Eighteen Feet of Clay: Thoughts on Phantom Rule 4(m)

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Recommended Citation
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Eighteen Feet of Clay: Thoughts on Phantom Rule 4(m)

GENE R. SHREVE*

THE STORY

The Supreme Court recently transmitted to Congress a number of amendments to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. ¹ Unless Congress acts to reject, change, or delay them, the amendments become law on December 1 of this year. ² They represent some but not all of the changes proposed earlier to the Court by the Judicial Conference. ³ Perhaps the most ambitious change the Court decided to transmit concerns Rule 15(c).

Rule 15 describes circumstances in which parties may revise (amend) pleadings. In situations falling within paragraph (c) of the rule, an amendment inserting a new claim "relates back to the date of the original pleading." Paragraph (c) affects cases where statutes of limitation eliminate the option of presenting the same claim in a separate suit. Rule 15(c) requires for its application a significant connection between the claim relating

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* Professor of Law, Indiana University at Bloomington. Support for this essay came from a summer grant provided by Indiana University and the School of Law. I wish to acknowledge the excellent research assistance of Joe Pieters, Class of 1992. For their helpful comments on the draft, I am grateful to Dan Conkle, Peter Raven-Hansen, Lauren Robel, and David Shapiro. My thanks to Don Gjerdingen, Bill Popkin, and Alex Tanford for their research suggestions and to Ralph Whitten for introducing me to phantom Rule 4(m). I take sole credit, of course, for any aspect of this essay that troubles the reader.


2. Congress may legislate rules of procedure for federal courts directly. See infra note 13. But nearly all rules result from the more circuitous process established in the Rules Enabling Act. 28 U.S.C. §§ 2071-2075, 2077 (1988). See generally W. BROWN, FEDERAL RULEMAKING: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES 5-34 (1981). The Supreme Court's April 30 initiative follows this approach. It came in just under the deadline, since the Court's transmission must come "to the Congress not later than May 1 of the year in which a rule prescribed . . . is to become effective." 28 U.S.C. § 2074. Unless Congress intercedes, the transmitted amendments take effect "no earlier than December 1 of the year in which such rule is so transmitted." Id.

3. The Court's transmission included amendments to Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 5, 15, 24, 34, 35, 41, 44, 45, 47, 48, 50, 52, 53, 63, 72, and 77. 111 S. Ct. (No. 16) CCXIII. But the Chief Justice noted in an accompanying letter to the Speaker of the House that "amendments proposed by the Judicial Conference to Rules 4, 4.1, 12, 26, 28, 30, and 71A are not transmitted at the present time pending further consideration by the Court." Id. at CCXIV.
back and an original claim. When an amendment changes the party claimed against, Rule 15(c) makes relation back even more difficult.

How difficult became evident in the Supreme Court’s decision Schiavone v. Fortune Magazine. The Court stated there that an amendment changing a party would relate back only if the new party had notice of the case prior to the running of the statute of limitations. In response to criticism that Schiavone had not given enough life to the relation-back principle, the Judicial Conference proposed to the Court, and the Court has now transmitted to Congress, new subparagraph (c)(3). To overcome Schiavone, (c)(3) creates for amendments changing parties a relation-back route that is independent of statutes of limitation: when (in the language of the new provision) the substituted party has notice “within the period provided by Rule 4(m) for service of the summons and complaint.”

The problem is that this language in (c)(3), if permitted to take effect, will refer to nothing at all. The provision in Rule 4 governing time for service is paragraph (j). Paragraph (j) is also the last paragraph in the rule. There is no Rule 4(m). Paragraph (m) existed only in the Judicial Conference’s proposed revision to Rule 4, which the Supreme Court declined to recommend to Congress. This appears to be the source of the Court’s error.

4. In the language of the rule, it is necessary that “the claim or defense asserted in the amended pleading” arise “out of the conduct, transaction, or occurrence set forth or attempted to be set forth in the original pleading.” FED. R. CIV. P. 15(c) [hereinafter RULE 15(c)]. See generally 3 J. MOORE, MOORE’S FEDERAL PRACTICE ¶ 15.15[3] (1991).

5. The rule adds preconditions that:
   within the period provided by law for commencing the action against the party to be brought in by amendment that party (1) has received such notice of the institution of the action that the party will not be prejudiced in maintaining his defense on the merits, and (2) knew or should have known that, but for a mistake concerning the identity of the proper party, the action would have been brought against the party.


8. It “has been revised to change the result in Schiavone v. Fortune . . . with respect to the problem of the misnamed defendant.” Proposed Amendments to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Advisory Committee Note, 111 S. Ct. (No. 16) CCLXXIV, CCCXXV (June 19, 1990).

9. 111 S. Ct. (No. 16) at CCXVII.
The Judicial Conference proposed revisions of Rules 4 and 15 simultaneously. Proposed Rule 15(c)(3) thus referred to the place where the Judicial Conference had relocated time-for-service requirements in its proposed revision of Rule 4: paragraph (m). The Court failed to realize that, once it decided to implement the Judicial Conference's revision of Rule 15 without changing Rule 4, it would be necessary to realign the reference in 15(c)(3). The reference thus should have been "within the period provided by Rule 4(j) for service of the summons and complaint."  

Eventually, litigants will probably receive the greater relation-back opportunities so obviously intended by Rule 15(c)(3). Congress could now salvage matters by redrafting the provision. If by inaction Congress permits the flawed subparagraph to become law, the Supreme Court can expedite review of a case involving it. The Court can then replace the bogus reference to 4(m) with one to 4(j), invoking the interpretative maxim that statutory language—however clear—cannot direct absurd results. Or, since the Justices might find use of the maxim in this setting somewhat mortifying, the Court might address the problem indirectly by sending a corrective amendment to Congress next year.

10. On the relationship between current Rule 4(j) and proposed Rule 4(m), see the Advisory Committee Note for the latter. 111 S. Ct. (No. 16) at CCCXIII.
11. There was more confusion of the same sort. For example, in the order in which it transmitted the spurious language of Rule 15(c)(3) to Congress, the Court also abrogated Form 18A and replaced it with Forms 1A and 1B. In so doing, the Court adopted the recommendations of the Judicial Conference. Those recommendations, however, were intended (in the words of the Advisory Committee) to "reflect the revision of Rule 4." 111 S. Ct. (No. 16) at CCCXCIII.
12. See supra note 8.
14. See supra note 2.
16. A case involving phantom Rule 4(m) would present the Supreme Court with a situation much more embarrassing than the one it encountered in Green, 109 S. Ct. 1981. See supra note 15. The Court bore no responsibility for the language it pronounced absurd in Green, since that language had been injected into the rule by Congress. Id. at 1988-90.
17. Until then, it is doubtful whether a means exists under the Rules Enabling Act for the Supreme Court to transmit a correction to Congress. See supra note 2. Re-enactment of the process next year suggests the possibility of a solution on December 1, 1992.
That is the story of phantom Rule 4(m). What does one make of the story? The discussions I have had with other proceduralists suggest that answers vary. It is not yet clear whether my point of view (or any other) reflects a consensus. I doubt that all commentators would be as sharp in their criticism of the Supreme Court as I will be over the balance of this essay or that all would be as concerned over the probable lack of a strong reaction against Rule 4(m) as I will be or that all would be as inclined to see a connection between the lack of a response and general trends in modern legal scholarship.

ONE REACTION TO PHANTOM RULE 4(m)

The Court's error might foster some instability in relation-back cases. But there is reason to hope that, even if Congress permits phantom Rule 4(m) to become law, the immediate damage to federal procedure will not be great. Since the Supreme Court can patch up Rule 15(c)(3) through interpretation, lower federal courts should be able to do so as well. Yet the Court's error has caused damage of a different sort which, although hard to measure, is serious and more difficult to repair. The Court's inattention to the content of its own recommendations to Congress is quite disturbing. Even the nation's most distinguished legal institution is entitled to make mistakes, but not stupid mistakes. Phantom Rule 4(m) may make it harder for some to take the United States Supreme Court seriously, or to take civil procedure seriously, or both. That Congress occasionally makes such errors is beside the point. We do not expect of Congress the same high levels of concentration and of commitment to coherent lawmaking that we do of the Supreme Court.

18. See supra note 15 and accompanying text.
Whether there will be much printed response to the episode is another matter. Developments in procedural law are seldom of great interest to the news media, and the phantom Rule 4(m) is more likely to capture the attention of legal scholars than the general public. Yet it is uncertain how extensive responses will be even from the former.

Academics are seldom bashful about criticizing the Supreme Court. We stripmine the Justices’ opinions and devote innumerable pages in law journals to interpreting and second-guessing the Court’s work. But this is different. Phantom Rule 4(m) represents such a whopping error that it seems almost indecent to talk about it. The episode may therefore provide little grist even for current debates about the institutional role and personality of the Court. There may not, for example, be many attempts to exploit Court fumbling in Rule 15(c)(3) as proof that the role designed for the Court in procedural rule making is inappropriate, or as proof that the Court has become so politicized, or so debilitated by personal wrangling that it is no longer capable of attending to important details of judicial administration.

Can we simply fault the Court for a major lapse of judicial craftsmanship and leave it at that? Models of professionalism are certainly available to test the Court’s performance. Yet, because we labor under the conditions of modern legal scholarship, firm footing may be harder to find. Appeals


to craft face growing skepticism. Moreover, because consensus within the legal academy about what the law is or ought to be has diminished, it is difficult to attack even something as grotesque as phantom Rule 4(m) with force and particularity. It is worth considering some aspects of the problem in more detail.

First, law’s fragmentation is a byproduct of the most important development in modern legal scholarship: the shift from insularity to inquiry informed by other disciplines. The benefits from this development probably far outweigh the costs, but the costs are sobering. The interdisciplinary pull of modern legal scholarship may place some law professors in closer touch with colleagues in other university departments; however, it may also estrange them from the environment inhabited by clients, lawyers, and judges, the world they are supposed to be preparing many of their students to enter. More to the point here, the interdisciplinary shift has created for many scholars a dismembered, apologetic image of the law.


27. See, e.g., Stone, From a Language Perspective, 90 YALE L.J. 1149, 1156 (1981) ("Asking 'what is law?' has fallen, I fear, out of fashion.").

28. Civil procedure scholarship offers an example. I complained in 1980 that thinking about . . . rules of procedure . . . has dwelt too much in the middle latitudes of appellate judicial doctrine . . . . The inquiry should be broadened by probing the jurisprudential values that appellate judges infrequently—perhaps almost never—explore . . . , and by probing the particular stress and flavor of . . . controversies that comprise a vital part of the trial court process, which are often beyond the accessibility of appellate judges.

Shreve, Questioning Intervention of Right—Toward a New Methodology of Decisionmaking, 74 NW. U.L. REV. 894, 894-95 (1980).


29. Professor Christopher Stone wrote of those entering the law-teaching profession:

The brightest of the candidates, though typically "willing to 'do' torts," have as their principal interest some body of scholarship outside the law. They have discovered in, say, economics or social-choice theory, some lance of insight with which they are prepared to take a tilt at the law—any body of legal rules should do—in some way it has not been tilted at before.
For example, techniques of deconstruction borrowed from philosophy and literary criticism have produced some penetrating results in legal scholarship. Yet, because deconstructionism interprets texts in a way ignoring context, logic, norms, or drafters’ intent, it could undermine the view that it is nonsensical for Rule 15(c)(3) to refer to Rule 4(m). Deconstructionists might maintain that such a reference is as useful as a reference to Rule 4(j) would have been. Their approach suggests that neither “4(m)” nor “4(j)” has extrinsic meaning and that the terms are equally suited as receptacles for whatever meaning the community reading Rule 15(c)(3) might choose to give them.

The second reason why contemporary legal scholarship fails to support a firmer response to phantom Rule 4(m) is somewhat related to the first. Convictions that the law does or should have particular content may be severely tested by growing doubt that our society (or perhaps any society) can function successfully. The greater tendency of commentators to emphasize conflict, oppression, or uncertainty when discussing legal topics seems part of a drift toward disillusionment in legal scholarship and in other

Stone, supra note 27, at 1151. See Posner, The Decline of Law as an Autonomous Discipline: 1962-1987, 100 Harv. L. Rev. 761, 766 (1987) (“The supports for the faith in law’s autonomy as a discipline have been kicked away in the last quarter century.”).

Others disagree, of course, and claim freestanding vitality for law. E.g., Fried, The Artificial Reason of the Law or: What Lawyers Know, 60 Tex. L. Rev. 35 (1981). Cf. Fiss, The Law Regained, 74 Cornell L. Rev. 245, 249 (1989) (“I continue to believe that law is a distinct form of human activity ....”). Yet because the idea (so accepted a generation or two ago) of law as autonomous discipline is under attack, more precise efforts to determine what aspects of the law are, or ought to be, suffer accordingly.


31. See S. Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? 14 (1980); Fish, supra note 30, at 551-52.

32. Whether this reading of deconstructionism is entirely right is probably a matter of controversy. As I noted earlier, deconstruction does appear “to invite the assumption that conflict between interpretive communities for the dominant (hence real) meaning of a text goes on without reference to notions of value or higher social good. Might makes right; or, at least, might makes meaning.” Shreve, supra note 23, at 14 n.75. For similar reactions, see A. Altman, Critical Legal Studies: A Liberal Critique 19 (1990); Cornell, Two Lectures on the Normative Dimensions of Community in the Law, 54 Tenn. L. Rev. 327, 328-29 (1987); and Fiss, Objectivity and Interpretation, 34 Stan. L. Rev. 739 (1982). Professor Balkin recently acknowledged “the popular conception of deconstruction as linguistic nihilism coupled with assertions of complete individual freedom in the reading of texts.” Balkin, Ideology as Constraint, 43 Stan. L. Rev. 1133, 1136 n.19 (1991). Balkin questions the accuracy of this conception. Id.

33. It is, of course, only natural that groups long victimized by injustice and only recently permitted a voice in legal discourse would be more critical of the legal order. See, e.g., the feminist literature noted in Teachout, Chicago Exposition: The New American Jurisprudential Writing as a Cultural Literature, 39 Mercer L. Rev. 767, 847 n.270 (1988); and in Robel, Book Review, 8 Const. Commentary 309, 312 n.5 (1991) (reviewing Karst, Belonging to America (1989)).
disciplines. Aspects of this phenomenon are sometimes called postmodernism. Postmodernism diminishes opportunities for wide agreement about what is (or would be) good in the law. From a postmodernist perspective, phantom Rule 4(m) may be no more nonsensical than law often is.

A third set of difficulties awaits those tempted to confront the Court over Rule 4(m). Increasingly, civil procedure literature stresses procedure's impact on particular sets of rights or on particular groups. But, in visualizing the consequences of this error, it is not easy to identify rights or groups that will suffer especially. The affront instead seems to be to broader principles of judicial administration—principles that are trans-substantive. Because so much contemporary scholarship has disparaged trans-substantive approaches to identifying the function and value of civil procedure, it becomes more difficult to arouse concern over phantom Rule 4(m).


35. "What characterizes so much of what is sometimes called post-modernity is a new playful spirit of negativity, deconstruction, suspicion, unmasking. Satire, ridicule, jokes and punning become the rhetorical devices for undermining 'puritanical seriousness.'" Bernstein, supra note 34, at 59.


37. For example, influences of feminist jurisprudence have begun to appear in civil procedure writing. See Minow, Some Thoughts on Dispute Resolution and Civil Procedure, 34 J. LEGAL EDUC. 284 (1984); Resnik, Housekeeping: The Nature and Allocation of Work in Federal Trial Courts, 24 GA. L. REV. 909 (1990); Schneider, Rethinking the Teaching of Civil Procedure, 37 J. LEGAL EDUC. 41 (1987). The pace of the trend will likely increase after the program of the Civil Procedure Section of the Association of American Law Schools, entitled “Feminist Procedure,” is presented at the Association’s annual meeting in January, 1992.


39. A partial list would include O. Fiss, The Civil Rights Injunction (1978); Burbank,
Readers hardly need to be reminded that this essay has been riding for some time on a tide of opinion and speculation. It is a matter of opinion whether phantom Rule 4(m) is really cause for such distress. Even if it is, and even if a sharp scholarly reaction against it is not forthcoming, it is speculative to suggest that a more forceful response to the same error would have occurred, say, twenty-five years ago—before the emergence of unsettling forces like deconstruction and post-modernism and before the relative decline of trans-substantive procedural values.

If there are those who found these opinions and speculations less than helpful, I would urge them to go back to the opening portion of this essay and make of the fascinating story of phantom Rule 4(m) what they will. What I finally make of it is this. First, this sad episode may be proof of the need to search for more resonant images of law and judicial behavior. Few would return to the insular, self-satisfied age of legal scholarship. Still, we must not lose sight of law's own pragmatism, of the extent that law as a discipline must define and serve law's own needs.

Second, to assume (as we must) that procedure should exist only to make real the values of substantive law does not mean that procedural problems are important only when their effects can be isolated within a particular category of substantive interests. The debacle of Rule 4(m) reminds us that trans-substantive concerns can be important as well.


40. Here the Supreme Court may be a step ahead of some legal scholars. Professor Frederick Schauer raises this possibility in the setting of statutory interpretation. The Justices have not been reading their Derrida. Indeed, despite the lengthy importunings of legions of law professors, the Justices have been neglecting to read not only Derrida, but Foucault, Gadamer, Rorty, and Heidegger as well. Instead, as the statutory construction cases of the 1989 Term demonstrate, they have been spending their time reading (Noah) Webster, relying, both in fact and in articulated justification, on notions of plain meaning routinely derided in contemporary legal scholarship.
