

Pseudo-Libanius the Novelist?: A Study of *Ekphrasis* 30

Ekphrasis 30 in Libanius' *Progymnasmata* was probably not written by Libanius (Foerster and Münscher 2522; Gibson 427-29), and depending on one's definition of the term, may not even be an *ekphrasis*. This short piece is titled an *ekphrasis* "of beauty" (κάλλους), an abstract concept rather than a work of art or stock scene type; it is unusual in its claim to describe an abstraction or personification (Webb 61-64). The narrator, a young man, describes the experience of seeing and being captivated by a beautiful young woman sitting at her window as he rides past on horseback. He compares her to the moon, Aphrodite, paintings of the sun, a garden, various plants and flowers, the Muses, and her lips specifically to honeycomb, and he narrates his "loss of vigor" and pseudo-death as her gaze melts his courage. The close relationship between *ekphrasis* and *enkomion* manifests clearly throughout the piece in the narrator's approach to the subject and his eventual despair of being able to fully describe it in words (Webb 78-81). With its first-person perspective, its sudden and shocking moment of connection between the speaker and the woman viewed, and its emphasis on the relationship between love and death, the *ekphrasis* reads more like an excerpt from an imperial-era Greek novel than an exemplary school text. In fact R. Foerster, in his edition of Libanius, notes certain parallels to Greek novels in this *ekphrasis*, as well as to authors from the sixth century school of Gaza. Yet despite this fascinating convergence of literary features, no formal study has been published on the piece, and it remains an enigma to scholars. This paper aims to fill that gap in the scholarship by offering a close reading and analysis of the piece, drawing on current scholarship on *ekphrasis*, school texts, and the Greek novel to argue that this *ekphrasis* is in fact an excerpt from a lost ancient novel.

In my argument I will expand upon Foerster's notes on novelistic qualities in *Ekphrasis* 30, comparing the piece specifically to the *ekphraseis* of women found in Achilles Tatius. Ps.-Libanius and Achilles Tatius have their narrators describe the women with comparable terms and imagery: Achilles Tatius' hero compares his love at first sight to a painting of Selene, a garden of flowers, a peacock, and her lips to bees (*Ach. Tat.* 1.4, 19). Both narrators lose their life force the longer they look at the woman without possessing her (*Ach. Tat.* 1.4). Both attempt to convey "not reality, but the perception of reality" (Webb 38, on goal of *enargeia* in general), that is, their experience of viewing/being viewed rather than physiological traits. In Achilles Tatius, *ekphraseis* of cities, paintings, shipwrecks, pirate battles – all standard subjects for *ekphrasis* according to ancient theorists – convey less emotional impact than the *ekphraseis* of living women, both for the reader/listener and for the characters in the story, thus offering fruitful parallels to *Ekphrasis* 30. Moreover, I argue that for both authors, the male viewer/narrator becomes a model for the reader/listener, displaying the way in which young men are expected to act towards women. Achilles Tatius emphasizes this aspect of his narrator by using other characters as negative *exempla* of inappropriate ways to view a woman (e.g. Thersandros in book 6). The similarity of language, situation, and apparent intended effect of these two passages creates a strong case for considering the original context of *Ekphrasis* 30 to be a late antique Greek novel.

Bibliography

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