

Zitierhinweis

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Simon Swain (ed. and tr.): Themistius and Valens. *Orations* 6–13. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2021 (Translated Texts for Historians 78). 416 p. £ 110.00/\$ 165.00. ISBN: 978-1-800-85677-6.

Themistius is – along with Libanius, Claudian, and, to a lesser extent, Symmachus – one of the bright lights of fourth century political oratory.¹ His significance, which we will discuss further in a moment, is hard to understate and he may reasonably be termed the single most important – and without question be termed the single most prolific – political orator of the entire late Roman period.² It is, therefore, an enormous failing of modern anglo-phone scholarship that only half of Themistius’ public orations have ever been translated into English. Simon Swain’s new book will help to redress that balance, offering translation of seven orations: Them. or. 6–13 (exempting or. 12 which has long been regarded as a bogus attribution). Of these speeches, four (or. 7, 9, 11, and 13) have never been translated and fifth only partially (or. 8). I have, therefore, been eagerly anticipating the publication of this book since I first caught wind of its existence in the middle of the last decade, and I am pleased to say that it does not disappoint.

The book is the seventy eighth instalment in Liverpool University’s ‘Translated Texts for Historians’ series, an inestimable project that aims to bring late antique and early medieval texts to a wider audience through translations (primarily of Latin and, as here, Greek, but with forays into Arabic, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Old Irish) and historical commentaries that are designed to be accessible and intelligible to a wider audience without compromising on academic rigour. Swain’s work fits this brief admirably, and it is a great victory to have these seven speeches now – finally – in English for those without the linguistic skills to tackle Themistius’ forbidding Greek or to read him in translation in another modern language (it is a sobering test

- 1 I do not claim Claudian is an orator, merely that his works are important to the history of fourth century oratory.
- 2 The distinction ‘political’ here is of course important. Themistius’ Christian counterparts were less directly influential in the world of high politics (though Eusebius of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan, and John Chrysostom certainly had their share of oratorical influence at the courts of their emperors). Nonetheless, the contribution of Christian oratory – in the form of homilies – to the corpus of surviving late Roman writings is prodigious.

of one's reading comprehension in any language to attempt to read Themistius in it).

First, Themistius. As stated in my introductory paragraph, his importance in the field of both late Roman oratory and late Roman politics is hard to overstate. A philosopher and philosopher's son, Themistius was born *c.* 317 and raised in Byzantium/Constantinople. From an early life as a teacher, he came to imperial notice after delivering – in 347, 350, or 351 – a speech to Constantius II in Ankyra, after which time he was admitted to the senate and began a glittering political career. Across this public career, spanning more than thirty years, Themistius delivered panegyrics to six emperors across a vastly varied range of occasions and contexts.³ Of these speeches, eighteen survive and a further two at least are known to have been delivered but are now lost, in addition to fifteen 'private' orations.⁴ An advisor and confidant of many of the emperors whom he praised, Themistius also spoke (in almost all instances) as a representative of the Constantinopolitan senate which he was himself so instrumental in helping to build to its full glory and status under Constantius II. His speeches thus promise not only a window into the workings of the imperial mind, but also a representation of the wants and needs of the Eastern senate, not to mention a subtle reworking of Themistius' persona to appeal to the different audiences before whom his speeches were delivered: a different job to praise the emperor amongst his generals (e.g. or. 10), before the senate in Constantinople (e.g. or. 7), or at Western court in Trier and senate in Rome (or. 13). Given that his eighteen orations are more-or-less evenly distributed across the period 350–384, they provide a detailed (if episodic and intermittent) record of the policies and ideology of (almost exclusively) Eastern emperors across a vast swathe of this important century.⁵ Themistius, in short, matters.

3 These were (in chronological order) Constantius II, Julian, Jovian, Valens, Gratian, and Theodosius. For the private orations, see R.J. Penella: *The Private Orations of Themistius*. Translated, Annotated, and Introduced. Berkeley, CA 2000 (*The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 29).

4 These are a speech to Julian for his fourth consulship in 363, mentioned by Libanius (epist. 818.3 and 1430) and to Valens in 375, condoling him on the death of his brother (Soz. hist. eccl. 4.32.3–4; 6.36–37.1).

5 The dating of the first oration is actually a matter of considerable dispute and I give, with 350, the date that I have favoured in the past (A. Omissi: *Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire: Civil War, Panegyric, and the Construction of Legitimacy*. Oxford 2018 [*Oxford Studies in Byzantium*], p. 167); 351, 347, and even

Swain is no stranger to Themistius, having in 2013 published “Themistius, Julian, and Greek Political Theory under Rome”⁶, itself a translation of a number of texts relating to the relationship between these two misaligned philosophers-turned-statesmen. In this new work, Swain has set for himself the task of translating *Oration*s 6–13, that is those of Themistius’ public panegyrics that were delivered under the emperor Valens. It is a shame not to see a full translation of *all* Themistius’ panegyrics, but Swain introduces each of his speeches with an introduction that usually equals if not exceeds the length of the speech itself and a volume tackling Themistius’ entire output, at such scale, would total more than a thousand pages. Given the complexity of Themistius’ messaging, the density of his style, and the considerable contextual knowledge that these speeches demand, each of these introductions is an invaluable piece, and there is a logic to this collection as it stands; Swain makes a good case (p. 55 and *passim*) that Valens marked the apex of Themistius’ career, and that the philosopher enjoyed with this emperor an intimacy and an influence that was unprecedented for him and that would not afterwards be repeated.

Though Swain’s translations are novel, his work does not exist in a vacuum, and he rightly acknowledges his debts (pp. 59–60). Foremost amongst these is the very detailed 1995 Italian edition, translation, and commentary of Riccardo Maisano⁷ and the likewise important 1998 German translation and commentary of Hartmut Leppin and Werner Portmann⁸. Maisano has clearly been an enormous aid to Swain, though he is not afraid to disagree with him on occasion (e.g. p. 167 n. 1; p. 241, n. 22; etc). In English, much ground-

342 have been offered as possibilities. On the very early date see A. Skinner: Violence at Constantinople in A.D. 341–2 and Themistius, *Oration* 1. In: JRS 105, 2015, pp. 234–249.

6 S. Swain: Themistius, Julian, and Greek Political Theory under Rome. Texts, Translations, and Studies of Four Key Works. Cambridge/New York 2013.

7 Themistio: Discorsi. A cura di R. Maisano. Turin 1995 (Classici greci).

8 Themistios: Staatsreden. Übersetzung, Einführung und Erläuterungen von H. Leppin und W. Portmann. Stuttgart 1998 (Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur 46).

work has also been laid within the Translated Texts series itself, with translations by John Matthews in 1991⁹ and by David Moncur in 2001¹⁰ (both augmented by the excellent historical commentary of Peter Heather) rendering or. 1, 3, 5–6, part of 8, 10, and 14–17 available in English. There are two important monographs – John Vanderspoel’s 1995 “Themistius and Imperial Court”¹¹ and Noel Lenski’s 2002 “Failure of Empire”¹² – which Swain naturally draws extensively upon.

The first sixty pages of the book constitute a general introduction both to Themistius and to these seven speeches. Here Swain established a number of important guiding principles of his study. The first is a very strong assertion of the fact that Themistius can, both in a number of very specific cases and in a more general sense, be seen as a mouthpiece for Valentinianic regime in the East. Valens (and his elder brother) were *novi homines* in a world that had been ruled by the Constantinians for seventy years and, so Swain argues, this required them to lean much more heavily on advisors than had their predecessors. Themistius, an intimate of Valens, might present himself as an independent philosopher lobbying his emperor on behalf of his city but – Swain is clear – the reality was that Themistius acted as a conduit through which the Latin-speaking Valens might repackage himself under the cloak of Greek philosophy for the elite of the East: “Themistius was in the service of the regime, close to it, and consulted by it [...] everything was prepared in consultation” (p. 13). Secondly, and related to this, Swain is keen to point out that Themistius sought a broad appeal, tailoring his messages to the audiences that would be present to hear them (he favours, for instance, the noun *philadelphia*; which Swain argues was rarely used outside of Christian contexts; pp. 27, 70). Thirdly and finally, Themistius is always present within his own speeches, and though Swain entertains no doubt about the fact that Valens was clearly providing Themistius with authorised talking-points – a

- 9 P. Heather/J. Matthews: *The Goths in the Fourth Century*. Liverpool 1991 (Translated Texts for Historians 11).
- 10 P. Heather/D. Moncur: *Politics, Philosophy and Empire in the Fourth Century. Select Orations of Themistius*. Liverpool 2001 (Translated Texts for Historians 36).
- 11 J. Vanderspoel: *Themistius and the Imperial Court. Oratory, Civic Duty, and Paideia from Constantius to Theodosius*. Ann Arbor, MI 1995.
- 12 N. Lenski: *Failure of Empire. Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century A.D.* Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles, CA/London 2002 (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 34).

claim which, though not uncontroversial, is justified at some length throughout the work – nonetheless Themistius made sure always to do it in such a way as to advertise his own preeminent position within the Eastern civil hierarchy.¹³

Though there are occasional moments when I raised a brow – the assertion that *Oratio* 13 had a Latin, pre-circulated version (p. 24) is not really evidenced, and I found myself desperate for a longer justification of the notion that the texts we possess today are precisely as Themistius delivered them (pp. 58–59) – in general I found this introduction a thoughtful and enlightening read. In particular, the way in which Swain complements his deep knowledge of Themistius and his work with a wealth of incidental detail drawn from other texts, especially making judicious use of the letters of Libanius and various of the Eastern church fathers to add both depth and colour to his account (e.g. pp. 24–27, 54, 103, 106, 259–260, etc). Equally, the way that we are treated to Themistius-on-Themistius is skilfully done, and insights from beyond the corpus of or. 6–13 are neatly deployed (insights on references to Valens in Themistius’ later orations, for instance, are subtle and nuanced; pp. 46–48).

Following the general introduction, the individual speeches are then presented chronologically, each with a sizeable introduction describing first date and occasion, then exploring the key themes of the speech, before concluding with a summary of the text. Each introduction seems designed to be a standalone piece (hence occasional repetitions, e.g. much of pp. 102–104 reappears at pp. 154–155), meaning that the putative reader is able to dip in to a particular chapter of the work without regard to the wider whole if only a given speech or speeches is of interest. The speeches (with Swain’s dates and a brief summary of his reading of them) are:

1. or. 6 (November 364) Themistius’ first address, presenting the new regime to the Eastern elite in the senate and introducing senators to the careful balancing act of a senior emperor in the West, but an emperor

13 In general, orators are not viewed simply as mouthpieces for the regime they serve (cf. for instance my own discussion at *Omissi* [note 4], pp. 54–59). Yet Themistius’s relationship to his emperors, in particular to Valens, was such and the nature of his statements on the direction of imperial policy both so confident and so well informed, that it seems reasonable to agree here with Swain (and with Heather before him) that Themistius *was* preparing his speeches in coordination, however this was managed, with the court itself.

on their doorstep who nonetheless remained their most important patron.

2. or. 7 (winter 366/367) delivered before the senate in the wake of the Procopian uprising in Constantinople and forcefully asserting Valens as both a beneficent protector of elite interests and a clement victor.
3. or. 8 (March 368) delivered at Marcianople for the start of Valens' quinquennial year and in the first year of a war with the Goths which had so far yielded no significant victories; it worked, like the previous oration, to present Valens as a careful and competent administrator who was rejuvenating the Empire's financial condition after the profligacy of the Constantinians.
4. or. 9 (1st January 369) a consular address at Marcianople for the infant Valentinianus (Valens' son) on his assumption of the consulship and the promise of his eventual imperial power (frustrated by the boy's early death the following year).
5. or. 10 (March 370) a speech at Constantinople presenting to the senate the peace that Valens had made with the Goths in the previous autumn and to account, in so doing, for the lack of any decisive military victory.
6. or. 11 (March 373) a decennial speech delivered at Antioch and confronted with the delicate task of praising an emperor currently ravaging the elite of that city with rapacious treason trials as well as the need to present yet another underwhelming conflict (this time with Persia) in favourable terms.
7. or. 13 (spring or early summer 377) delivered – so Swain argues – in the context of Themistius' rapid journey to Trier to consult with Gratian about the Gothic crisis; interesting, given that no direct reference to the crisis is detectable in the text and, so Swain, all conversations regarding it were reserved for behind closed doors (a bold and perhaps problematic claim). Regardless, Swain follows consensus in arguing that we have the Trier speech, with an extra conclusion written for when the speech was re-delivered before the Roman senate.

Throughout I found Swain's arguments about these speeches highly convincing and persuasive, and together they make a more-or-less joined narrative of Valens' reign and of Themistius' career. More generally, however, what impressed me about these introductions was both their variety and

depth. Each is an interesting and individual read and offers real insight into the historical context of the particular speech it accompanies and of the rhetorical strategies that Themistius is employing. These very varied contexts mean that one is treated to a wide range of material, all of it learned and well researched, whether it be the mechanisms of the imperial taxation system and Valens' own innovations within it in the introduction to or. 7 (pp. 155–160), on the form and evolution of Germanic political systems in the introduction to or. 10 (pp. 216–217), or on the sectarian divisions within fourth century Christianity in the introduction to or. 11 (pp. 266–271). Throughout, they are likewise peppered with interesting historiographic detail, such as the question of whether Themistius ever appears in the *res gestae* of Ammianus – so Swain, he does (pp. 262–263). Only once did I feel seriously short-changed: the erotic language of or. 13 strikes me as so odd that I think it deserves more explanation than it merits on pp. 315–316 (and previously, in brief, on p. 39).

In a review of work that is above all a translation, it is frustrating that I am not able to say more about the quality of the translation itself. I once read all of Themistius' orations (both in Greek and in German), but it was twelve years ago and a task that no earthly power could induce me to repeat. Other reviewers will, I hope, have more to say. What I *can* say is that the English is clear and fluent, and it renders the considerable complexity and the allusive quality of Themistius' prosody into English at once suitably elevated and yet perfectly intelligible. Commentary within the text is given via footnotes and is liberally indulged in, such that I never found myself looking for detail or clarification and being denied it. The footnotes also contain a wealth of insight into variant manuscript readings, which are given in the Greek alphabet, though Greek terminology taken from Themistius is elsewhere rendered in Latin characters.

Swain's arguments are not groundbreaking – we gain no dashing new image of Themistius from this work – but they are meticulously researched and refreshing to see combined with Themistius' own words. At times I found myself wishing that Swain made more effort to contrast the Themistian presentation with what can be gleaned from other sources; one comes away from reading this book with the sense that Valens was one of the more adept emperors of the late Roman period – a skilful administrator, a careful general, and adroit manager of the church – and this sense is hard to square with what we know of Valens reign from elsewhere. So long as the reader keeps

this in mind, however, and complements Swain with suitable historical material, this is no great loss, and it is Swain's object to help us understand Valens-via-Themistius, not Valens *in toto*.

Swain's work is part of the 'Translated Texts for Historians' series and it succeeds admirably as a member of that circle: light and clear enough that an undergraduate or amateur historian will be able to work easily with the material therein, dense and well-researched enough that any late Roman scholar will find within it nuggets of information that will be new to them. It is such a pleasure to finally have these orations available in such an accessible form and likewise to see something long-awaited come to fruition in such excellent shape. This is a fantastic book that offers the reader an easy and yet detailed and erudite overview of the subtle chains of policy, obligation, and ambition that bound Themistius to Valens and Valens to Themistius. In its careful appreciation of the way in which orator, object, and audience each interacted with one another throughout the prose of a skilled orator like Themistius, it also offers a clear and intelligible model for the role of panegyric and of political advisership in the late Roman autocracy, and of the way in which emperor and elites interacted. For anyone with an interest in Themistius, in Valens, or in the East Roman Empire in the mid fourth century, it is a must read.

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