

# **RHETORIC AT THE MARGINS: A PEDAGOGICAL NOTE ON SALLUST'S *HISTORIAE* 2.92 M.\***

**RETÓRICA NAS MARGENS: UMA NOTA PEDAGÓGICA SOBRE AS  
*HISTORIAE* 2.92 M DE SALÚSTIO**

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**Resumo:** Neste artigo analisa-se o papel das mulheres nas *Historiae* de Salústio, tendo por foco o fragmento 2.92.M. Ao perscrutar a representação das mulheres como possíveis ‘atores retóricos’ em Salústio, o presente estudo mostra até que ponto a oratória funciona como lente através da qual o género e o poder se entrecruzam. Para além da análise textual do fragmento 2.92.M, o artigo procura propor novas abordagens pedagógicas para o ensino de Salústio nas salas de aula contemporâneas. Estas estratégias têm o potencial de encorajar os alunos (e os professores) a envolverem-se criticamente com questões de voz, autoridade e género na historiografia romana, integrando perspetivas interdisciplinares de retórica, estudos de género e história da receção.

**Palavras-chave:** Salústio, Mulheres, Oratória, Aproximações pedagógicas, Memória cultural.

**Abstract:** This article examines the role of women in Sallust's *Historiae*, focusing on the fragment 2.92 M. By analyzing Sallust's depiction of women as likely 'rhetorical actors', the study highlights how oratory functions as a lens through which gender and power converge. Beyond a mere textual analysis, the article tries to propose new pedagogical approaches for teaching Sallust in contemporary classrooms. These strategies have the potential to encourage students (and teachers) to engage critically with questions of voice, authority, and gender in Roman historiography, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives from rhetoric, gender studies, and reception history.

**Keywords:** Sallust, Women, Oratory, Pedagogical Approaches, Cultural Memory.

## INTRODUCTION

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When Sallust appears on a syllabus, he is often framed as the historian of moral decline.<sup>1</sup> His *Bellum Catilinae* and *Bellum Jugurthinum* remain the most taught texts, both in universities and in high schools, in part because they feature interesting portrayals of central figures (above all, Catiline and Jugurtha),<sup>2</sup> and advance an

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1\* In the research proposed here, I would like to thank Rodolfo Funari for discussing the main Latin passage with me and for generously sharing his suggestions. I also take this opportunity to thank the anonymous referees, whose insightful comments on an earlier draft greatly improved this article.

On the aforementioned subject the bibliography is huge and develops several thoughts: see for example over the last few years Baier 2020: 205-233; Dunsch 2021: 24-32; Shaw 2022; Paleo Paz 2023: 198-212; Scherberich 2023: 131-145; Rallo 2024: 570-582. In any case, fundamental reading on Sallust remains Paladini 1948; Syme 1968; La Penna 1969 (and the 2017's revision); Funari 2019; Marcone 2023.

2 On the portrayal of Catiline from several angles, see e.g. Levick 2015; Urso 2019; Baudry 2021: 289-308; Urso 2023: 101-117; Canfora 2023; Cedone 2024. On Jugurtha, stimulating thoughts are found in Brescia 1988: 5-57; see also e.g. Cipriani 1988: 75-90; Wiedemann 1993: 48-57; Feldherr 2021: 173-192.

interpretive framework that encourages broad discussion of – among others – ambition, corruption, and republican values. By contrast, Sallust's *Historiae* are usually confined to advanced seminars or treated primarily as evidence for the annalistic tradition.<sup>3</sup> Yet these fragments can serve as a strikingly original pedagogical entry point, especially when one shifts the focus away from political history and toward questions of gender and rhetoric. Their fragmentary state invites scholars and students alike (especially within the Academia) to confront problems of textual transmission, authorial voice, and the ways in which meaning is constructed from partial evidence.

One fragment –*Historiae* 2.92 Maurenbrecher—deserves special attention.<sup>4</sup> This passage opens onto questions of oratory, and identity construction that resonate far beyond the immediate historical context. I shall hence use this fragment to make a case study in order to shed fresh light on how Sallust may manipulate rhetorical performance, and may appear to destabilize conventional gendered expectations. By doing so, I shall try to demonstrate the interpretive richness of the fragment in relation to *Historiae* and its potential as teaching text, in the sense of being capable of provoking discussion about the intersections of thoughts and cultural norms in the late Republic.<sup>5</sup>

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### **SALLUST'S *HISTORIAE* 2.92 M. (= 2.75 MCGUSHIN = 2.79 RAMSEY)**

Let us begin with a reading of *Historiae* 2.92 Maurenbrecher, a passage preserved in a late-antique parchment. The fragment reads as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> On the *Historiae* see for instance Clausen 1947: 293-301; Pasoli 1964; La Penna 1969: 247-311; Sensal 2009: 249-262; Rosenblitt 2013: 447-470; Gerrish 2019.

<sup>4</sup> On the structure of book 2 of Sallust's *Historiae*, to which the present fragment belongs, see e.g. Garbugino 2020: 27-43.

<sup>5</sup> Groundbreaking studies on the subject are for example Earl 1961 and Due 1983: 113-139. More recently, see in particular Shaw 2022.

<A matribus parentum facino>ra militaria uiri<s memora>bantur in  
bellum a<ut ad la>trocinia pergent<ibus, ubi il>lorum fortia facta <ca>nebant.<sup>6</sup>

The text, owing to the condition in which it has come down to us, is rather uncertain, marred by numerous material gaps; the proposed reconstruction—at least the one conventionally accepted by scholars (and essentially the version I have transcribed here)—is highly conjectural.

Frassinetti translated this in Italian as follows:

“Le madri rammentavano gli atti di valore dei padri ai soldati  
che si accingevano a partire per la guerra o per qualche scorreria,  
questi cantavano le loro gesta”.<sup>7</sup>

A possible English translation of this passage may be the following:

“The mothers used to remind the menfolk setting out to war  
or brigantage of the warlike exploits of their fathers when they  
celebrated in song the brave deeds of these heroes”<sup>8</sup>

and also

“Whenever the men set off to war or banditry, <their mothers>  
used to remind them of their <fathers> martial <deeds> when they  
sang of the brave achievements of those heroes”.<sup>9</sup>

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6 The Latin text reproduced above follows Maurenbrecher 1891-1893's edition, p. 98, subsequently reprinted without alteration in Reynolds 1983: 179, and in Ramsey 2015: 202. Frassinetti 1991 introduces, at p. 446 n. 45, a variant that deserves consideration in light of the manuscript's complex transmission history.

7 Frassinetti – Di Salvo 1991: 446-447.

8 McGushin 1992: 57 (and pp. 237-238 for a better understanding of the fragment's context along with other mutilated texts of the *Historiae*).

9 Ramsey 2015: 183.

The passage involves a degree of scholarly inference.<sup>10</sup> However, despite the uncertain status of the text and the philological issues that arise from it, the scene remains remarkable—and this aligns with the central aim of the paper, as stated at the outset of this discussion. My intention is in fact not to dwell on the philological difficulties, but rather to consider the broader pedagogical resonance of the episode (therefore regardless such difficulties). In other words, my aim is to point out how Sallust positions his readers at the threshold of departure, where mothers – for us anonymous – invoke ancestral memory to exhort their sons toward valor.

What Sallust appears to capture is not a political *contio* or a senatorial debate, but a different kind of rhetorical act—one grounded in the transmission of memory, whose dynamics are striking.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Although the present contribution is primarily pedagogical and didactic in nature, a few philological clarifications are nonetheless indispensable, for they allow the text to be more accurately studied and contextualized. The fragment under discussion belongs to the direct tradition of Sallust's lost historical work, preserved—albeit in an extremely fragmentary state—in the so-called *Codex Floriacensis*. This manuscript, which found its way to France before being eventually dismembered, constitutes the principal 'direct' witness to Sallust's fragments. Its importance for the reconstruction of the Sallustian *corpus* can hardly be overstated. Portions of the *codex* resurfaced during the nineteenth century, enabling scholars to recover and reassess several fragments (for a thorough discussion see especially Reynolds 1983: 348; cf. also Funari 2016: 154-156). The *Codex Floriacensis* formed the textual foundation for Maurenbrecher's canonical edition of Sallust, which has since served as the point of departure for all subsequent critical revisions. The manuscript's fragmentary condition and the paleographical challenges it presents naturally account for the textual uncertainties that persist in a number of passages. As regards the historical and interpretative context of the present fragment, see McGushin 1992, who offers an English translation accompanied by a concise yet illuminating commentary; cf. also Ramsey 2015: 202, for further contextual remarks.

11 One could situate this discussion within the broader question of how memory was transmitted in antiquity. To 'transmit memory' in the ancient world rarely meant the mechanical preservation of information, as in modern archival practice, but rather a process of embodied, oral, and performative re-enactment. Memory was preserved through ritual, storytelling, myth, poetic recitation, and the repeated inscription of values in civic or religious practice. From a pedagogical perspective, this suggests that ancient education was less about information transfer and more about initiation into a

Crucially, it is not the fathers who recount their own deeds, but the mothers who emerge as the custodians of family glory. This detail offers valuable insight into the broader dynamics of how gender and voice shaped Roman cultural memory.<sup>12</sup> Far from being confined to silence, the maternal figures here seem to emerge as active moral agents. The affective dimension of this voice is not incidental, as far as I can understand it: maternal exhortation invests memory with an emotional authority that differs from the more formal registers of political speech.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this fragment lends itself to rich classroom discussion. It provides a powerful example of how Sallust represents rhetoric beyond the formal spheres of politics, and how gendered voices can shape the transmission of cultural values. Its brevity make it accessible to students, while its interpretive possibilities—concerning memory, gender, and rhetoric—open pathways for deeper critical engagement, especially within an academic setting. In what follows, I shall explore more fully these implications, and suggest ways in which the passage might be mobilized as a teaching text alongside Sallust's more canonical works.

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## WOMEN AND THE LIMINAL RHETORICAL SPHERE

The aforementioned passage opens several perspectives on the subject and makes us argue something more on the bond between

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cultural repertoire—learning to remember meant learning to perform within a tradition. Thus, the transmission of memory might be seen as the passing on of interpretive frameworks, habits of thought, and modes of speech that allowed each new generation not only to recall the past, but to re-actualize it in a living form.

12 On cultural memory (and identity as well) cf. Bommas 2011; on the same topic, with a discussion related to Republican and Augustan Rome, cf. Dinter and Guérin 2023; further remarks on the aforementioned issue are also in Bianco – Cusumano – Melidone – Rallo 2023; Bettini 2024: 343-356. A stimulating reading remains Assmann 1997.

women and oratory through the Sallustian lens. For students accustomed to studying Roman rhetoric primarily as the preserve of male citizens in public arenas—whether in the senate or the forum—this fragment offers a valuable challenge. Although, as already noted, such an episode is highly conjectural, the text nonetheless deserves scrutiny for what it suggests about the boundaries of rhetorical practice in Roman society.

Women appear here not in silence; they assume the stance of orators. Their voices operated in settings that blurred the boundary between domestic and civic. Women's rhetorical presence materializes in a liminal space: the moment of departure for war, where maternal exhortations to sons, husbands, or brothers acquire a resonance that is both personal and communal. This transformation of the domestic moment into a quasi-public stage is crucial. I would suggest that it demonstrates how exhortation could echo outward into the broader civic community, shaping collective values and inspiring action. The scene reminds us that rhetorical culture in Rome cannot be neatly confined to its institutional settings.

Pedagogically, then, the fragment is rich. It compels students, teachers and scholars as well, to reconsider fundamental questions: Who is permitted to speak publicly in Rome? In which contexts does speech carry civic weight? What purposes can rhetorical expression serve beyond arenas of law and politics?

In Sallust's illustration, women's words carry the force of ancestral *exempla*—the very currency of Roman oratory. Roman orators, from Cicero to Cato, frequently invoked the *mos maiorum*, the precedent of ancestral virtue and action, as their most persuasive resource.<sup>13</sup> That

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13 For Cicero, the *mos maiorum* could legitimize political positions by cloaking them in the authority of Rome's past (let us think, for instance, of *De Republica* 5.1, *De Legibus* 2.9, *Pro Sestio* 98–99). For Cato the Elder, the appeal is even starker. The fragments of his *Origines* and speeches repeatedly frame innovation as dangerous and degeneration as imminent whenever ancestral precedent is abandoned. An example

here such exempla are voiced by mothers destabilizes the notion of a purely male monopoly on this rhetorical tool. That is to say, the *mos maiorum* is entrusted to female voices and embodied in maternal speech acts.

The implications are wide-ranging. Women may have been excluded from formal political power, but they were not excluded from shaping the ethos that sustained it.<sup>14</sup> Their words could inspire courage, and reinforce communal values. In this sense, they reveal the permeability of Rome's rhetorical boundaries and the ways in which power could be exercised through forms of speech that escape the notice of canonical rhetorical handbooks.

Finally, for students of rhetoric and cultural history, this episode opens an opportunity to reflect on what might be called alternative rhetorics. It challenges the long-standing narrative that confines rhetoric to male-dominated public life and instead asks us to map out the many other spaces—domestic, ritual, affective—where persuasive speech was cultivated and performed. To examine women as orators in this unconventional setting is to uncover a more complex and inclusive picture of Roman communicative practice.

## ORATORY OUTSIDE THE FORUM

Let us come now to a second pedagogical angle, that is, the expansion of what counts as rhetorical space. The fragment allows us to ask: must oratory be confined to the courts or the senate? Sallust

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is provided by *Oratio* 149 Malcovati, where, for instance, he contrasts the *disciplina maiorum* with contemporary softness, implying that only through imitation of the ancestors can Rome avoid decline.

14 Furthermore, this fragment accords with others from the long Roman tradition that depicts women as intervening in both soft and hard forms of power within Roman politics, influencing male behavior through their actions but, above all, through their words.



implicitly answers ‘no’. The home, the camp, the liminal space between departure and battle—all become stages for persuasion, and in this broader conception women assume a determinant role.

The point is crucial for understanding Sallust’s thought in the *Historiae*, and for advancing students’ understanding of Sallust, more broadly. Indeed, students can be invited to consider how this complicates the conventional, often taken-for-granted, picture of Roman oratory as the exclusive domain of civic elites. Comparison with other Roman texts reinforces this point. For instance, Livy’s Lucretia (as seen through *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.58) famously speaks words that cause revolution, in the sense of transforming personal tragedy into a political act;<sup>15</sup> her speech is not public in the institutional sense, yet it effects a collective upward. Tacitus’ Agrippina (e.g. *Annals* 14.1–9), by contrast, uses words—alternately persuasive, insinuating, and defiant—that unsettle imperial politics, words that show how utterance from the familial sphere could shape the state at its highest levels.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to Sallust’s fragment, the mothers exhorting warriors thus resonate with these broader patterns of Roman narrative, but with a difference. Sallust’s prose refuses embellishment: the exhortation is stripped to its essentials, preserving both gravity and urgency. In this way, the fragment not only enlarges our understanding of what counts as rhetorical space but also demonstrates how Sallust’s stylistic choices lend particular force to voices that might otherwise be marginal.

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15 On Livy’s Lucretia, see for example Moses 1993: 39–81; Calhoun 1997: 151–169; Vandiver 1999: 206–232. See also Livy’s account of the Sabine women, whose interventions and speeches succeed in halting the war between their relatives—fathers and brothers on one side—and their husbands on the other. The difference with Sallust is that, in his narrative, women employ storytelling to transmit information and values intended to exhort the next generations of men. Whether narrative, expository, or exhortative, these forms are all united by a rhetorical purpose: to transform the recipient’s original stance.

16 On Tacitus’ Agrippina, see for instance Ginsburg 2006; Boatwright 2008: 375–393; Zwierlein 2008: 171–175; McHugh 2012: 73–96; Panoussi 2019: 205–223; Fuhrer 2022: 21–35.

## STYLE AS PERFORMANCE

The third point of analysis is provided by the stylistic features of the fragment.<sup>17</sup> Sallust's hallmark parataxis, and his preference for archaic diction intensify the impression of urgency. The fragment moves quickly: *memorabantur...canebant*. These two verbs indicate an explicit rhetorical act.<sup>18</sup> Action follows action, with no rhetorical embellishment, only the stark juxtaposition of remembering and singing. For students of Latin prose, this is a valuable opportunity to see how style itself functions performatively, enacting in miniature the brisk, exhortative rhythm of the mothers' speech. The effect is not merely descriptive but kinetic, as though the prose itself presses the reader forward without pause, embodying the breathless momentum of exhortation.

One might contrast this with Livy's more expansive and periodic narrative, which often embeds women's words within a broader moralizing framework,<sup>19</sup> or with Tacitus' insinuating irony, where speech is marked by hesitation and dark suggestion.<sup>20</sup> Against these, Sallust's stylistic austerity gives the women's exhortations a peculiar forcefulness. The voice is almost primitive in its directness, its urgency heightened by the absence of rhetorical cushioning. This is quite different from what we encounter, for example, in the

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17 De Meo 1970 is a good reading on Sallust's style in relation to the ideology expressed in his works.

18 We assume that, for women, there was at a given moment a rhetorical reception (since they had heard from others about the heroism of the past) and, as depositories, a rhetorical transmission (since they conveyed it to men in order to reinforce their character).

19 On Livy's style, see in particular Shuttleworth Kraus 1988; Murgia 1993: 89-109; Adamik 2008: 34-41.

20 On Tacitus' style, see for instance Michel 1981: 283-292; Cizek 1993: 219-244; see also Utard 2004, with comparisons between Caesar, Livy, and Tacitus.

portrayal of Sempronia in the *Bellum Catilinae* (25),<sup>21</sup> where Sallust deploys irony and digression to frame a woman's conduct.<sup>22</sup> In the fragment, by contrast, the diction itself seems to place women as active agents, so that their exhortation may be a driving force in the narrative. Pedagogically, this element – I believe – invites an appreciation not only of what Sallust depicts, but how his prose is going to perform the urgency of exhortation, that is, that of women. It has the very potential to encourage students to reflect on the ways in which style is not neutral packaging; rather, it is a vehicle of meaning: in other words, parataxis here does not merely signal Sallust's brevity but enacts a mode of communication that mirrors the content of the speech. One might even say that Sallust, through this stylistic compression, stages a collision between gender and genre: women's words are elevated to a public and performative function precisely because of the historian's refusal to dilute them with connective or interpretative discourse.<sup>23</sup>

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21 The figure of Sempronia has already studied over the past few decades. See for example Cadoux 1980: 93-122; Paul 1986: 9-22; Weiden Boyd 1987: 183-201; Syme 2016: 173-181; Loar 2019: 146-157; Track 2021: 45-52.

22 Cf. also what I have noted in Rallo 2024: 573-574, “Sempronia viene descritta come una donna che ha compiuto azioni molto audaci (...). Infatti, è come se Sallustio volesse spingere il lettore a quello che realmente caratterizza il ritratto di questa donna, cioè *multa alia, quae instrumenta luxuriae sunt*. Ovvero, viene fornito un ritratto complesso di Sempronia, una donna che si distingue per la sua audacia, i suoi crimini, ma anche per la sue numerose qualità, che spesso superano i confini tradizionalmente associati al genere femminile nell'antica Roma”. That is to say, Sallust's portrayal of Sempronia is multifaceted: while she is marked by audacity and moral transgression, she also possesses notable abilities that complicate her characterization and push her beyond traditional expectations for Roman women.

23 And this is what happens, for instance, in some passages of *Bellum Catilinae* and *Bellum Jugurthinum*: see my analysis in Rallo 2024: 570-582 with a focus on *luxuria*, *metus*, e *invidia*.

## TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF GENDER AND RHETORIC

Foregrounding fragment 2.92 M. from Sallust's *Historiae* in the classroom allows educators to reposition Sallust as far more than a chronicler of political collapse. In this fragment, Sallust records women not as silent (or merely secondary) background figures, but as rhetorical actors—in other words, voices who exhort, remember, and transmit. They do not appear to us to legislate or command, but they endow action with moral weight: shaping memory, inciting courage, and carrying forward the capital of heroic *exempla*. Reading Sallust through this lens hence expands the pedagogical field, offering students and scholars a richer view of Roman culture, rhetoric, and historiography.

As far as the gender perspective is concerned: What does it mean that women, formally excluded from political speech, may emerge here as transmitters of heroic memory? Their presence forces students (and teachers) to confront the porous boundary between political and domestic. Sallust does acknowledge their power to sustain civic virtue across generations. Discussing this allows for broader conversations about gendered voices in antiquity—about how women's rhetorical force, though rarely preserved, could be imagined, staged, and mobilized by historians.

Second point of discussion: rhetoric. If we accept Sallust's scene as rhetorical, how then do we define oratory? Not every speech is delivered in the forum or the senate; here, persuasion seems to take place at the family threshold. This destabilizes conventional definitions of eloquence and broadens the scope of what counts as rhetoric. Students may therefore learn that ancient rhetorical culture was not confined to institutions of power, but also embedded in moments of familial exhortation, as it appears from this Sallustian's passage.

Last but not least: historiography. Why did Sallust choose to preserve this moment in his *Historiae*? The passage complicates our

assumptions about which voices ancient historians deemed worth recording. By admitting women's exhortations into his narrative, Sallust reveals the selectivity of historical memory. Students are encouraged to see historiography as a literary practice that frames whose words and actions mattered.

Students can thus compare Sallust's mothers with other female voices mediated by male authors—the aforementioned Livy or Tacitus, for instance—tracing their narrative function and rhetorical force. These comparative exercises reveal the constructedness of such voices, while also affirming the historiographical imagination that granted—even if fleetingly—women's speech a place in history.

## SOME WORK-IN-PROGRESS CONCLUSIONS

Fragment 2.92 M. should not be read merely as a dry scholarly puzzle. For the classroom, it can become something engaging: a vivid example of how Sallust's moralizing historiography – as in our case appears from *Historiae* – intersects with questions of gender, rhetoric, and cultural memory. It invites us to see late Republican Rome not only through the voices of senators and generals, who are in the majority of the cases seen as the only protagonists, but also through the imagined speech of mothers—figures who, though anonymous to us, carried an authority that linked past traditions to present crises. Their words in fact resonate beyond the page, showing students that the power of persuasion in Roman culture was not restricted to formal political arenas.

By foregrounding this partly neglected passage in our teaching, we – as scholars and teachers – may encourage students to approach Sallust's *Historiae* not only as a record of political upheaval, but also as a textured narrative where history, gender, and oratory – as I have tried to demonstrate – intertwine in surprising ways.

Teaching Sallust also through fragment 2.92 M. means offering students a more original encounter with Roman historiography. We can show Sallust as a writer whose narrative strategies invite us to think about who speaks in history, how speech shapes political culture, and why even forgotten fragments can illuminate big questions about authority, identity, and the writing of the past.

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