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LIBANIUS AND THE DEATH OF JULIAN

ORATIONS XVII AND XVIII – FEW REMARKS ON THE TRUE EMOTIONS BEHIND CONVENTION

ABSTRACT: Two speeches composed by Libanius after the unexpected death of his emperor and friend, the *Monody* (XVII) and the *Funeral Speech* (XVIII), fulfill the requirements of the genre so perfectly that it is easy to classify them as purely conventional. Both the structure and content, not to mention the language, demonstrate the author's literary fluency rather than originality. Yet I would like to argue that even if the concept and form of the speeches reproduce the well established pattern, my personal impression that there is something unique in these works is not completely groundless. Libanius' friendship and respect for the late emperor, as well as the political situation after Julian's death, make the orator's commitment exceptional and I cannot resist the feeling that his grief and confusion are genuine. I would like to focus on the passages referring directly to the circumstances of the emperor's death, since Libanius' approach to the explanation of this tragic event seems crucial for my argument.

KEY WORDS: Libanius, rhetoric, monody, funeral speech

When in 363 emperor Julian was leaving Antioch to launch his expedition against Persia, his heart was full of anger and disappointment: the people of the city had shown no enthusiasm towards imperial religious reforms and renewal of old cults. Libanius, as the only prominent citizen of Antiochia who had not lost emperor's favor, set to work: he began writing speeches which would reconcile his city and the offended ruler

(Oration XVI to Julian and XVII to the Antiocheans). The orator, who shared the emperor's views on religion and education, welcomed Julian on the throne: Libanius was aware that the young ruler offered a chance for classical culture and religion, although he did not always support the methods adopted by the emperor to implement his reforms and restitute the cults of the old gods and former paideia.[1] Despite these discrepancies Libanius showed deep respect and affection towards Julian; at the same time the orator was determined to protect his native city from the emperor's anger. The unexpected death of Julian could put an end to the troubles of the recalcitrant city, yet for Libanius it meant almost a personal tragedy, since all his hopes for rescuing the fading ancient world were destroyed together with the emperor. The orator expressed his sorrow in several speeches, but two of them are the most relevant to the subject: Oration XVII, the *Monody on Julian*, and Oration XVIII, the *Funeral Speech*.

Despite the obvious and direct connection to the emperor's death, it is not easy to determine the exact time when both speeches were composed. It was generally assumed that Libanius created the *Monody* first, and the *Funeral Speech* second, but the timespan between the two speeches was uncertain; scholars have considered a number of dates between 363 and 368. Nowadays, most of them accept that the *Monody* was composed in 364 and the *Funeral Speech* in 365.[2]

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[1] It is a generally accepted view that Libanius had not too much in common with Julian' religious zealotry; Libanius most probably did not support the emperor's edict preventing Christians from teaching in schools. Although there is direct criticism of so called Rescript on schools in Libanius' writings, his silence on the subject seems meaningful, especially if we consider his commitment to the classical education and friendly relations with several Christians. It might be interpreted as condemnation of Julian's policy, see: Cribiore 2013: 233–237; Wiemer 2014: 195.

[2] These dates are accepted by Wiemer and Watts, who also discuss other hypotheses, see Wiemer 1995: 225–264; Watts 2014: 54. The debate refers mainly to the composition of the *Funeral Speech* and is connected to the dating of the earthquakes which devasted some Asian cities in the second half of the 4th century AD. Libanius enumerates the earthquakes that accompanied Julian's death, and the scholars have been discussing the nature of those remarks: do they offer genuine and accurate information, or do they belong to the rhetorical strategy of an orator? It is also not easy to decide whether these natural disasters foreshadow Julian's death, or follow it as the expression of cosmic grief. For arguments in favour of 365 as the date of Oration XVIII,

In both speeches Libanius observed almost all the rules of the genre: both the *Monody* and the *Funeral Speech* seem to be built on well-established structural and linguistic patterns, with only few modifications. Despite the conventionality of the form, partly counterbalanced by Libanius' literary fluency and admirable erudition, I cannot resist the feeling that both speeches reveal genuine distress and sincere grief. Although this impression is certainly personal and does not contribute to the philological approach to the text, it may be relevant for the general view of Libanius' work, especially that the issue of sincerity has already been touched in the extremely interesting analysis of the expression of suffering conducted by Edward Watts, who compares the letters Libanius wrote to Philagrius, an officer in Julian's army (letter 1434), and Scylacius, a professor of law from Berytus (letter 1431).[3] The orator approached both men with the same request: he asked for information about the emperor's last campaign. Yet the letters are different in tone. The letter to Philagrius is devoid of dramatic expressions and descriptions of personal suffering, because probably its author did not want to cast any doubt on his own mental strength, since he intended to use the addressee's diaries to complete his work. Writing to Scylacius, Libanius allowed himself to be more emotional, but he could expect his friend to recognize (and appreciate?) rhetorical expression. Watts concludes that Libanius, depending on the addressee of a given text, carefully administers the description of his personal grief. On the other hand, there is no reason why we should not believe that this correspondence was inspired by genuine trauma after Julian's death, as Bradbury suggests.[4] Watts implies that the dramatic closure of the *Monody* does not necessarily reflect the orator's true condition and his interpretation seems convincing, nonetheless I believe that Libanius revealed his feelings not only in the lines directly depicting his sorrow, but also in the passages describing the circumstances and possible causes of the emperor's death, and his efforts to explain the reasons of Julian's fall go beyond rhetorical convention.

The treatises dating to the late 3rd or early 4th century AD and ascribed to Menander Rhetor discuss epideictic speech genres including

see: Jacques and Bousquet 1984; Henry 1985; Wiemer 1995. For the date 368, see van Nuffelen 2006.

[3] Watts 2014: 52–54.

[4] Bradbury 2006: 252–253.

the encomium of an emperor (i.e. the imperial oration), the monody and the funeral speech. The four have quite a lot in common, but the degree of affinity depends on the relation between the orator and the addressee of a speech and on the time of composition.[5] The monody usually refers to an unexpected tragedy, usually a young person's death. If the orator is related to the deceased, the speech constitutes a pure lamentation, in other cases it combines elements of a lament with those of an encomium. When mourning someone young, the orator should grieve over the young age and the good nature of the deceased, dwelling on the sorrow his/her untimely death has brought to the city. Complaint against the divine power and cruel fate is another traditional element of the speech. The orator should refer to the present, to the past and to the future; he should also describe the funeral and the physical appearance of the deceased. As a direct reaction to the death, the monody should be relatively short. This restriction does not apply to the funeral speech, which certainly takes more time to compose. If the epitaph is delivered within 7–8 months after the death, it should comprise an encomium and a consolation, but if the timespan between the event and the delivery is longer, the speech becomes a pure encomium. Only a close relationship with the deceased allows a more emotional tone in every part of the speech, even a long time after the person's passing. In an encomium, as might be expected, the rhetor should talk about the ancestry and life of the deceased; the conventional elements of such praise could be presented in the following order: family, birth, nature, nurture, education, actions and accomplishments, i.e. wealth, children, devoted friends, honors granted by the city. The speaker may present the deceased as more distinguished than others, or at least equal to the best.

The encomium in a funeral speech corresponds to the imperial oration in almost every point, but one of Menander's comments on the *basilikos logos* seems more interesting: in comparing a ruler with bygone emperors an orator should avoid insulting the latter, since this would indicate bad craftsmanship (Men. 377).

Libanius' position as the author of the *Monody* and the *Funeral Speech* is peculiar: he knew Julian personally, respected and admired

[5] Menander describes the monody in passage 434–437, the funeral speech in the passage 418–422, and the imperial oration in the passage 368–377.

the young ruler and the respect was mutual. Therefore, it is quite understandable that the sublime tone of the orations dedicated to the deceased emperor is combined with more personal commitment. It also explains why Libanius bent rules of the genre and devoted so many lines to describe his own sorrow.[6] For the modern reader his emotional, almost exalted, words may seem exaggerated and artificial, especially if one considers Watts' conclusions, yet we should remember that demonstrating devotion to Julian could not bring any benefit from his successors, for whom Julian's controversial policy was rather heavy burden. Neither Jovian, nor Valens intended to follow Julian's path and the citizens of Antioch openly rejoiced at the emperor's death, hence praising the late ruler required some courage and was a proof of genuine loyalty towards the Apostate; orations XVII and XVII were inspired not only by a sense of duty, but also by true friendship.[7] The speeches were most probably delivered in front of a small circle of Libanius' friends, who might have expected the orator to commemorate Julian.[8]

According to Hans-Ulrich Wiemer the *Monody* has a simple and clear structure, with §§1–3 constituting an introduction, §§4–35 the main part comprising a complaint against gods (§§4–13), praise for Julian (§§14–21) and the lament (§§22–35), and finally §36–38 – ending.[9] Within this frame one may observe that there are correspondences between certain parts. More specifically, passages 1–14 correspond to passages 23–38: Libanius speaks about the grief over Julian's death, the odd behavior of the gods (§§4, 24), the death of the emperor inflicted by the Assyrians (§6), or a Persian (§32), the rejoicing of Julian's enemies, Christians (§7), or Goths, Celts and Sarmatians (§30); then he refers to other characters, like Constantine (indirectly, §8), Agamemnon, Cresphontes, Codrus, Ajax, Achilles, Cyrus, Cambyses, Alexander (§31), and finally he describes the sorrow over the loss, be it general (§§10–11) or personal (§§36–38). In the passages in the middle of the speech Libanius briefly describes Julian's accomplishments (§§14–18) and addresses the late emperor.

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6 For more commentary on transgressing the form of the monody see: Watts 2014: 55.

7 On hostility of the Antiocheans towards Libanius see: Wiemer 2014: 195–196.

8 Wiemer 1995: 256, 266–267.

9 Wiemer 1995: 248–249.

In the speech Libanius skillfully exploits the themes, language and ideas offered by the vast Greek literary sources using Homeric epics as the basic point of reference.[10] It would be naive to expect a high degree of originality in a speech belonging to an established genre and composed by a professional orator and an erudite. However, we can hope for a little personal touch: amplification of conventional elements,[11] expression of personal grief and a more elaborate explanation of the tragedy, understandable for someone emotionally involved and unable to accept the fate.

The issue of divine ingratitude seems especially important, considering Julian's determination to restore the old religion and absence of any successor willing to continue with this policy. The Olympians did not protect Julian, although he fulfilled all the duties of a pious man bringing offerings to all the gods (§4). The mention of Hector in the preceding paragraph – leaving aside the sheer similarity between the two characters, fallen protectors of cities, whose deaths left their fatherlands defenceless – indirectly refers to the divine ingratitude towards the Trojan hero. Perhaps such an approach was the reason why Libanius chose to speak about Hector, and not any other character, in the opening passages of the speech. In the *Iliad* (XXIV 33–35), Apollo reproaches the other Olympians for not saving Hector's body, reminding them of all the sacrifices performed by Priam's son. Paragraph 6 brings some curious comments on divine justice: despite receiving opulent offerings they had received and in contrast to the initial promises of success they had made, the gods deprived their champion of everything and lured him into his death, which also reminds us of Hector's fate. Although the situation of the two characters was different, the tragic lot of the Trojan prince seems to provide quite an adequate connection, at least as far as divine loyalty towards humans is concerned.

Complaints about the cruel fate and divine decisions are among the conventional expressions of grievance, but it is worth noting that Libanius does not confine himself to asking rhetorical questions about divine responsibility.[12] It seems that the orator is seeking an answer that would

[10] For detailed analysis see Nesselrath 2014: 260–265.

[11] Like in his *Monody* on Nicomedia, see Watts 2014: 48.

[12] Complaining about gods' will and fate belonged to the most popular *topoi* in monody (Men. 435) see also Wiemer 1995: 248.

help him to overcome confusion of thoughts. The death of Julian was more detrimental than Hector's: the latter brought destruction to Troy, according to the divine will, whereas the former, in Libanius' opinion, was destructive both to the state and to the divine cults. The orator's frustration is almost tangible, when he refers to the long reign of Julian's predecessor and describes the late emperor, more or less directly, as cruel, impious and stupid (§8). Yet the gods allowed this man to live and reign for a long time, although he did not deserve their favour. Praising an emperor by criticising his predecessor was not particularly subtle, yet Libanius seems to be disgusted enough to express his feelings in this rather harsh way.[13]

Determined to explain the tragedy to his audience, Libanius offers his first hypothesis in the paragraphs 19–21, beginning with the address in the second person singular to Julian. He reproaches his beloved emperor for rejecting the Persian peace offer, but at the same time he is perfectly aware that the Persian activities outraged Julian and made him think of exacting punishment (§19). The divine powers opposed imperial plans, or, more likely, Julian's action was too severe and the punishment not commensurate with the crime; the emperor's army pillaged the once prosperous land of Assyria and its beautiful cities (§§20–21). It is important to remember that Libanius does not openly accuse Julian, a noble ruler, a fierce warrior and the protector of the empire, of offending divine justice, nevertheless the suggestion seems fairly explicit and acceptable for anyone familiar with the traditional notions of moderation

[13] Menander's comment on "bad craftsmanship" (transl. Russell and Wilson, p. 93) refers to the encomium of an emperor (imperial speech), but both the monody and the funeral speech comprise elements of a praise and such an association seems at least partly justified (Men. 377). Menander says that the predecessors should be presented as admirable, yet less perfect than the present emperor. It is interesting to note that C.E.V. Nixon and B. Saylor Rodgers, in the introduction to their edition of *Latin Panegyrics*, claim that according to the rule the rivals of the praised ruler should be referred to with derogatory terms. The scholars also observe that the former rulers are rarely mentioned, and usually in comparisons, see: Nixon, Saylor Rodgers 1994: 25. Libanius, while speaking about Julian's predecessor, seems to be close to the deprecation of a rival. In the *Funeral Speech* Libanius uses less offensive language, but still his image of Constantine is far from flattering. The comparison between Julian and Constantine is based on sharp contrast: good – bad commander (§§26, 210). On the image of the perfect commander in Latin panegyrics, see: Szopa 2015.

and restraint. It would be nothing new to see a great warrior and leader who in his pursuit of glory, even when acting as a tool of divine wrath, crossed the line and put himself in danger. The interpretation, however tempting, is barely touched upon by Libanius, who does not develop this line of argument.[14] In paragraph 23 the orator emphasizes Julian's zeal: the emperor rushed to bring order among his marching troops and did not spare time to put on his armour. This remark is not necessarily connected with the theory presented above; my general impression is that Libanius, with no coherent theory at hand, considers different options and interpretations of what happened. The question of divine intervention (or rather, its absence) remains a recurring theme: gods saved other heroes, although they did not always deserve it, and it is hard to understand why they chose not to act in the case of Julian (§24). Considering all that has already been said, this question may reflect genuine distress of the author. Libanius could not give it up in the *Funeral Speech*, although in this impressive, long, oration, he approaches it with much more moderation.

The *Funeral Speech*, as the genre requires, comprises an elaborated encomium of Julian, composed according to the scheme known form the Menander's treatise. After a customary remark concerning the inefficiency of words, which would never match the greatness of the subject, Libanius describes Julian's family, life, accomplishments and actions providing an image of an extremely talented man, a great military commander beloved by the soldiers for his courage, a friend of philosophers, fond of wisdom and rhetoric and a religious man favoured by gods for his pity. Emphasizing the last topic was in accord with convention and most probably also with the orator's own conviction, but presented an even more difficult task, than in the *Monody*, since Libanius had to discuss Julian's political and military victories at greater length. Divine support would be a natural condition of such a successful career, but it would make the explanation of the ruler's sudden death more demanding, especially that Libanius tries to persuade his audience that the gods bestowed upon Julian extraordinary favours: they not only supported his claim to the throne (§103), showed heir goodwill during his campaigns (§§40, 252), but also saved him by revealing to him a conspiracy

[14] On the lack of coherent theological explanation see also Wiemer 1995: 260.

against him (§§102, 162), and came in person to talk to him (§172).[15] This time Libanius does not suggest Julian's responsibility for the end of his life: instead of considering the emperor's lack of moderation in inflicting punishments on the Persians, the orator refers to a change of fortune (§267) and the decrees of fate (§298). Julian had brought to the empire a few years of prosperity and happiness by curbing the process of degeneration (§298), and now he took the rightful place among immortal gods (§§296, 304). The lament and a long sequence of rhetorical questions, which this time are really left without an answer, add to the general pathos of the speech, but provide no explanation of the inconsistency of divine plans. Employing the conventional notion of fate is certainly a reasonable choice; it offers an acceptable option for a religious man and puts an end to the discussion, since one cannot argue with fate. Nevertheless, the need to understand and explain was too strong; the orator gave up the search for an explanation of the role of the divine factor and shifted his attention to the more rational sphere instead.

In the *Monody* Libanius described the joy of Julian's enemies and put special emphasis on the Christian reaction to the emperor's death (§7). In the *Funeral Speech* he makes another step: inclined to accept the theory of an internal conspiracy leading to murder he suggests that this act of treason was concocted by the Christians (§274–275).[16] Such an explanation would leave Julian's name intact and put the blame on the traitors among his own men. I believe that the change in the way Libanius explained the death of his beloved emperor is not unimportant. It shows

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[15] The individual piety of a hero and divine support belong to the most conventional topics of an encomium, e.g. *Genethliacus of Maximian Augustus* (§6, 11), *Panegyric of Constantius* (§17), *Panegyric of Constantine* (§7) (see: Nixon, Saylor Rodgers 1994), but divine intervention to prevent a conspiracy, or personal conversation with a god seem to be much less frequent. Similar examples of such extraordinary favours are to be found in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*: in the book Eusebius describes the famous sign of the Cross in Constantine's vision (§28–29) and the discovery of a plot, revealed to the emperor by God himself (§47). Libanius knew Eusebius's work, but it is regarded as a point of reference for the panegyric on the emperors Constantius II and Constans, not for the *Funeral Speech* dedicated to Julian. On Libanius' employment of *Vita Constantini*, see Nesselrath 2014: 255.

[16] The rumour about Roman responsibility for the emperor's death is mentioned by Ammianus, although the historian calls it "unfounded" (XXV 6, 6), and the alleged responsibility of the Christians is discussed by Sozomen (VI 2).

that the orator did not cease to think about the issue and, although he was not able to develop any coherent theory referring to divine powers, he at least adopted the hypothesis involving purely human factors, which seemed the most plausible to him at the moment. Before we classify these efforts as another rhetoric device, typical for the convention of the genre, we should remember that the orator could easily confine himself to traditional remarks on the inevitability of fate and cruel destiny. He was not obliged to offer any explanation at all, unless he considered it important. Libanius' personal commitment may be reflected by his efforts to understand Julian's lot. Providing any coherent and acceptable explanation might be equally important for the author and for the audience. Perhaps Libanius needs this explanation no less than his audience and he is the first addressee of his own persuasion. Whether his efforts produce the desired outcome, remains open to question, but even an unsatisfactory result does not necessarily undermine Libanius' sincerity. I would be even inclined to suggest that a certain degree of helplessness and inconsistency demonstrated by the orator in seeking explanation for Julian's regrettable death indicates genuine confusion and suggests that Libanius' rhetorical fluency, erudition and strong attachment to the classical form do not exclude true emotions.

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