THE *PROGYMNASMATA* AS PRACTICE*

Ruth Webb

Introduction

As their name suggests, the *progymnasmata* were a series of preliminary exercises in composition which were a prelude to the study of rhetoric, that is, to the dominant form of education available to the elites from the Hellenistic period to the end of antiquity and beyond. The type of individual this education produced is perhaps epitomised by the heroes of the Second Sophistic as portrayed by Philostratos in the *Lives of the Sophists*: relentlessly eloquent, able to compose a declamation on any theme, often at a moment’s notice, thoroughly imbued with the classical past. The period defined by Philostratos represents the high point of this education, the point at which an educational practice came close to being a form of (relatively) popular entertainment. But the education itself both preceded and survived the Second Sophistic. Its workings can be gleaned from the distinctly less glamorous rhetorical handbooks, including *progymnasmata*, composed under the Empire which take us behind the sophist stage and reveal some of the underpinnings of the sophists’ art, and of ancient rhetorical education in general.

The *progymnasmata* ranged from the simple retelling of an episode from mythology, to the discussion of some witty or moralising anecdote or a fully elaborated argument for or against a proposition like ‘one should marry’. They formed the transition from the study of grammar and the reading of texts—the domain of the grammarian—to writing and speaking. The poets were the raw material for many of the exercises, which demanded that the student make active use of the grammatical and other knowledge acquired in the earlier stages and, most importantly, begin to write and to perform his own compositions.

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The progymnasmata were therefore crucial in laying the foundations for elite discourse, and must have helped to inculcate certain modes of thinking about language, about the classical texts which served as models, and about the relation of the individual to those texts and to language in general. At this moment of transition the students’ souls were still conceived as soft and malleable. The authors of the handbooks use images of shaping, or imprinting students, whether they are speaking of teaching rhetorical techniques or morally edifying fables.¹ They are therefore most interesting to us when seen in this light, as part of a wider process of formation of the rhetorically literate individual, and if we look at the surviving handbooks not as sets of rigid ‘rules’ or definitions of fixed types of discourse,² but as the archaeological remains of part of a broader educational process.

The relation of the progymnasmata to the more advanced stages of the curriculum, like declamation and epideictic, and thus to full-scale, adult oratory, is therefore a complex one.³ In some cases, the progymnasmata might represent ready-made parts of a longer discourse to be memorised then cut and pasted in at will.⁴ Ancient critics certainly complain about this practice.⁵ But the relation of part to whole is by no means the only or even the most important way in which the progymnasmata could be reflected in a finished composition. The preliminary exercises furnished speakers with a store of techniques of presentation and argumentation, with flexible patterns on which to model their own compositions, and a set of common narratives, personae and values to appeal to. When authors of more advanced treatises appeal to their readers’ knowledge of the progymnasmata, their words suggest that they saw the exercise as a source of techniques

¹ See for example Theon, Progymnasmata, 61.32–3; ps.-Hermogenes, Progymnasmata 1.3–5. On the image of education as moulding see Morgan (1998) 259–60, Plutarch, Moralia 3 E.
² Baldwin (1928) 38 caricatured the progymnasmata as follows: ‘Arid, impersonal as arithmetic, pedantically over-classified, sometimes inconsistent, these rules are nevertheless illuminating. They expose sophistic oratory. The patterns set forth for boys are recognizably the patterns of the public oratory of men.’
³ On declamation, see Kaster in this volume, Kennedy (1983) and Heath (1995); on epideictic see Pernot (1993); Russell (1998).
⁴ Baldwin (1928) 18 conceives the relation of progymnasma to finished speech as follows: ‘Apparently a boy could carry this peacock [composed as an example of the exercise of ekphrasis] from school to the platform and continue to use it with merely verbal variations’.
⁵ Quintilian complains of the insertion of ready-made common places at Institutio oratoria 2.4.28–9. Ps.-Dionysios of Halicarnassus, On Mistakes in Declamation, 372 and 370.3–12 criticises misplaced ekphrasis, and over-lengthy, irrelevant narrations.