Intellectual Caricature in Libanius's Declamations

From their initial encounters with Athenian society in the fifth century BCE, intellectuals identified as Sophists became the butt of ridicule in Old Comedy, anti-democratic mercenaries in the speeches of the Attic Orators, and peddlers of counterfeit wisdom in the dialogues of Plato. This triple inheritance of sophistic caricature persisted well into the Roman period, so that even the most iconic "Sophists" of the Second Sophistic, such as Dio Chrysostom and Aelius Aristides, distanced themselves from that label even as they were striving to redeem the art of rhetoric from Plato's resounding condemnations (Stanton 1973; Whitmarsh 2005). I have found that this ambivalence toward the term "sophist" endured into the so-called Third Sophistic beginning in the fourth century CE, when authors such as the orator Themistius and the emperor Julian similarly denied the sophistic label from being applied to their philosophical oratory.

Yet unlike many of their Second Sophistic predecessors, professors of rhetoric in the Third Sophistic such as Libanius and Himerius proudly embraced the title of Sophist. They styled themselves the stewards of Hellenic *paideia* and equated eloquence with moral virtue and traditional piety. In the case of Libanius, however, the triple inheritance of intellectual caricature still finds an outlet. His declamations (fictional speeches delivered by historical or stock characters) commonly feature negative and derogatory references to sophists, orators, and philosophers that are so ironically opposed to their author's positive professional identity that they beg to be interpreted as self-parody.

This paper will examine the caricature of intellectuals in Libanius' declamations to determine authorial intent and rhetorical purpose. I will argue that these caricatures have a multivalent function to persuade, entertain, and edify. Whether set in classical Athens, or the fictional "Sophistopolis" closely modeled upon it, the anti-sophistic rhetoric of these

declamations was designed to appeal to the imagined audience of those settings, a democratic audience suspicious of intellectuals (Russell 1983). Libanius' defense of Socrates (*Decl.* 1), for instance, denigrates the Sophists of the late fifth century BCE to further dissociate his client from their reputation, effectively using the Athenians' characteristic distaste for intellectuals to his own advantage. When placed in the mouth of a comic stock character, on the other hand, anti-sophistic rhetoric further emphasizes the speaker's own defective character and renders him all the more derisible, such as when a miserly father, whose son asked for a laurel crown as a reward for heroism, claims that his son was tricked by "pretentious sophists" into refusing to ask for gold (*Decl*. 33). The effect is that the speaker's own embodied stereotype and the stereotype of intellectuals that he presents appear equally ridiculous; thus negative attitudes toward intellectuals become associated with unsympathetic characters, while the true sophist is on the side of moral rectitude. The fictional audience is brought to the speaker's side, while Libanius' audience in the real world is simultaneously persuaded of the opposite.

While the irony and self-parody that come from reproducing these age-old stereotypes are designed to gratify both the author's and audience's sense of humor, they also serve to redeem sophistic identity by sharpening the focus between the negative stereotypes and the positive value of the Sophist as a moral role model for Greco-Roman society, especially in a Christianizing Roman Empire, under which traditional *paideia* was expressing fears for its own continued existence.

Bibliography

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