

## The Forgotten Genre in the United States Declaration of Independence

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## **The Forgotten Genre in the United States Declaration of Independence**

Today when we think of the genre of the United States Declaration of Independence, it is quite easy for us to automatically label it as a “declaration”, for that is already indicated by its name. Yet, the Declaration could also be seen as a group writing, since it was the intellectual product of a whole draft committee, instead of Jefferson’s solo work. If you are familiar with English history, you may think of the Declaration as a deposition apologia as well, which is a type of public address used to sanction the removal of the old king, just as the colonies did to George III in the Declaration. Indeed, the Declaration has rolled so many genres into one that each of them would serve as a lens through which we could read some unique messages. However, one of its genres has been overlooked to the detriment of our understanding of its complete message. I argue that the features unique to the Dutch Plakkaat should qualify Plakkaat as originating a new genre that was particularly concerned with protecting a new nation’s credibility. Moreover, I argue that viewing the US Declaration as another instance of this genre calls attention to an otherwise underappreciated feature of the document: the oath breaking and oath taking that were central to its implementation.

Stephen Lucas, author of “The Rhetorical Ancestry of the Declaration of Independence,” while contending in his book that the Declaration emulated the deposition apologias, pointed out one aspect in the Declaration that makes it not perfectly fit into the traditional model of deposition apologias. He argues that the Declaration outlined general theories of the government in the preamble, whereas the deposition apologias tends to studiously avoid such bold statements about political principles, as it would impose unequivocal limitations on royal authority (159). This meaningful argument helps lead our attention to a new genre of Plakkaat, a more precise model of the Declaration which was created by the State General of United Provinces of Low Country in the *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* in 1581.

Known as the Act of Abjuration in English, the *Plakkaat van Verlatinge* was “the Dutch Declaration of Independence”. In 1581, seeking to justify its independence from Spain, the State

General of United Provinces of Low Country issued *Plakkaat van Verlatinge* and cut ties with Spain. The Plakkaat first begins its preamble with the prince's obligation to defend his subjects and the right of the subjects to disallow his authority if he fails to protect them. Then it turns to indict King Philip II for his misbehavior over the years and ends with renouncing their King. Like most deposition apologias, the indictment part is by far the longest part of the *Plakkaat van Verlatinge*, yet the bold theories about the rights of subjects in the preamble were so novel for a deposition apologia that it became a distinct feature of the Plakkaat (163). Moreover, normally after publishing the deposition apologias to forfeit a king, a new king would be crowned, but the *Plakkaat* announced their throne vacant after justifying the reason they overruled the king. These distinct features show that the Plakkaat should not be simply seen as an example of deposition apologias. Rather, it should qualify itself as a new independent genre.

In the model of Plakkaat, one central purpose is to abjure the oath of allegiance, which is often referred as "abjuration." The term of abjure comes from the Latin abjurare, namely "to forswear." Abjuration thus means a solemn repudiation, abandonment, or renunciation by or upon oath. Abjuring the oath of allegiance to the King of Spain is the main goal of the *Plakkaat van Verlatinge*, and sentences expressing this idea appear in the *Plakkat* repeatedly, such as "We hold them to be henceforth discharged from all oaths and obligation." In fact, the direct translation of *Plakkaat van Verlatinge* is "Placard of Desertion," rather than "The Act of Abjuration" we commonly know it as today. Compared with the former one, obviously the sense-for-sense translation could better reflect the soul of the Plakkaat.

Of all the available models for Jefferson when the Declaration was drafted, probably no document could provide a better precedent than the Plakkaat (165). Historically, the thirteen colonies and the Dutch provinces were both colonies suffering under their rulers. According to Jefferson's notes of proceedings in the Continent Congress in 1776, one argument advanced was that the Dutch Revolution "proved that a secession of some colonies would not be as dangerous as some apprehend." Structurally, the Declaration and the Plakkaat have the same structure argument.

What's more, their preambles bear striking resemblance in ideas (163). Though it has become untestable whether the Plakkaat did provide Jefferson with inspiration without direct evidence, the crucial fact to recall is that those striking similarities have already made it plausible to classify the Declaration as a Plakkaat.

The significance of viewing the Declaration as a Plakkaat is that it reveals the central role of oath-breaking in the Declaration. As subjects of Great Britain, the thirteen colonies owed a loyal duty to the British Crown. Their oath of allegiance demanded recognition of the British monarch as the "lawful and rightful king" and acknowledgment that no pope by himself or the authority of any powers could depose the King. At the end, it even clearly dictates that no person whatsoever hath power could absolve the oath.

Before the American Revolution, the oath of allegiance to the monarch was taken very seriously. Influenced by the idea "Render unto Caesar" in the Bible, for years people have believed that they should obey their king in all circumstances, and overthrowing a legitimate king was always seen as a morally wrong action to take. More would prefer to stay loyal to the monarch as long as the conflicts between them could be glossed over. One sentence in the preamble of the Declaration indirectly indicates this attitude perfectly: "that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they accustomed" (US 1776). On the other hand, Britain, obtaining the moral advantage when the colonies announce independence, could initiate war in any given moment with good justification.

Though for the founding fathers of the United States, seeking independence was necessarily imminent in 1776, passively admitting the oath-breaking would put their newly established nation at risk. Without proper justification, seeking independence would challenge the legitimacy of the new government and the security of the unprotected nation. Determined as the founding fathers of the United States were, they could not afford the new country to have a tarnished oath-breaker image. Back in 1776, the United States was a vulnerable entity in the international world. If the war was doomed to break out once the independence was announced, seeking

international supports and forming allies were in great importance, if not for long-term development, then for temporary necessity. Potential allies in the international world, however, if focused on the oath-breaking act of the United States, may have refused to offer help to the United States because the doubt in the country's credibility. In this circumstance, it was the Declaration's job to gloss over the fact of breaking the oath. At the very least, it should give countries in Europe enough reason to remain neutral, in case they intervened in this conflict in support of Great Britain.

The strategy the Declaration employed, in addition to indicting the King George III for his mistreatment to the colonies, was to use the conclusion to announce an equally formal and sacred oath of abjuration to relieve their previous oaths of allegiance. As we look more closely at this paragraph in the Declaration, though no word of abjuration exists, phrases and sentences like "solemnly publish and declare", "Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved" suggest that an act of abjuration is being made. More interestingly, when the Declaration announced the United States as "Free and Independent States" and its power "to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which the Independent States may of right do", the colonies were indeed responding to the previous oaths they made to the king that "no pope could be given Licence to bear arms, raise Tumults, or to offer any violence or hurt to the king." In the very last sentence, the representative's behavior of "mutually pledge to each other" also created a strong sense of ritual (US 1776). By doing so, the Declaration counterbalanced the effect of the oath of allegiance.

Today, it is still significant to read the message of the oath-breaking in the Declaration, for it reveals that the United States has a long tradition of breaking oaths. Though interest-driven politics is like British statesman Henry Temple's famous remark "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow", still, international credibility is highly valuable for the stability of the countries. Yet, from the broken treaties between the America the Indian Nations that deprived native

Americans of their right to live in their homeland, to the relatively ugly side of the Declaration, to the Paris Climate Accord President Trump's withdrew from in 2017, there are endless examples of America breaking the oaths, treaties, or promises. The US is very likely an unreliable international partner - and probably it has long been one, so people today should not be surprised when oath-breaking happens again in contemporary American Politics.

### Work Cited

Lucas, Stephen. "The Rhetorical Ancestry of the Declaration of Independence." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1998, pp. 143-184