

### Greek Declamation and Scholastic Rivalries: The Case of Himerius's *Oration 3*

Since the endowment of an imperial chair of Rhetoric in the second century CE, Athens had become one of the primary entrepôts of rhetorical education, and in combination with both its schools of philosophy and its historical legacy, emerged as the most resilient bastion of pagan Hellenism in the twilight centuries of antiquity. The purveyors of Hellenic *paideia*, the sophists, competed for the imperial and municipal chairs, as well as for students drawn from all over the Empire. The imperial chair brought not only a handsome salary but also empire-wide distinction (Watts 2006). Competition sometimes flared into institutionalized violence between rival sophists' schools, to which the rise of Christianity to imperial power added a new dimension, as well as the closing of ranks among pagan Hellenists (Watts 2006). The middle of the fourth century CE saw imperial power alternate between Christian emperors and the pagan Julian, with shifts in scholastic conflicts following suit.

We possess a number of orations by various sophists, such as those of Himerius addressed to his students and officials in Athens and of Libanius to those in Antioch, which directly address daily life and contemporary events of school, city and empire, and which paired with the works of Philostratus and Eunapius are logical starting points for illuminating relationships between schools as well as within them. Yet the sophistic corpus also contains several declamations, imaginary speeches performed in character, which were the capstone exercise for students of rhetoric since the Hellenistic period, and by Late Antiquity had become popular performance pieces. While an apparent means of escape to an idealized past where deliberative and judicial oratory freely flourished under Athenian democracy, declamations remain largely untapped as possible reactions and reflections of their authors' own world.

In this paper I propose to read one such declamation, *Oration 3* by Himerius, as a veiled response to the politically-charged scholastic rivalries of fourth century Athens, particularly that between Himerius himself, a devotee of the emperor Julian, and the Christian sophist Prohaeresius. *Oration 3* is a prosecution of the philosopher Epicurus for his doctrinal rejection of divine Providence, and I will suggest that the purpose behind this peculiar declamation was to accuse Prohaeresius of “corrupting the youth” with newfangled doctrines, atheism and immorality. Substantial evidence of the rivalry between the two sophists exists in other sources such as Eunapius, but it may be in this work of fiction that Himerius himself comes closest to characterizing his real-life opponent in all but name (Penella 1990). Despite inconclusive evidence for this claim, this declamation may be more generally read as a covert anti-Christian polemic, which, if correct, would confirm the value of this literary genre as a source of critical insights into the *Kulturkampf* of the period.

#### Bibliography

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- Watts, E. 2006. *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*. Berkeley: University of California Press.