CHAPTER 1

The Social Role and Place of Literature in the Fourth Century AD

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Interest in the literature of Late Antiquity has lagged somewhat behind in comparison with the boom in late antique history. More work has appeared recently, but, understandably in a field where some basic work still needs to be done, most of this has been in the field of editions, translation, and stylistic analysis. Much of current scholarship on late antique literature therefore remains focused on exploring strictly literary issues, i.e. what a text means and what tropes it uses, at best in relationship with earlier, classical literature. The difference between the Second and the so-called ‘Third Sophistic’ is often assumed to be that in Late Antiquity, literature lost its social prominence and retreated into the school and the private reading room: the third century marks the break between the vibrant Second Sophistic and its arid successor.1 This volume starts out from the hypothesis that these perceived differences should be attributed less to a fundamental and sudden change in the role of literature than to different scholarly methodologies with which texts from the second and the fourth century are being studied.2

1 Late Antique Literature: Continuity and Discontinuity

As a booming field, the study of Late Antiquity still defines itself in opposition to older visions of a general, political and cultural, decline of the ancient

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world after 250 AD. Such views were generated by the idealization of the classical, especially in the nineteenth century, and were transmitted through an education that tended to focus on a strict canon of authors: Plato not Plotinus, Demosthenes not Libanius, Tacitus not Ammianus. Whereas the label of decline was also applied to other post-classical periods, such as the Hellenistic Period, it has stuck the longest to Late Antiquity. The profound political and religious changes after 300 AD undoubtedly contributed to a persistent emphasis on what separates the later ancient world from the preceding centuries, rather than on what unites both periods. Late antique rhetorical culture is, for example, still routinely characterized as one dominated by the school, in the sense that rhetoric was primarily performed there and hence lost its prominent role in wider society. This impression is sustained by the accidents of manuscript transmission, which makes that we possess an important number of rhetorical treatises and exercises from Late Antiquity, in contrast with the less abundant harvest for earlier periods. As a static and increasingly socially meaningless practice, late antique sophists are seen as giving way to the new artisans of the word, the bishops. Negative judgements abound on some of the typically late antique literary productions, such as historical epitomai, which have been derided as nothing but summaries for emperors whose grasp of classical history and culture was shaky at best.

It is interesting to note that similar negative judgments were, until a few decades ago, also commonly made about the Second Sophistic, a period now synonymous with the dynamic interaction of literature and society. Without

3 P. Wolf, Libanios: Autobiografische Schriften (Zürich, 1967), p. 12; E.J. Watts, City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria (Berkeley, 2006), p. 14 who speaks of a ‘self-sustaining culture’ through education. This impression is perpetuated by the numerous excellent studies of late antique schools and rhetoric: e.g. R. Cribiore, The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch (Princeton, 2007); R. Kaster, Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity (Berkeley, 1988); R.J. Penella, Greek Philosophers and Sophists in the Fourth Century AD: Studies in Eunapius of Sardis (Leeds, 1990); idem, The Private Orations of Themistius (Berkeley, 2000); idem, Man and the Word: The Orations of Himerius (Berkeley, 2007); idem, ed., Rhetorical Exercises from Late Antiquity: A Translation of Choricius of Gaza’s Preliminary Talks and Declamations (Cambridge, 2009).
