

PHILOSOPHY AT THE FESTIVAL: THE FESTIVAL ORATIONS OF GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION. By MacDougall, Byron. *Mnemosyne Supplements* 461; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022.

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This fine monograph on Gregory Nazianzen's *Festal Orations* is a valuable addition to scholarship on Gregory Nazianzen, and to scholarship on the relationship between Christianity and Greek *paideia* in Late Antiquity more broadly. In this book, Byron MacDougall seeks to show that Gregory's *Festal Orations* belong to a longstanding Greek tradition of 'performing philosophy' in a festival setting. According to MacDougall, 'Gregory's project in these orations is to "philosophize", to perform philosophy at the festival" (p.57), and as such he crafts his orations in a manner that reflects the 'conventions, generic marks, and wider literary concerns' (p.2) of this tradition in a manner that would have been easily recognisable to the well-educated members of his audience (the *pepaidoumenoi*) who were 'shareholders in the cultural enterprise of *paideia* (p.3). By analysing these orations in light of this tradition, MacDougall invites the reader to understand how these orations would have been heard by their audiences in their original festival context, while also highlighting Gregory's skill as a practitioner of philosophical rhetoric. This analysis of Gregory's *Festal Orations* also serves a broader purpose, namely, to show that 'the performance of philosophy at festivals constitutes one of the major points of continuity between non-Christian festival culture and the performative contexts of the Christian homily.' (p.143).

MacDougall makes his case convincingly in six chapters. Chapters 1-2 lay the groundwork by setting out the role of the rhetor in non-Christian festival culture as one in which rhetors were expected to 'perform philosophy' for their audience. Chapter 1 explores the way rhetors presented themselves as offering up a sacrifice or gift of *logoi* on behalf of the festival spectators, and shows that Gregory presents himself as conforming to these longstanding expectations about the role of a rhetor at a festival by presenting his orations in the same terms. Chapter 2 delves further into this tradition by looking at how rhetors took festal orations as the occasion for the public 'performance' of philosophy. In particular, MacDougall draws out the ways in which rhetors used their speeches as a means of leading their audiences into the contemplation (*theoria*) of divine realities which paralleled their spectatorship (*theoria*) of the festival's visible spectacles.

Chapters 3-5 form the central core of the book's argument and offer a close analysis of Gregory's *Festal Orations* in light of the tradition set out in chapters 1-2. Chapter 3 does this through a close analysis of the *prooemia* of Gregory's orations, showing how Gregory uses these *prooemia* to prefigure the oration's key themes and to direct the audience's attention from visible realities to invisible realities, 'from ritual spectatorship of the festival itself and of related texts and images to the contemplation of theological mysteries' (p.63). Next, chapter 4 explores Gregory's treatment of the process of purification-contemplation-deification in the *Festal Orations*, again situating Gregory's discourse within a broader tradition of philosophical rhetoric. By incorporating these motifs into his *Festal Orations*, Gregory (like other practitioners of philosophical rhetoric before him) uses the festival oration as a means of purifying his listeners so as to prepare them for contemplation and deification, thereby performing for the *pepaidoumenoi* in his audience 'the same philosophical culture that they knew from their time in the classroom' (p.105). Chapter 5 continues with the theme of contemplation by looking at Gregory's use of *ekphrasis* as a means of inducing his audience to engage in *theoria*. For Gregory, one of the important goals of festival discourse is to produce

‘mental images’ (*phantasmata*) in the minds of his listeners through use of ‘vivid’ (*enargēs*) descriptions and narratives. MacDougall examines Gregory’s efforts to attain this goal by analysing of his use of *ekphrasis* in *Or.* 41 and 44, showing that Gregory uses *ekphrasis* of visible phenomena as a means of guiding his audience towards contemplation of their spiritual counterparts. In analysing Gregory’s use of *ekphrasis*, MacDougall once again illustrates the continuities between Gregory’s approach to preaching at Christian festivals with the prior tradition of festival oration, in which ‘the contemplation of divine images is a key goal’ (p.120).

Chapter 6 rounds off MacDougall’s argument by analysing the reception of Gregory’s *Festal Orations* in Byzantium. MacDougall sensibly focusses on the reception of one specific passage – *Or.* 38.7 – in four Byzantine writers (Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, Andrew of Crete, and Photius of Constantinople). MacDougall chooses *Or.* 38.7 because it illustrates the continuities between Gregory’s approach to festival oration and prior non-Christian approaches, having previously argued in chapter 4 that this passage is a subtle re-working of Dio Chrysostom’s treatment of *theoria* in his ‘Olympic Discourse’ (*Or.* 12). MacDougall’s analysis of the reception history of this passage thus serves to illustrate a broader claim about the continuities between pagan and Christian festival oration, and Gregory’s role as a conduit linking these two traditions.

One of the great merits of this book is the way MacDougall contextualises Gregory’s use of philosophical sources in light of the Late Antique commentary tradition and of the tradition of philosophical rhetoric at festivals. Gregory’s engagement with ancient philosophy, and in particular the writings of Plato, is well-worn ground. Nonetheless, MacDougall casts new light on this topic by showing how Gregory’s use of these texts is shaped by their later reception history. To give one example, in chapter 4 MacDougall convincingly argues that Gregory’s repeated allusions to Plato’s *Phaed.* 67b2 (‘it is not permitted for the impure to touch the pure’) reflects the use of this text in Late Antique commentaries on the works of Aristotle, in which Plato’s words are taken as setting out the pre-requisites for the student who wishes to study the Aristotle’s writings. In this context, the Platonic maxim comes to be associated specifically with concerns regarding the practice of philosophical exegesis. It is these concerns which inform Gregory’s allusion to this maxim in *Or.* 27.3 and *Or.* 39.9, where he is concerned with the question of the spiritual qualifications of the scriptural exegete.

While MacDougall makes a compelling case for the continuities between the pre-Christian tradition of festival rhetoric and Gregory’s ‘performance’ of philosophy in his *Festal Orations*, this reviewer was left wondering what, if anything, is distinctly Christian about Gregory’s approach to preaching philosophy. To take one example, MacDougall presents Gregory’s frequent use of the language of ‘deification’ as part of the ‘universal grammar’ shared by pagan and Christian philosophers alike, which saw ‘assimilation to God’ as the goal of the philosophical life. Yet, while Gregory does allude to Plato’s famous remarks on assimilation to God in *Theat.* 176a, he almost entirely avoids the language of ‘assimilation’ (*homoiōsis*) even when alluding to this text, preferring instead the (by this stage thoroughly Christianised) vocabulary of ‘deification’ (*theosis/theopoiēsis*). A more proximate source for Gregory’s use of this language is Origen, whose portrayal of Moses in *Comm. Jn.* 32.338-9 as someone who was deified through contemplation doubtlessly lies behind Gregory’s frequent use of Moses as a paradigm of purification/contemplative ascent. While Origen’s account of deification does make use of a Platonic grammar of participation, it is equally indebted to biblical accounts of glorification before the divine presence. More attention to the way Gregory incorporates such Christian traditions and concerns into his performances of philosophy will further enrich the

illuminating picture MacDougall has painted in this book of Gregory as a practitioner of philosophical rhetoric *par excellence*.