

Raffaella Cribiore:

The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch

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Libanius, who held an official teaching post in his native Antioch for almost 40 years in the second half of the fourth century AD, was one of the most distinguished teachers of rhetoric of his time. The corpus of surviving works is intimidating in scale (Förster's Teubner edition spans twelve volumes) and has long been recognised as an important source for late ancient social history. It also has rich potential as a source of evidence for the practice of rhetorical education in this period. In part, this evidence is provided by specifically pedagogical compositions: a large collection of model progymnasmata; many declamations, demonstrating more advanced school exercises; and introductions to Demosthenes' speeches. But, in addition, the autobiographical *Oration 1* tells us much about Libanius's career as student and teacher; many of his other speeches deal with school issues; and so, inevitably, do many of the 1544 letters surviving from his extensive personal correspondence. This large and varied corpus has been much less exploited than one might have expected. Paul Petit's *Les Étudiants de Libanius* (1956) was a landmark study, but deeply flawed by misconceptions about the organisation of ancient schooling and the structure of courses in rhetoric. Anyone familiar with Raffaella Cribiore's earlier work on ancient education, and especially her outstanding *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (2001), will know how well qualified she is to take up the challenge. "When I was writing about Greek education in Egypt [...], I looked for an ancient writer against whom I could test some of the ideas that the papyri suggested. It soon became apparent that Libanius was ideal" (p. ix). The present book is not only a natural progression from its predecessor but also inherits that work's substantial merits: it is clearly written and accessible; well informed; it is firmly grounded in the primary sources; and it unquestionably breaks new ground.

Two introductory chapters help non-specialist readers orient themselves. The first ("Libanius and rhetoric in Antioch", pp. 13-41) outlines what is known about Libanius's life, and tries to give a sketch of his character. Here we must take note of a fundamental problem in reading this author. Cribiore believes that "most ancient writers did not disclose themselves with the same intensity" as Libanius (p. 22). But I wonder whether it would not be truer (it would certainly be more circumspect) to say that they do not display such skill in projecting images of themselves. The chameleon-like variability of the images which Libanius projects may make more sense if we bear in mind that he was a professional rhetorician, that his declamations display a positive genius for fictitious characterisation, and that contemporaries already remarked on his extraordinary all-things-to-all-men adaptability (cf. Eunapius, *Lives of the Sophists*, p. 495f.). "What was Libanius really like?" (p. 15) is a dangerous question to pose to the writings of such a man.

From Libanius, Cribiore proceeds to the city of Antioch and its rhetorical schools, and then (in chapter 2, "Schools and sophists in the Roman East", pp. 42-82) to a broader survey of schools and sophists in the Roman East. Here, of course, such major centres as Athens and Constantinople provide most of our evidence, but Cribiore is careful to acknowledge the less

well-attested labours of teachers in smaller cities throughout the eastern provinces. The case of Alexandria illustrates the problems we face in forming an adequate picture of what was going on beyond the patches of illumination provided by our very incomplete sources. Cribiore follows the standard view that rhetoric in Alexandria declined in the Roman period (p. 78). That may be true, but we should be aware that the patchiness of our evidence leaves us prey to illusions. In the following century Alexandria was certainly an important centre of rhetorical education: does that reflect recovery from decline, or the continuation of an unbroken, though poorly attested, tradition? Cribiore does not mention Athanasius, an influential Alexandrian sophist of (probably) the late fourth century. He wrote a commentary on Hermogenes that influenced the surviving scholia, and he is cited in the scholia to Demosthenes and Aristides. Should we see him as a representative of the continuing tradition, or was he a catalyst for revival? We have no way of telling.

Chapter 3, "The Network" (pp. 83-110), is concerned with the establishment and promotion of a sophist's school, covering the public display and assessment of an aspirant rhetor's abilities; the role of official support; the intense competition between sophists; and the means by which students were recruited. Particular emphasis is placed on the importance of a sophist's network of friends and former pupils as agents of student recruitment; in this connection there is an admirable discussion of the correspondence between Libanius and his former pupil Basil of Caesarea.

The remaining chapters track a student's experience from his arrival in Libanius's school through to the completion of his studies, and beyond. Chapter 4 ("Admission and evaluation", pp. 110-136), studies the admission and evaluation of new students. Chapters 5 ("Teaching the *logoi*", pp. 136-173) and 6 ("The long and the short paths to rhetoric", pp. 174-196) are concerned with aspects of the study of rhetoric (I shall return to these below). Chapter 7, "After rhetoric" (pp. 197-228), looks at the student's progress beyond the school, including the role of the teacher's recommendations and of interviews in appointments, and the relationship between rhetoric and students' subsequent careers. This last point raises questions about the competition which rhetoric suffered from other subjects, such as shorthand, Latin, and law. Here we confront once more the difficulty of pinning down the 'real' Libanius. Cribiore speaks at one point of "his conviction that the studies of law and rhetoric were mutually exclusive" (p. 218); yet he was willing to write letters of recommendation for students going on to law school, and the claims he makes about a former student's mastery of both disciplines are not compatible with mutual exclusion (*Ep.* 339). One possibility is that the real Libanius changed his mind, perhaps in response to changes in the social environment that made rhetoric a less attractive career path and therefore more vulnerable to the encroachment of rival disciplines (although, to the extent that Libanius himself is the evidence for such changes, we risk arguing in a circle). Or perhaps he concealed his real conviction when writing a letter of recommendation. But if we find that Libanius, though not always saying the same thing, always says what is appropriate to the occasion, then the question of his real convictions becomes opaque. What a rhetorician says when maintaining the status of his own profession will of course be different from what he says when writing letters of recommendation, just as what he says when speaking for the prosecution will be different from what he would have said if retained as the defendant's advocate. Cribiore is well aware of the relevance of generic and situational factors, and of the risk that the uneven chronological distribution of letters and speeches may create an illusion of personal change over time (pp. 5-8 and 212), but I feel that she remains too much committed to the hope that Libanius's convictions, like his character, can be divined from his writings.

An appendix (pp. 233-321) translates 206 student-related letters (Cribiore's selection complements those in Norman 1992 and Bradbury 2004). This is a particularly valuable enhancement of the book's usefulness, since it gives readers access to many of the primary texts on which her arguments are based – and this assistance will be welcome even to readers with a good knowledge of Greek, since Libanius's letter-writing style, full of artifice and allusion, is by no means easy. The academic evaluations in his letters of recommendation illustrate the problem. They are likely to strike a modern reader as too vague and formulaic to be usefully informative of anything but the fact of Libanius's personal patronage. That impression is dispelled by Cribiore's very effective demonstration of how they would have communicated to their rhetorically trained addressees (pp. 217-225). (There is also a good discussion of the teaching of letter writing in rhetorical training on pp. 169-173.)

Cribiore says that Libanius's students "were the products of a rather uniform system of education that proceeded along mandatory tracks" (p. 122), and describes the rhetorical curriculum itself as "an unchangeable entity outside of a teacher's influence [...] truly an obligatory course, in every place where rhetoric was taught" (p. 147). These claims are puzzling. It is not just that they are, in my view, false (comparison of technical writings on rhetoric from different periods shows that the content of rhetorical education evolved over time, and innovation was a source of pride to many of the technical writers; cf. Heath 2004, p. 234f.). The real puzzle is that Cribiore herself contradicts her claims. She acknowledges the possibility of innovation in Libanius's own teaching methods (p. 5), and suggests that his unusual "scholastic cursus" was not as eccentric as is usually thought: "there were no strict rules governing schooling" (p. 31). Moreover, she argues at length in Chapter 6 for the existence of "two different educational tracks" (p. 174) in rhetorical schooling and for the great variability of the length of time that Libanius's pupils studied with him. On this last point, she is certainly correct; and I entirely agree that there was diversity and flexibility in the provision of rhetorical training (cf. Heath 2004, pp. 228-233 and 321-331). But the case is not strengthened by invoking Lucian's "teacher of rhetoric" (pp. 174-176; see also Cribiore 2007). The teacher of rhetoric in Lucian's savage (and, if one accepts that the target is Pollux, highly personalised) invective explains how to become a counterfeit sophist: neither the ludicrous incompetence of your displays of improvised declamation (18), nor your consistent failure as an advocate (25), will damage your reputation if you learn how to over-awe the gullible with the superficial mannerisms of a celebrity virtuoso performer. What is offered here is not an abbreviated version of the lengthy traditional course in rhetoric, capable of equipping competent advocates, but a way to bypass that course entirely, aping the sophist's external show without acquiring any of his underlying expertise. That is certainly not what Libanius offered those students who studied with him only for a year or two! Better support for Cribiore's thesis might be found in Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius* 6.36, which recommends a course in 'marketplace' rhetoric as a quick and easy substitute for someone who has missed out on the conventional academic course of study with philosophers and sophists. But since this is an alternative to, not an abbreviation of, attendance at a sophist's school, it is unlikely to have been exactly what Libanius offered. Cribiore's argument should in my view have gone further: the student of rhetoric had a choice, not between a long path and a short one, but between *multiple* paths, differing in kind as well as length.

More generally, though Cribiore is excellent on the personal, social, and organisational aspects of rhetorical education, her handling of the content and structure of the rhetorical curriculum is less assured. She says, for example, that "it is notable that [Libanius's] declamations do not bear many traces of the theory of Hermogenes" (p. 155). My own analyses of *Declamations* 44 and 36 suggest a different view (cf. Heath 1995, pp. 156-160 and 194-197). Unfortunately, Cribiore

does not explain the basis on which she reached her conclusion, making the disagreement hard to diagnose or resolve.¹ Two examples concerned with progymnasmata are indicative of a certain fragility in the grasp of rhetorical technicalities. First, “the sophist Nicolaus expressed the general dismay that *encomion* was included among the *progymnasmata*, since it was complete in itself and belonged to the panegyric type of oratory” (p. 146). I know of no evidence for “general dismay” on this point; there is certainly no dismay in the passage of Nicolaus that is cited – it simply introduces an explanation of encomium’s inclusion among the progymnasmata. Nicolaus’s distinction between the limited progymnasmatic encomium and the specialised, differentiated forms that constituted panegyric oratory proper is important (47.5-11; cf. Theon 61.20-8). Second, “Theon calls refutation *antirrhesis*” (p. 149). In Theon’s system of progymnasmata, the exercises of refutation and confirmation are introduced later in the sequence than they are in more conventional programmes: first come anecdote, fable, narrative, and *topos*; then exercises in exposition and amplification; then the refutation and confirmation of anecdote, fable, and narrative; these prepare the way for the inherently disputatory exercises of thesis and law. *Antirrhesis* is one of several exercises that run alongside this modified conventional sequence. Though Theon is vague about the point at which students should be introduced to *antirrhesis* (65.22-5), he clearly regards it as an exercise distinct from the application of refutation to the more elementary exercises. The nature of the distinction is indicated by his description (partially preserved in Greek in the indirect tradition, but more fully in the Armenian translation)² of how a student’s engagement with *antirrhesis* should progress – responding first to individual *epicheiremata*, then to whole heads of argument, then to the narrative, so that one builds up towards the *antirrhesis* to an entire speech. Even though Theon controversially classed *antirrhesis* as a progymnasma, he would have agreed with Nicolaus (34.4-21) that the equation of *antirrhesis* with refutation is a blunder. (The fact that Theon fits so neatly into a debate about the status of *antirrhesis* and its bearing on the classification of Aristides *On the Four* that is known to have been conducted in the late fourth and fifth centuries, is one of many pieces of evidence that point to a fifth-century date for Theon: Cribiore (p. 144, n. 39) asserts a first-century date without discussion. See Heath 2002/3 for further examination of these matters.)

There are, inevitably, points of detailed interpretation on which I disagree with Cribiore. I have suggested that in *Ep.* 1066.2, a passage which Cribiore takes as evidence that students might be asked “to read and act a play” in Libanius’s classroom, “drama” is used metaphorically (cf. Heath 2004, p. 239). This word is used metaphorically in Libanius more often than Cribiore’s response allows (p. 165, n. 153, “only once”: but as well as *Ep.* 722.3 see *Or.* 24.24; *Decl.* 23.70, 29.24, 46.20; *Top.* 7.1; and *Ethop.* 15.1), and here the metaphor seems to me to be a very easy one. The reading of speeches in class was expected to be expressive and accompanied by appropriate gestures; students chosen to read would be acting out the role of the speaker. Theon’s description of the exercise of reading (again preserved only in the Armenian version) emphasises this element, with comparison to the technique of a tragic actor (see also Longinus

¹ Readers will, I hope, be astonished by the suggestion that Hermogenes was the main source for Quintilian’s reading list (p. 158, n. 111): Cribiore cites Ian Rutherford, who of course referred to Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Equally astonishing is the attribution to Steven Jay Gould of the proposition “that human beings are genetically indistinguishable” (p. 129): in the book cited, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996 (1981)), Gould argues that there are no behaviourally significant genetic differences between human groups, and points out that genetic variation within groups is much greater than between-group variation. The ancient nature/nurture discussions to which Cribiore refers are concerned with within-group variance.

² *RG* 7.2, 1206.12-1207.8 Walz; for the Armenian (with a French translation), see Patillon and Bolognesi 1997.

F48.398-402 Patillon-Brisson = 196.2-5 Spengel-Hammer). In *Or.* 34.16f. Libanius's response to a student's complaint is so cryptic that certainty about its meaning may be beyond our grasp; but Cribiore's interpretation fails to account for the evidence: "the whole group included at that level read texts with an assistant" (p. 149, n. 47) neglects Libanius's clear statement that the other students who would have made up such a group were not available (*hoi d' ouk ephainonto*, 3.198.20f.).³ So I am inclined to stay with my "unnecessarily complicated" interpretation (cf. Heath 2004, p. 240). On the other hand, Cribiore is undoubtedly right to reject my interpretation of *Ep.* 894 (p. 152, n. 53, against Heath 2004, p. 240).

I have found fault with Cribiore's treatment of technical matters. But these, it must be emphasised, are unfamiliar ground, on which most scholars would stumble. That is regrettable: there is no short path to an adequate understanding of late ancient rhetorical education and practice that bypasses understanding of its technical basis. In other matters, however, I have learned much from Cribiore's book and have been encouraged to find that in approaching this difficult and still incompletely mapped territory from our different perspectives we have been able to reach convergent conclusions on so many points. With this book, Cribiore has made another excellent contribution to opening up an important and neglected subject.

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³ Norman's translation (2000) omits this phrase, presumably by an oversight: there are no text-critical grounds for doubting its authenticity.

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