CHAPTER 8

The Constantinians’ Return to the West: Julian’s Depiction of Constantius II in Oration 1

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Introduction

Constantius II suffers from one of the most overtly hostile source traditions of any Roman emperor. One may consider this an unjust fate for a ruler who, during his long reign (second during the fourth century only to Constantine), made valiant attempts to consolidate the inheritance of his father by quashing usurpations and maintaining the boundaries of his Empire.1 His misfortune lies in the combination of his support for the losing side in a doctrinal dispute, and having a skilful and hostile propagandist as a successor. A host of authors from either side of the Mediterranean, both pagan and Christian, lined up to criticise him: Nicene bishops penned works of invective while he was alive,2 and Julian’s successful usurpation in 360 unleashed a wave of condemnatory texts that coloured the interpretations of secular historians for a generation following his death.3

It is an irony of Constantius’ reign (and source tradition), then, that the few positive depictions of him were composed by authors who would later be largely responsible for the creation of Constantius’ negative image: Julian and Libanius both addressed panegyrics to Constantius earlier in their careers, Libanius’ Oration 59 addresses both Constans and Constantius in the late 340s,

1 For a more rehabilitative interpretation of Constantius, see now Barceló 2004.
2 Namely Lucifer of Calaris, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Hilary of Poitiers, for whom see Flower 2013 and Flower 2016.
3 Julian’s most virulent propaganda may be observed in the Letter to the Athenians, one of four such texts sent to major cities of the Empire. Libanius swiftly followed his lead, and continued to defend Julian in anti-Constantian terms after his death (Orr. 17, 18, for which see now the overview given in Malosse 2014). Ammianus and Eunapius can both be placed in the ‘pro-Julianic’ and thus anti-Constantian camp. For Ammianus’ negative depiction of Constantius, see Whitby 1999. The fifth-century ecclesiastical historians are largely hostile on doctrinal grounds. Two more positive historiographic accounts are presented by Aurelius Victor, who composed his work in the last days of Constantius’ reign, and the fifth-century Eunomian church historian Philostorgius.
and Julian’s *Orationes* 1 and 3 in the mid to late 350s. Modern scholarship’s reaction to this phenomenon has often been to excuse the content of Julian’s and Libanius’ speeches variously as insincere, composed out of compulsion, laden with hidden condemnatory messages, or re-written later. In comparison to Constantius, Julian has attracted more supporters in the modern era, to whom the idea that he was subservient or fawning towards his senior emperor has been unappealing. The ‘Apostate’ and rebel are retrojected onto the newly-promoted Caesar of the mid 350s, just as the staunchly pro-Julianic, Antiochene Libanius of the 360s is retrojected onto the itinerant sophist of the late 340s, who was buffeted from one teaching post to another through the jealousy of competitors or the intervention of Constantius himself.

Irrespective of the author’s sincerity, panegyric provided one of the most potent ways to create a textual depiction of an emperor in Late Antiquity. Unlike works of historiography, panegyric created contemporary images of living emperors. Those images could be disseminated in more than one way, in the initial oral/aural form, as performed oratory, but also through circulation as written text, reaching a much wider audience than those gathered round the emperor himself. Those images, of course, served an immediate purpose.

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4 I follow the numbering of Bidez 1932. Julian also composed a further panegyric to Constantius’ wife Eusebia (*Or. 2*). For its relationship with *Or. 1*, see now García Ruiz 2015.

5 For Julian’s concealed messages, hidden behind an overly formulaic approach to panegyric: Browning 1975, 74–5; Athanassiadi 1992, 61–2; Curta 1995; García Ruiz 2015; for compulsion, see Boulenger 1927, 22; re-writing Geffcken 1914, 42–8. MacCormack’s comment is typical of attitudes to Libanius: ‘His subject did not appeal to Libanius, as one may gather when comparing this panegyric to his very different speeches on Julian. Its sheer length and comprehensiveness make the oration on Constantius ii and Constans one of the least convincing of panegyrics’. MacCormack 1981, 187. See also Seiler 1998.

6 For this view, see Tougher 2012, 19.

7 Libanius was driven out of Constantinople under a cloud of accusations of sexual misconduct in 343 (*Eun. Vit. Soph. 495*), but was subsequently appointed to the chair of rhetoric by imperial command in 349 (*Lib. Or. 1, 74*). He spent the intervening years in Nicaea and Nicomedia. See Van Hoof 2011 for Libanius’ careful presentation of his ‘career moves’ in *Or. 1*, which creates a more coherent *curriculum* than may actually have been the case. It is worth noting that Libanius revises his view of Constantius once his pro-Julianic fervour of the 360s has abated. Constantius is no longer the foil of Julian in *On Avenging Julian* (*Or. 24*, addressed to Theodosius in 379) and is held up as an *exemplum* of moderate rule in *Or. 19,47–8* (to Theodosius in 387).


9 On the sending of speeches: Libanius *Ep. 434* and *Ep. 1439* (speeches by Themistius), and Cribiore 2013, 79–89.