians.¹¹ They allow for the production of a considerably more nuanced chronology and a far more detailed understanding of the campaigns that Maximian waged in northern Gaul against Carausius in 288. They allow us to ascertain that a naval expedition against Britain in 289 or 290 was a failure, that the peace between Carausius and the dyarchs that lasted from 289/90-93 was a cold one, and to reconstruct the details of both Constantius' capture of Gesoriacum (Boulogne) in 293 and his two-pronged invasion of Britain in 296.¹²

In fact, this position is far from unusual. *Pan. Lat.* VI(7) is a vital witness to the usurpation of Maximian in 310, an event that historical texts pass over in virtually total silence; *Pan. Lat.* XII(9) and IV(10) together allow the reconstruction of Constantine's invasion of Italy in 312 in a level of detail that would otherwise be wholly impossible; Julian's account, in his *Or.* 1, of the oratorical defeat of the usurper Vetricianus in 350 is much the fullest description of this bizarre event; and Pacatus' *Pan. Lat.* II(12) is the most detailed record of Theodosius' campaign against Magnus Maximus in 388 that we possess. Were we reliant only on narrative histories and the shadowy hints that can be gleaned from coinage and from occasional, isolated inscriptions, Carausius and Allectus would be little more than names to us. Whilst the situation may be a little less severe for other usurpers, nevertheless, the point remains that much of the evidence upon which we have to draw for usurpation and for civil war in the later Empire is to be found within the panegyrics.

¹¹ On the purpose of narrative within the context of panegyric, see Rees 2010, esp. 108-18.

¹² Casey 1994, 106-39.

Panegyrists: primary witnesses

That panegyrics are often our most detailed witnesses to moments of civil war in the later Empire is — though it has not been recognised in modern literature anywhere near as widely as it deserves to be — relatively uncontroversial. In most cases, it is a simple point of fact, and therefore easy to prove. No one would, I hope, argue with my contention (above), that *Pan. Lat.* X(2) and *Pan. Lat.* VIII(4) say *more* about the British Empire than do Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, or that other comparable examples can be adduced. More probable grounds for objection, however, are likely to be found when we begin to assess the *quality* of the historical information that panegyrics have to offer. The orator's job was to praise the emperor, and it was an aim that he would pursue with little regard to accuracy or fairness.

As I have already tried to demonstrate, however, even at the level of constructing firmly positivist narrative, the panegyrics can in fact be used to complement the ostensibly more 'historical' accounts of later writers, who are thus revealed to be painting in distinctly broad brushstrokes. In part, it is the very contemporaneity of the panegyrists that allows them this unique level of detail. The very longest amount of time that separated the composition and delivery of one of our surviving panegyrics from the moments of civil war that it discussed were the eight and half years that separated the delivery of Nazarius' *Pan. Lat.* IV(10) in March 321 and Maxentius' death at the Milvian Bridge in October 312, and the (perhaps) nine years that separated the usurpation of Magnentius in 350 from the putative date of composition of Julian's *Or.* 2 in 359.¹³ More commonly, however, orators spoke within only a few years or even months of the events that they discussed.

Nor is this all that recommends the panegyrists as witnesses. On occasion, orators conformed to the worst stereotypes of the genre — closeted literati who read much and acted little, men who had little practical experience of the world that they described. But this is a hard charge to level at any of the authors of our surviving speeches, most of whom had direct experience of imperial politics and some of whom were, in fact, direct witnesses of the events that they describe, or had access to such individuals.¹⁴ The orator of *Pan. Lat.* VIII(4), whom we have already had several occasions to mention, is again a convenient example. His own oration makes clear that his relationship to Constantius, the honorand of his speech, went back many years; he had been introduced to the court of the emperor Maximian through Constantius' patronage in the days before the latter was made emperor and he had, as a result of this, delivered a panegyric to Maximian and had been awarded some high office. Following this, he had gone on campaign with Constantius in the 280s or 290s, and he was still serving with him in 293 when Constantius was promoted to Caesar.¹⁵ Furthermore, at several points in his oration he makes explicit that he had gathered some, at least, of the material for his speech by talking to members of Constantius' army.¹⁶ He was a man well qualified to speak on the British Empire and its demise.

¹³ On the date of these speeches, see (respectively) Nixon and Saylor Rodgers 1994, 338 and Curta 1995, 195-96.

¹⁴ Omissi (forthcoming).

¹⁵ *Pan. Lat.* VIII(4).1.1-3.1. Galletier 1949-55, I, 71-2; Nixon and Saylor Rodgers 1994, 104-5.

¹⁶ *Pan. Lat.* VIII(4).15.1, 16.3.

Almost as important, however, as the fact that orators possessed — or had access to — first-hand knowledge of the events that they described is the fact that the speeches were delivered to *audiences* who also possessed such knowledge. Imperial panegyrics were performed before large and diverse audiences, the core of which would usually consist of the emperor himself accompanied by his senior generals and civilian officials. But even outside this senior core, by reason of their very attendance at such an occasion, all members of the audience of a panegyric could be expected to be politically conscious individuals who were engaged with contemporary events either as participants or, at the very least, as interested parties. The awareness of this fact, that an orator's audience would already be well informed on the events the orator described — potentially better informed, indeed, than the orator himself — imposed important limitations on the content of the speech, forcing some unexpectedly candid admissions.

One of the most interesting examples of this is to be found in *Pan. Lat.* VI(7), a speech delivered in the summer of the year 310, perhaps as little as a month after the usurpation of the former emperor Maximian. Maximian had, in 308, been forced for the second time in his life to resign from an imperial power he clearly considered rightfully his. In 310, whilst Constantine was distracted by campaigning against the Franks from a base at Cologne, Maximian thus donned the imperial regalia, announcing to soldiers gathered at Arles that news had come from the Rhine frontier that Constantine had died. He marched east to the coastal stronghold of Marseilles where Constantine, marching from the north, besieged him. The orator devotes some 20 lines of colourful narrative to the account of Constantine's siege of this well fortified city, asserting with confidence that despite the city's naturally secure position, Constantine's soldiers would easily have been able to take it. Then, however, he checks the impetus of his narrative with a surprising statement (*Pan. Lat.* XI(3).20.1-2):

Sed o singularem tuam, Constantine, pietatem et sua semper officia etiam inter arma servantem! Signum receptui dedisti et victoriam distulisti, ut omnibus tibi liceret ignoscere, ne quid atrocius faceret miles iratus quam clementiae tuae natura pateretur. In quo licet optimi imperatoris sollicitudine caveris ut inducti in fraudem milites paenitendi tempus acciperent atque ultro veniam precarentur...

But o what singular piety, Constantine, ever guarding you in your duty even on the field of battle! You gave the signal for retreat and you put off your victory so that you might be permitted to pardon all and so that an angry soldier might not act with more violence than your natural clemency would suffer. It must be granted in this that with the solicitude of a most excellent emperor you took care to ensure that soldiers led into delusion would be given time for repentance and might of their own volition beg for pardon...

That the orator had decided to discuss this incident at all is a result of its having been such breaking news at the time of the speech's delivery. The occasion of the speech was the anniversary of the foundation of the city of Trier, but the orator had little indeed to say about the city itself — the pace of political change was too fast for him to devote much time to urban histories. An event as momentous as the usurpation, defeat, and ultimate suicide of Constantine's onetime *auctor imperii* could hardly pass without comment. What is so

interesting in this passage, however, is not so much that the orator chose to speak about this at all, but rather the details he chose to include. Behind the palpably absurd notion that Constantine called off his army in order to give his (formerly loyal) soldiers within the city the opportunity to seek pardon, what we can clearly see is that the assault on the city was a failure. After having attempted through force to break Marseilles' defences, Constantine clearly resorted to negotiation with the soldiers within, who must have realised that their options were disastrously limited, and who were thus induced to yield up their rebellious emperor.

No orator could give an account of the siege that openly called into question Constantine's abilities as a general (and, indeed, his own personal *virtus*, his manly courage). Yet it was hardly a glorious tale. Recasting this failure as the working of Constantine's clemency was an oratorical trick par excellence. The very fact that the orator included it at all, however, is a result of the fact that he spoke before an audience who knew very well that Constantine had failed to take Marseilles by force. The panegyrist might be able — with all the audacity that only a panegyrist could manage — to somehow turn this failure to Constantine's credit, but he could not pretend the events had been other than they were. To simply fabricate a narrative, as, for example, did Lactantius, in which there was no failed assault and the gates of the city were simply thrown open to Constantine, was not possible to an orator speaking directly to those who had been involved in the very campaign he described.¹⁷

Details such as these are fascinating opportunities to peak behind the golden screen created by orators' praise of the emperor. Such opportunities are however uncommon, as only rarely did orators find themselves in the difficult position of having to speak on a topic they would rather avoid. In general, the recommended tactic for an orator to employ when confronted with detail that would detract from the emperor's praises or in any way displease him, was simply to ignore it. As with so many panegyric quirks, however, this tendency of composition can also be made to yield valuable historical insights, if handled carefully. During the period in which first dyarchy and then tetrarchy vied against the British Empire of Carausius and Allectus, three surviving panegyrics were delivered, *Pan. Lat.* X(2), XI(3), and VIII(4). X(2) was delivered in (probably) in the spring of 289, shortly after the recapture of northern Gaul. Describing the preparations of an enormous naval outfit for the conquest of Britain, the orator looked forward to the invasion of Britain and Carausius' final defeat in the coming campaigning season. Yet, two years later, when another orator addressed Maximian on the occasion of his birthday, no mention of the expedition — indeed of the British Empire — is to be found anywhere within the speech.¹⁸ From this, we can easily infer that the expedition was a total failure. Thus, when we find that a given topic has been omitted from a panegyric, we are then forced to ask why. Silences, in this way, can speak as loudly as words.

In all of the panegyric corpus, one of the most jarring of these 'loud silences' is that of Ausonius' *gratiarum actio*, delivered at Trier towards the end of 379 in thanksgiving to Gratian for having made Ausonius consul for that year. 379 was a significant year. In the

¹⁷ Lact., *de Mort.* 29.

¹⁸ It is possible, though unlikely, that these two speeches were in fact delivered by the same author. For consideration of this, see Rees 2002, 193-204.

preceding year, the emperor Valens, Gratian's uncle, had been killed in battle against the Goths at Adrianople. That autumn, so our historical sources have it, Gratian recalled from semi-exile Theodosius the Younger, the son of a general who had been executed for treason by Gratian's father just a few years previously. Theodosius, we are told, was given military responsibility for the Balkans, now overrun with unchecked Gothic invaders. His victories in this period were so spectacular that, on 19 January 379, Gratian met him at Sirmium and declared him Augustus of the eastern Empire. This was an extraordinary promotion, handing over to Theodosius not only supreme power, but management of an Empire in a perilously chaotic condition. It implied an unshakeable confidence on Gratian's part in the new appointee; not only in Theodosius' ability to stem the Gothic tide, but also in his loyalty to Gratian's own house.

Viewed from the East, this story can be seen convincingly represented in three panegyrics delivered to Theodosius by the orator Themistius: his *Or.* 14 of 379, *Or.* 15 of 381, and *Or.* 16 of 383. Across these three speeches, Themistius extols the close partnership existing between the two emperors, describing them, in *Or.* 15, as twin helmsmen sailing the ship of state through the storm that had beset it.¹⁹ The support of Gratian, the purple stamp of the senior emperor then reigning, was a vitally important ideological tenet of the Theodosian regime. Theodosius' panegyrist made sure to underscore this connection.

Ausonius' panegyric, however, gives us nothing of the sort. Even were it not for the unprecedented situation in the Balkans, it would be normal practice for an orator delivering a panegyric to an emperor who was a member of a college to mention his emperor's colleagues. To pass over other living emperors without mention was almost always a sign of more or less open hostility; thus, in 321, the orator Nazarius utterly ignored Licinius and his son, the infant Caesar Licinius, despite the fact that the occasion for Nazarius' panegyric was the Caesar Licinius' *quinquennalia* (along with that of Crispus and Constantine II, who *were* considered).²⁰ Yet at a moment in which our (pro-Theodosian) historical sources would have us believe Gratian had placed unwavering confidence in Theodosius, one of Gratian's closest confidants could describe the Balkan crisis without so much as passing reference to the new emperor (Aus., *Grat. Act.* 2.7-8):

Ago igitur gratias, optime imperator, ac si quis hunc sermonem meum iisdem verbis tam saepe repetitum inopiae loquentis assignat, experiatur hoc idem prosequi, sed nihil poterit proferre facundius. Aguntur enim gratiae, non propter majestatis ambitum, nec sine argumentis, imperatori fortissimo: testis est uno pacatus anno et Danubii limes et Rheni; liberalissimo: ostentat hoc dives exercitus; indulgentissimo: docet securitas erroris humani; consultissimo: probat hoc tali principe Oriens ordinatus; piissimo: hujus vero laudis locupletissimum testimonium est pater divinis honoribus consecratus, instar filii ad imperium frater ascitus, a contumelia belli patruus vindicatus, ad praefecturae collegium filius cum patre conjunctus, ad consulatum praeceptor electus. Possum ire per omnes appellationes tuas, quas olim virtus dedit, quas proxime fortuna concessit,

¹⁹ Them., *Or.* 15.194d-198b; Heather and Moncur 2001, 218-21, 233, and 255-57 (note that distance was beginning to grow between them in Themistius' presentation by *Or.* 16). For these speeches, see also Stone's chapter in this volume.

²⁰ Crispus and Constantine II are routinely described in the speech without reference to Licinius, e.g. *Pan. Lat.* IV(10).3.5-5.8, 36.3-5.

quas adhuc indulgentia divina meditatur. Vocarem Germanicum deditione gentilium, Alemanicum traductione captorum, vincendo et ignoscendo Sarmaticum.

For I am giving thanks, not in order flatter your majesty, nor without offering proof to a most valiant emperor: witness that the Rhine and Danube both have been pacified in a single year; to a most generous emperor: the wealth of the army shows this; to a most mild emperor: the safety of human error shows this; to a most learned emperor: the organisation of the East by so great a *princeps* shows this; to a most pious emperor: and there is most ample evidence of this tribute — his father [Valentinian I], consecrated with divine honours, his brother [Valentinian II], adopted to Empire as if he were a son, his uncle [Valens], avenged for the affront he suffered in war, a son and father,²¹ joined in a prefecture, his teacher, elected to the consulship. I could run through these titles, which your valour has won for you thus far, which Fortune has so recently granted, and which divine concession is still devising for you: I may call you Germanicus, because of the surrender of that people to you, Alamannicus, because you carried over their captives, Sarmaticus, because you conquered and forgave them.

Indeed, across the nearly 500 lines of his speech, Theodosius is never so much as hinted at. Though Ausonius predicts that great men will go on to enjoy the consulship, and he eagerly looks forward to Gratian's own future tenure of that office, he has not a word to say for Theodosius, consul designate with Gratian for the following year.²² The speech describes how Gratian selected Ausonius as consul whilst at Sirmium (which city Ausonius explicitly names) without dropping in mention of Theodosius' proclamation there. It even dwells on the fact that Gratian was unable to attend Ausonius' consular inauguration at Trier in January 379 without bothering to mention that it was the proclamation of an emperor in the Balkans that was keeping him away.²³ A potential conclusion to draw from this astoundingly determined effort to ignore Theodosius, therefore, is that it was common knowledge to Gratian's subordinates that, far from spearheading Theodosius' promotion to imperial power, Gratian had merely acquiesced to the usurpation of power by a Balkan commander whose troops declared him emperor in the chaos that followed Adrianople (a conclusion reinforced by Themistius' intriguing phrase concerning Theodosius' accession, that 'nobly [Gratian] made the vote his own, which the moment had made').²⁴

Past and Present: how panegyrics shaped history

By examining the panegyrics as the textual legacy of a primarily oral and theatrical moment, and by considering the methods and motives that shaped their composition, we have seen how their texts can be interpreted and their peculiarities used to better understand this period.

²¹ Ausonius and his son, Thalassius.

²² Auson., *Grat. act.* 4.16.

²³ Auson., *Grat. act.* 18.80.

²⁴ Them., *Or.* 14.182c. This argument is more fully developed in Sivan 1996 and Omissi 2018, 255-63.

Yet perhaps the most valuable insight that they have to contribute to our understanding of the fractured political world of the late Empire is that which is most direct. As has already been stated, it is a remarkable feature of the panegyrics that, across the surviving corpus, the authors of these speeches (and therefore, we can assume, the emperors who received them), evince a keen determination to talk about the delicate subjects of civil war and usurpation. Thus far, we have explored how this manifests itself in terms of narrative and of the selection of material. In the concluding section, we will explore what the panegyrists have to say about usurpers themselves, the terrible bogeymen of late Roman political discourse.

As with the more general focus on civil war, it may initially come as a surprise to discover that rival emperors are described in often lurid detail within the panegyric corpus. For the most part, the demands of the genre necessitated that all persons other than the emperor himself were reduced to indistinct collectives: the emperor's subjects acclaiming him en masse, the supplicant peoples he has conquered. Infrequent exceptions are members of the imperial family, who are occasionally mentioned in passing (and can be *expected* to get at least a sentence or two if they are themselves emperors as well), historical personages, or the occasional foreign king. Usurpers, however, are drawn in stark relief, their vices enumerated, their thoughts and emotions explored, and their characters laid bare.²⁵ This vicious invective may, on first contact, seem like an undifferentiated stream of abuse, a seam of tar running through the golden words of praise directed toward the emperor. Like that golden praise, however, the invective is far from undifferentiated, and a careful consideration of its individual nuances can reveal much about the emperor who received the panegyric and the usurper whom it castigates.

For the purposes of illustration, let us consider the way in which three separate usurpers are handled within the panegyric corpus: the British emperor Carausius (286-93), of whom we have already had cause to speak, the Italian emperor Maxentius (306-12), overthrown by Constantine at the famous Battle of the Milvian Bridge, and the Western emperor Magnentius (350-53), who fought against Constantius II in the bloody battle at Mursa. Carausius was denounced as a pirate (*pirata*), his rebellion constituting an act of banditry (*latrocinium*), in which ships, soldiers, and resources were stolen away from the Roman people and hoarded up in the fastness of Britain.²⁶ Maxentius, however, was cast in the model of a classical tyrant (*tyrannus*), a new Sulla or Nero, who festered within the city of Rome like a disease. He filled the Tiber with murdered citizens and senate, and vaunted the reputation earned from his (apparently) false paternity in the emperor Maximian.²⁷ Magnentius, finally, was both wild barbarian (*βαρβάρος*) and terrible tyrant (*τύραννος*), his presentation self-consciously oscillating between the pretence that Magnentius' usurpation was akin to a foreign invasion and the evocation, again, of models of classical tyranny.²⁸

What it is important, firstly, to recognise here is that, though these presentations drew closely on highly formulaic language and normative moral programmes, they were nevertheless each individually modulated to the specific needs of the emperor whom they celebrated and to the character of the usurper whose downfall they commemorated. Carausius

²⁵ This theme is explored in Roger Rees' chapter within this volume, [p. 10-12 of original MS]

²⁶ E.g. *Pan. Lat.* X(2).12.1, VIII(4).6.1, 7.3, 12.

²⁷ *Pan. Lat.* XII(9).3.5-7, 4.3-5. IV(10).27.5, 33.7.

²⁸ Jul., *Or.* 1.33c-35d, 42a, 2.56c-57b, 97c-d. Them., *Or.* 3.43a-c, 4.56d-57a.

was attacked as a pirate because of the naval element to his usurpation, because he had a background in the imperial fleet, and because it suited Maximian's own presentation as Hercules to represent himself as the suppresser of pirates.²⁹ Maxentius' parentage was attacked and discredited because it was a source of embarrassment to Constantine that Maxentius' father, Maximian, was also Constantine's father-in-law, whilst the suffering of Rome was dwelt upon in order to justify why Constantine had brought such a destructive war into the Empire's heartland.³⁰ Magnentius, despite having murdered Constantius' brother, Constans, was nevertheless characterised as an invader and usurper who had brought war against *Constantius*, as the orators carefully edited away Constantius' hated younger sibling.³¹

It is also exceptionally important to see that these presentations display a commanding uniformity, usurper by usurper. Thus, across five speeches, two authors, and three years, we see Magnentius delegitimised as foreign invader crossed with murderous tyrant; across eight years and two authors we see Maxentius demonised as a cowardly warmonger whose death was a necessary liberation for the ancient city of Rome that groaned beneath his weight; and across two authors and eight years we see Carausius made into a rebellious bandit, beneath the dignity of imperial power and, above all, non-participant in the divine concord of the tetrarchy. The significance of this lies in the fact that we know with certainty that the corpus of late Roman panegyrics that survives into the modern world, an initially impressive roster of forty eight speeches, actually constitutes merely a fraction of the thousands (if not tens of thousands) of speeches that must have been delivered to emperors during the period 284-432. Confronted with these apparently uniform and coherent presentations within the speeches that *do* survive, we can posit that the majority that have been lost to us would have approached these same topics in a similar manner.

In this we see the vital role that panegyric played in the later Empire, not only in a general context of communicating imperial power and imperial legitimacy-claims to a wide audience, but here in this specific context as a way of normalising and incorporating the challenge of civil war into the narrative of a given emperor's reign. In the wake of any given civil conflict, a great tide of panegyrics, which laid out the programme of how the fallen regime was to be understood, would break upon the Empire's political class. We have, for example, a single speech (*Pan. Lat.* VIII(4)) that commemorates the downfall of Carausius and Allectus' British Empire; yet we can infer that Constantius, whose invasion overthrew the British Empire, that Maximian, Constantius' senior Augustus, and perhaps even Diocletian and Galerius, the Eastern emperors, all received numerous speeches that commemorated this glorious occasion in which, for a brief period, the entire Roman world was united under the tetrarchs. This observation, indeed, holds true for the aftermath of any period of civil war, after which a programme of celebrations might last for months or even years. Constantius II, for instance, celebrated an initial triumph over Magnentius in 353 at Arles, but he continued a tour of his newly acquired Western provinces throughout the years that followed, culminating in the great triumphal entry to Rome in 357, which also crowned

²⁹ *Pan. Lat.* X(2).13.5.

³⁰ E.g. *Pan. Lat.* XII(9).2.3-4, IV(10).6.4.

³¹ Constans was largely airbrushed from a story of Constantius' glory: e.g. Jul., *Or.* 1.9d-10a, 18c-20a, 2.52b, 94c-d; Them., *Or.* 3.45b, 48c-d.

the year of his *vicennalia* as Augustus.³² Throughout this period, he will have been bombarded by provincial embassies bearing their thanks for his liberation, and will have been received in cities at which he arrived with similar pomp.

This great mass of oratory, which presented a single, coherent message tailored to the needs and the self-presentation of the court and the emperor that it flattered, had tangible effects on the recording of history. For men and women in contact with high politics, panegyric will have supplied one of the primary conduits of information through which they developed their understanding of current affairs. Whether any member of these audiences was ever much taken in by the hyperbole, the outrageous flattery, and patent absurdities that the panegyrics presented is highly doubtful; St Augustine's assessment of his own role as a panegyrist to Valentinian II would certainly lead us to believe that they did not.³³ Nevertheless, this vast mass of officially acceptable narrative — of invective directed against the losers of the late Empire's recurrent civil conflicts — could not fail to have an effect, particularly as what was once living memory began to transition into the realm of history. Panegyrists did what historians could not; they set the events of the contemporary world in writing. These speeches enjoyed a life that, at least sometimes, long outlived the moment of delivery, as the survival of the varied corpus it has been the business of the chapters within this volume to discuss demonstrates. Speeches were shared as models of style and as advertisements for their authors' virtuosity. Ultimately, they became the primary evidence upon which later writer would (or could) draw in order to compose true history.

The Gallic orator, Pacatus spoke frankly on the role of an orator as a communicator within Roman society, providing a conduit of information not only from the imperial centre to its provincial periphery, but between present and future time. Pacatus authored the last (chronologically) of the *Panegyrici Latini*, II(12), which was delivered at Rome to the emperor Theodosius in the late summer of 289, and he has generally been regarded as the compiler of the *Panegyrici Latini* collection. In the concluding section of his speech to an emperor newly triumphant over Magnus Maximus, a man who had held imperial power in the West for fully four years, Pacatus declared (*Pan. Lat.* II(12).47.6):

Quae reversus urbibus Galliarum dispensabo miracula! Quantis stupentium populis, quam multo circumdabor auditore, cum dixero: 'Romam vidi, Theodosium vidi, et utrumque simul vidi; vidi illum principis patrem, vidi illum principis vindicem, vidi illum principis restitutorem!' Ad me longinquae convenient civitates, a me gestarum ordinem rerum stilus omnis accipiet, a me argumentum poetica, a me fidem sumet historia. Compensabo tibi istam, imperator, iniuriam si, cum de te ipse nil dixerim, quod legendum sit, instruam qui legantur.

What wonders I will share when I have returned to the cities of Gaul! What crowds of astounded people, how great an audience will surround me when I say: 'I have seen Rome, I have seen Theodosius, I have seen both together; I

³² Maraval 2013, 141-49; Humphries 2015, 158-60.

³³ Aug., *Conf.* 6.6: 'How wretched I was... on the day when I was preparing to recite a panegyric to the emperor, in which I would tell many lies and would be viewed with favour by those who knew them to be such' (*quam ergo miser eram... quo cum pararem recitare imperatori laudes, quibus plura mentirer, et mentienti faveretur ab scientibus*).

have seen the father of the ruler, the avenger of the ruler, the restorer of the ruler!’ Distant cities will flock to me; every pen will receive from me the story of your deeds in order; from me poetry will get its themes; from me history will derive its credibility. Although I may have said nothing about you that is worth reading, I will make good this injury to you, emperor, if I shall give instruction to those who will be read.

For Pacatus, therefore, the delivery of his speech was the start, not the end of a process of communication in which the legacy of Theodosius’ bloody civil war would be forged. Though we may suggest that Pacatus’ words here ought to be discounted either as flattery to their honorand or as authorial hubris, we cannot deny their prescience. As we have already mentioned, Pacatus’ panegyric constitutes unquestionably the most detailed account of the course of the campaign against Maximus, and no modern historian would consider writing on that campaign without employing Pacatus’ testimony. More generally, we know that panegyric formed a primary source for historical writing and, time and again, we can point to manipulations, half-truths, and outright lies of panegyric that have made it into historical accounts of civil wars or of a given usurper’s reign, and so have become accepted as historical fact in the modern world.³⁴

It has been the aim of this chapter to show, firstly, that late Roman panegyric displayed a studied fascination with the topics of usurpation and civil war and, secondly, to critique the seeming disinterest towards this fact displayed in modern scholarship by sketching, in outline, some of the way in which we can understand and can utilise this dark seam of invective that runs its way through the panegyric corpus. Across the spread of authors, emperors, and occasions that this corpus presents us with, we see a recurrent twinning of invective and praise that tells us something fundamental not only about late Roman panegyric, but about the way in which Romans conceived of political power at the very highest level within their world. Panegyric helps shape the way that we understand emperors, and we ought to recognise that, in the late Roman world, emperors were very often to be understood through their enemies.

³⁴ To cite but a single example: The *Epitome* of pseudo-Aurelius Victor and the *Origo Constantini imperatoris* repeat as fact the preposterous claim that the usurping emperor Maxentius was not, in fact, the son of the emperor Maximian (Aur. Vic., *Epit.* 40.13; *Origo* iv.12), a claim transparently designed to distance Constantine from Maxentius, and first given voice in the panegyric of 313 (*Pan. Lat.* XII(9).4.3-5).

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