Irene Peirano Garrison, *Persuasion, Rhetoric and Roman Poetry,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. ix+287 Pages. ISBN 9781107104242. £ 75.

Reviewed by Alessandro Schiesaro, University of Manchester
(alessandro.schiesaro@manchester.ac.uk)

Peirano Garrison's thought-provoking monograph aims to put to rest once and for all the remarkably resilient narrative according to which, after Virgil, rhetoric gradually ramps up its influence over poetry until it suffocates it in frigid declamatory eloquence. This tale*,* as old as many of the texts directly involved, is rooted on the one hand in a familiar biological model of growth, peak and decay applied to literary history and on the other in the Romans' own self-perception that the emergence of the Principate entailed a corresponding withering of creative energy in the literary scene. (Tacitus, of course, proposes a famous variant version of this trajectory, in connection with historiography, at the very beginning of his *Historiae*, when he claims that, after Actium, '*magna . . . ingenia cessere*'). According to this narrative, in the intellectual vacuum created by the trauma of political upheaval, rhetoric triumphed, fostering an approach to literature potentially abstract from the originality of poetic inspiration, and exceedingly focussed on tropes; or on techniques and appearances, rather than substance and truth. This, at any rate, had long been a deep-seated concern for at least a part of the Roman élites: the edict against the *rhetores Latini* in 92 BCE, for instance, provides an early testimony of the unease about a form of technical knowledge that is not necessarily anchored in a set of moral values.

Over the past 40 years or so, much detailed and general work has thoroughly debunked our perception of authors such as Ovid, Lucan, Seneca or the Flavians as tired and 'rhetorical' epigones of their better Republican models, a movement paralleled, for instance, in the study of Manneristic and Baroque art and literature. Two other developments have also contributed to this shift in evaluation. Postmodern literature, which extols and even exasperates some of the very 'rhetorical' features much in evidence in Ist century authors, also contributed to a less prejudicial view of some of the texts involved; and the very concept and practice of 'rhetoric' itself, thanks to the influence of psychoanalysis, structuralism, and cognitive theory, has been fundamentally transformed. If today no one would seriously propose a reading of Ovid, or Lucan, as (pejoratively) 'rhetorical', or of Senecan tragedy as a lesser art more akin to declamation than to tragedy proper, the theoretical and historical underpinnings of these negative assessment remained to be done, and must be based, as this book rightly argues, in a two-way assessment of the relationship between rhetoric and poetry.

Peirano Garrison goes about this task by jettisoning the language and metaphors of 'corruption,' 'contamination' and 'invasion', and exploring instead dynamic interaction, competitive self-positioning and opposing claims for authority. Chapter 1 shows that rhetoric and poetry were regarded as kindred pursuits, and that authors as different as

Cicero, Ovid and Statius all question the existence of a rigid boundary between the two realms: Cicero admits that 'the poets have given rise to the enquiry as to how they differ from orators' (*Orat.* 66), while Ovid and Statius, conversely, claim for poetry the persuasive power of rhetorical discourse. Rhetoric and poetry are always inevitably enmeshed, including in the training of orators by means of poetry and of poets by means of rhetoric. Their borders are fluid, from all points of view, including the fact that prose rhythm (a topic which would be worthy of additional exploration in this context) contributes to a further blurring of the opposition between poetry and prose. Borders, in other words, are cultural constructs, shifting with times, attitudes, and argumentative objectives. When late antique authors such as Macrobius, Servius and Tiberius Claudius Donatus choose to read the *Aeneid* as an oration in verses, aimed at celebrating Augustus and his ancestors, they do not engage in a wilful misunderstanding of Virgil's poetic creativity, but actually point (as chapter 6 shows) to a set of intrinsic features of the poem, where both specific forms of rhetorical expression, especially in speeches, and a broader 'rhetorical' purpose intersect. Macrobius' famous statement that Virgil is 'no less an orator than a poet' (*Saturnalia* 5.1.1), buttressed by comparisons with Cicero and Demosthenes, implies a notion of rhetoric as (like poetry) the prime means for 'stirring pathos' (*Saturnalia* 4.4.12), the opposite of the polemical construction that would view it as a set of inert tropes, and very much in line, on the contrary, with the most influential trend in the modern interpretation of Virgil, inaugurated by Richard Heinze at the beginning of the last century.

The second chapter of the book discusses how poetry is conceptualised in rhetoric (the focus is on Seneca the Elder), and the third Quintilian's assessment of the relative characteristics and merits of the orator and the poet. The *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae* emerge from this discussion as sophisticated, nuanced texts, where different views about the origin of declamation, its decline and its impact on contemporary Roma society are forced to vie for attention. Here Arellius Fuscus and Porcius Latro embody two antithetical styles, with the former characterised by 'poetic' tendencies that stand metonymically for a 'Greek' lack of restraint -the polar opposite of the reliably Roman Latro (actually a Spaniard who Seneca sees as a reflection of his own self). Latro's lack of interest for public delivery is presented the mark of a 'good' orator who disdains public performance as a corrupt, non-Roman activity. Once rhetoric and declamation are presented as distinct pursuits, Seneca can thus still defend the validity and importance of rhetorical training and promote a more restrained, authentically 'Roman' form of declamation that eschews those excesses, whilst sharing in the widespread notion that a tilt towards declamation has accelerated the decline of Roman literary culture.

This attention to the various voices (literally) of Seneca's work allows Peirano Garrison to contextualise his presentation of Ovid as part of this wider polemical debate in the role of poetry in declamation and the post-Republican decline of oratory: Ovid's 'love for his own faults,' as Seneca famously puts it (2.2.12), is but another instance of 'unmanly' and Asianic *licentia* à la Fuscus, with whom Ovid would share a passion for *suasoriae* (a fertile ground for creative freedom) over *controversiae*, which demand a more logical and rational

approach. Seneca's words, taken at face value, have of course exercised a great influence on modern readings of Ovid in general, and especially of his own '*suasoriae*', the *Heroides*. Once this seemingly dispassionate assessment is deconstructed and contextualised, we can discern how Ovid's reputation suffered what is in effect collateral damage in a factional (and moralistic) war about the nature and future of rhetoric to which he was in many ways extraneous.

Tension and competition, again, characterise the role of poetry and poetic citations in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*. The 'licence of poets' attracts a negative assessment, being too far removed from the natural balance oratory strikes between unformed 'nature' and the excesses of poetic *ars*, and yet poetry is repeatedly invoked as an illustration of stylistic options. In a different and yet similar take on Seneca's deployment of the language of restrain and control, Quintilian also recommends that the orator resist abandoning himself to the temptations of poetry (irregular, obscure, potentially decadent), but still exploit its stylistic and argumentative potential without relinquishing control: Virgil can provide many successful examples of *ornatus*, but so can Cicero; a degree of artifice, especially in metaphors, is to be tolerated, but only within clearly defined boundaries. Mastery is at stake in book 10 as well, where Quintilian's evaluation of the relative merits of modern authors emerges in fact as a careful selection geared towards asserting, first and foremost, the dignity and worth of oratory *vis à vis* poetry itself.

The second part of the book deals with the image of orators (chapter 4) and demagogues (chapter 5) in poetry. Peirano Garrison persuasively suggests that these *mises en abyme* are privileged, self-conscious *loci* for poets to reflect on the role of rhetoric in a poetic context. The natural starting point is the first simile in the *Aeneid*, where the orator who quells the political storm in the assembly is both a double of the verbally dextrous poet, and a prototype of the Roman orator displaying his power of conviction in the public arena. The storm, too, does double duty, as a primal symbol of epic, but also, as Cicero shows, as a metaphor for the orator's difficult negotiations of the lure and dangers of the most elevated style. Again, it's the two-way traffic that is revealing: both sides extract from the other a degree of validation and, more importantly, the possibility to draw on the wider implications of the imagery. Similarly, it would be easy to dismiss the guest-appearances of demagogues in epic as an opportunity to criticise the pitfalls of a certain type of oratory. What Virgil offers in his speeches is instead a diachronic reflection (comparison with Homer is always in the background) on the intersection between diplomacy, political efficacy and rhetorical effectiveness, vehiculated by different oratorical styles.

The chief merit (there are many) of this carefully researched and deeply insightful book, lies in its ability to weave a compelling large-scale narrative building upon the detailed examination of a variety of different texts, both in prose and in poetry, each richly contextualised in its intellectual climate: the overall result is an original and exciting view of a fundamental chapter in the history of Roman literature and its reception.