

Aelius Aristides between Greece, Rome, and the Gods

Edited by

W.V. Harris
Brooke Holmes



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CHAPTER FOUR

ARISTIDES AND THE PANTOMIMES

G.W. BOWERSOCK

In 361 Libanius sent a letter to Demetrius of Tarsus to accompany the texts of two speeches he had recently written. In one of these he claims to have launched a polemic against Aelius Aristides: πρὸς Ἀριστείδην μάχομαι.¹ The sixty-fourth oration in the surviving corpus of Libanius seems to correspond with this description, and scholars are generally agreed that this is the work Libanius sent to Demetrius. It is a vigorous and lengthy assault on a lost speech of Aristides that had prudishly denounced the dancers known as pantomimes for corrupting their viewers.

The pantomimes were individual dancers of balletic virtuosity who in solo performances enacted familiar myths with the aid of masks, costumes, and music. They enjoyed enormous popularity throughout the Roman Empire, as did their more ordinary colleagues, the mimes, who spoke lines and acted together with one another. Both mimes and pantomimes were important transmitters of Hellenic mythology and culture. As some of the more austere Christian preachers complained, they appealed to a diverse audience and linked together persons of different religion and ethnic background in theatrical pleasure.²

Libanius confined himself exclusively to the pantomimes, who were the great virtuosi of the stage, although he says that Aristides had tried to denigrate them by linking them with the mimes.³ The debate between these two great sophists, two centuries apart, is full of paradox. In his austere preaching against corruption from watching lubricious entertainments, Aristides sounds more like a Father of the Christian church than the dedicated polytheist he was, the author of resplendent prose hymns to Olympian gods. Libanius, by contrast, espouses with

¹ Lib. *Epist.* 615 Foerster.

² See, for example, Moss 1935; Jacob of Sarug on the spectacles of the theater.

³ Lib. *Orat.* 64.10. Behr 1986, 416–419 (with notes on 501–503) presents excerpts from Libanius as probable fragments of Aristides' original speech.

particular warmth a form of entertainment that we know he openly disliked and avoided. Subsequently he even undertook to terminate it in his native city of Antioch. Furthermore, Aristides was, as he states explicitly and emphatically, an orator for whose achievement he had unbounded admiration.

If 361 was the date of the speech against Aristides, it would have fallen in the early part of the usurpation of the emperor Julian, whose cause Libanius strongly supported and whose memory he eloquently cultivated. Yet Julian, like Libanius, disliked the dancers.⁴ So how does it happen that Libanius took issue with an admired predecessor over an art-form for which neither he nor the apostate emperor had any sympathy? And why had Aristides himself shown such hatred for those popular mediators of Hellenism?

To be sure, arguing against an impeccable model such as Aristides would be in itself a feat of sophistic brilliance, and Libanius perhaps relished the challenge. He certainly managed to reduce Aristides' arguments to nonsense by showing that a few corrupt or effeminate performers could no more impugn the art of the pantomime than a murderous doctor could impugn the medical profession. Audiences are no more corrupted by what they see in the dances than they are by the vicious and bloody competitions of boxers and pancratiasts.⁵ Furthermore, Libanius asks, are the pantomimes more criminal than those who overturn altars, steal votive offerings, destroy shrines, and burn statues?⁶ This curious register of miscreants actually seems to allude to Christians, since pagans and Jews were not known to have committed misdeeds of that kind. Christians did indeed go on such rampages, conspicuously at Daphne, near Antioch, when Julian's brother, the Caesar Gallus, had undone the oracle of Apollo by importing into the temple precinct the earthly remains of St. Babylas. If the pagan Aristides in his puritanical mode of denouncing the pantomimes sounded rather like a Christian, it seems as if Libanius attacked him in his response almost as if he were.

To some extent, the Syrian origins of many famous dancers roused Libanius to defend himself as a Syrian. In his speech Aristides had been

⁴ Cf. Wiemer 1995, 69–71 (Die Rede 'Für die Tänzer').

⁵ For murderous doctors, Lib. *Orat.* 64. 44, for boxers and pancratiasts, *ibid.* 61 and 119. On the speech and its arguments see Mesk 1909 and Molloy 1996.

⁶ Lib. *Orat.* 64.33.

rude about Syrians.⁷ But, even so, the motivation for Libanius' curious defense of an entertainment he despised can only be left to speculation. Yet, with the help of his abundant references to Aristides' lost work and his occasional quotations from it, we can reasonably deduce the provocation that led Aristides himself to condemn the pantomimes. This deduction opens up issues of sophistic competition and jealousy—issues that we have long known were fundamental to the so-called Second Sophistic. Aristides' sense of his high calling as a rhetor did not easily accept any comparison with less grandiose professions. In his day the popularity of the pantomimes clearly vexed him.⁸ This paper seeks to find out why.

We know that Aristides' speech was addressed to the Spartans, although it is clear, from the citations and from Libanius' commentary, that he did not actually go to Sparta to deliver it.⁹ Libanius assumes that to some extent Aristides chose that city as his addressee in order to invoke the high-minded austerity of the legendary regime of Lycurgus. But, as Libanius points out, and Aristides himself must have been well aware, the Sparta of the second century AD was an utterly different place from the city of Lycurgus. Besides, as Libanius observes, Aristides himself had never declaimed by the banks of the Eurotas and therefore had no attachment to Sparta. So why did Aristides turn to that city, out of all those major cities that welcomed pantomimes, when he undertook to denounce them? Libanius offers a perceptive analysis: 'You claim to be giving advice to the Spartans alone because you know that the others would be annoyed by your speech. Where was it that you customarily worked up your numerous and splendid declamations? In what cities did you orate? Whose applause made you a star? I note that you did not choose Sparta as a workshop for your art, nor did you release your words to flow alongside the river Eurotas. But you used to go to the Hellespont, to Ionia, Pergamum, Smyrna, Ephesus, and to Egypt, the land which, as you say yourself, first brought forth the evil. You even went to Rome, where the dancing profession is highly esteemed'.¹⁰

This means that in declaiming about the pantomimes Aristides had deliberately chosen to avoid all the important cities where he had him-

⁷ Lib. *Orat.* 64.9.

⁸ For the whole topic, see the still fundamental study of Robert 1930.

⁹ Lib. *Orat.* 64.10–11, cf. 80.

¹⁰ Lib. *Orat.* 64.80.

self enjoyed great success—Pergamum, Smyrna, Ephesus, Rome itself. These were all places that cultivated and admired the pantomimes. And yet they admired Aristides too. In denouncing the tastes of the Spartans, Aristides would not be offending a constituency that had ardently supported him. He was safe with Sparta, since he had no connection with it. A master of rhetoric would have readily savored the potential of castigating the descendants of Lycurgus for watching pantomimes.

In his speech Aristides charged that pantomime dancing had changed over time for the worse, that by his day performers were little more than prostitutes on public view. He claimed that their sinuous, even contorted movement was an abomination that would lead viewers into bad habits.¹¹ It proved easy for Libanius to contest these assertions: in rhetoric itself, change and innovation over time was fruitful.¹² There were even paragons of virtue among the famous pantomimes, and no one was known to have become corrupt or criminal from watching a show.

Yet Aristides had inveighed against one of his sophistic rivals for using his rhetorical prowess in honor of a deceased pantomime, a famous dancer called Paris. According to Libanius, ‘Even the man who was once conspicuous among us with the same name as the ancient herdsman in whose presence the goddesses were judged for their beauty was so lamented on his bier by the sophist of Tyre... that no greater tribute could have been devised to honor a departed sophist. For he did in fact call the dancer precisely that. Did he choose to disgrace himself utterly by the encomium of a prostitute?’¹³ As scholars have readily perceived, that eulogist was none other than Aristides’s distinguished second-century contemporary, Hadrian of Tyre.¹⁴ It is obvious that Aristides had protested bitterly because his eminent rival had treated Paris just as if he were a deceased sophist and even called him that. As far as Aristides was concerned, Hadrian had sullied his reputation by an encomium of a whore.

This treatment of a pantomime as a sophist by the great rhetor whose reputation was at the time easily the equal of Aristides’ evidently

¹¹ Lib. *Orat.* 64.28 and 43 (πόρνοι).

¹² Lib. *Orat.* 64.22.

¹³ Lib. *Orat.* 64.41: ...ὥστ’ οὐκ οἶδ’ ὅ τι ἂν ἐζήτησε μείζον, εἰ σοφιστὴν οἰχόμενον ἐτίμα. ὅς γε καὶ τοῦτ’ αὐτὸ προσεπειν ἤξιωσε τὸν ὀρχηστήν. πάνυ γὰρ αὐτὸν εἴλετο καταρρυπαίνειν ἐν τοῖς ἐγκωμίοις τοῦ πόρνου.

¹⁴ *PIR*² H 4. See especially Philostr. *Vit. Soph.* 2.10 (pp. 585–590 Olearius).

opened up a deep vein of resentment, both against Hadrian of Tyre himself and against the whole profession of dancers, who appeared to be usurping the high prestige of public speakers. This appears to have been at least one of the sparks that ignited the flame of Aristides' rage against the pantomimes. In his view they were contemptible panders to public pleasure, and—worse still—were hailed as equal in artistic talent to sophists and rhetors. The case of Hadrian of Tyre's eulogy for the deceased Paris clearly reflected the heightened prestige of pantomimes in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and it was no less clearly this prestige that bothered Aristides.

During the reign of Lucius Verus, probably during his sojourn in Syrian Antioch, Lucian wrote a famous essay in defense of theatrical dancing.¹⁵ The authorship of this work, once doubted, has now been generally vindicated as authentically Lucianic, and the essay may well have been known to Libanius in writing his reply to Aristides. We have no way of telling whether it was known to Aristides himself and served as some kind of irritant, but Lucian's opinion was as positive as it was well informed. For the relation of pantomime to rhetoric, the essay provides precious testimony. In general, there were no competitions (*ἀγῶνες*) for pantomimes although the dancers performed a repertoire of tragic themes, and they were sometimes known as *τραγικοί*. But, says Lucian, there was one exception to the lack of thymelic crowns for them. In Italy there *were* competitions for dancers.¹⁶ We may surmise that this happened at the Sebasta in hellenophone Naples, and perhaps also at the Capitolia in Rome or the Eusebeia in Puteoli.

The conjunction of the word *tragic* with a pantomime is reinforced by Lucian's observation that tragedy and tragic dance were almost indistinguishable: αἱ ὑποθέσεις κοιναὶ ἀμφοτέροις, καὶ οὐδέν τι διακεκριμένα τῶν τραγικῶν αἱ ὀρχηστικαί, πλὴν ὅτι ποικιλώτεροι αὐταί ('The themes for both were the same, and the ones for dancers differed from tragedy only in that they were more ornamented'.) As Louis Robert demonstrated brilliantly in one of his earliest articles and one of his very few in German, the epigraphy of pantomimes in the later second century perfectly displays the technical diction of the trade.¹⁷

¹⁵ Lucian, *De Saltatione*. For an important discussion of this work see Jones 1986, 68–77 ('The court of Lucius Verus').

¹⁶ Lucian, *De Salt.* 31–32.

¹⁷ Robert 1930.

Let us observe some examples. The movement (κίνησις) of a dancer is regularly qualified as rhythmic (ἔνρυσθος or εὐρυσθος, both forms appear).¹⁸ It is also described as tragic (τραγική). On one inscription from Heraclea Pontica pantomime dancing appears as 'rhythmic tragedy' (τῆς ἐνρύθμου τραγωδίας στέφος), and a pantomime dancer can sometimes be called simply a τραγωδός.¹⁹ A dancer, such as the great Apolaustus or Paris of Apamea can be called an actor (ὑποκριτής), albeit one with rhythmic movement.²⁰ This technical language turns up significantly in Libanius in contexts that appear clearly to paraphrase or echo Aristides' original. There is a whole section on κίνησις, as well as a treatment of the dancer's gestures (νεύματα).²¹ Towards the end of his speech Libanius, probably echoing Aristides, calls the pantomimes τραγωδοί. It is evident that in his speech Aristides had resorted to the standard diction that was deployed in praise of the dancers of his day.

What the epigraphy also reveals, in addition to the characteristic language by which pantomimes were honored, is precious information about the place of pantomimes in the international ἀγῶνες of the Graeco-Roman world. It now appears that soon after Lucian wrote his essay on dancing the great agonistic festivals added dancing to the competitions. Rhetoric, poetry, kithara-playing, trumpet-playing had long since secured a firm place in the thymelic ἀγῶνες of the Roman empire, but, as Louis Robert already pointed out eighty years ago, the addition of dancing as a crown event came as an innovation in the second century outside of Italy (Naples, as we have seen, and possibly Rome or Puteoli, or both). The innovation in the eastern empire must have come between 165, which is the latest date for Lucian's treatise, and the reign of Commodus, during which the celebrated Tiberius Iulius Apolaustus boasted of being the first pantomime to win a crown at

¹⁸ For κίνησις see Lib. *Orat.* 64.28. On rhythmic movement, see *Fouilles de Delphes* III.1, 551: Tib. Iul. Apolaustus, τ[ραγικῆς ἐν]ρύθμου κινήσεως ὑποκριτή[ν]. *I. Magnesia* (Kern) 165 ἐνρύθμου, 192 ἐ]νρύθ[μου]. *IGR* 4. 1272 and *TAM* V.1016 (Thyateira): ἐνρύθμου. *SEG* I.529 (Syrian Apamea) ἐνρύθμ[ου]. Şahin 1975 (Heraclea Pontica, with photo), cf. *BullEp* 1976. 687: ἐνρύθμου. Blümel 2004, 20–22: εὐρυσθία. Observe Herodian 5.2.4 κινήσεως εὐρύθμου.

¹⁹ Şahin 1975, *SEG* XI. 838 (τραγωδῶ Σιδωνίω).

²⁰ *Fouilles de Delphes* III.1, 551: Tib. Iul. Apolaustus. Cf. *BullEp* 1976. 721 (citing Rey-Coquais 1973, no. 10): honors to Julius Paris of Apamea τραγικῆς κεινήσεως ὑποκριτήν.

²¹ For κίνησις see note 18 above. For νεύματα, Lib. *Orat.* 64.59.

Pergamum and in Thebes.²² His other victories in great cities, including Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, Sparta, Laodicea, and Sardis, were evidently not the first for a pantomime.²³ Hence it would be reasonable to assign the introduction of pantomime competitions either to the later years of Marcus or the early years of Commodus.

This chronology fits well with Aristides' intemperate judgment of both pantomimes and mimes in his extant speech *κατὰ τῶν ἔξορχουμένων* (no. 34 'Against the Betrayers of the Mysteries'). This is a work that can be assigned to Smyrna in early 170.²⁴ Towards the end Aristides contrasts rhetors, philosophers, and all others in liberal education with dancers, mimes, and magicians (*ὄρχηστὰς, μίμοις, θαυματοποιοῖς*), who please the crowds but are held in low regard.²⁵ The dancers are clearly the pantomimes, as they are in the lost speech, whereas the mimes are, as indeed they were, speaking performers.²⁶ Aristides even asks, 'Who would allow a mime to speak off stage?' in order to emphasize the lowly status of such a person. Aristides' prejudice is evident in this passage, but there is nothing here to suggest that pantomimes had yet been elevated to the level of agonistic competitions with honors that were accorded to the greatest rhetors of the age. This provides a slightly later *terminus post quem* than Lucian for the innovation that so outraged Aristides. It came after 170.

It is obviously relevant to understanding Aristides' lost speech that one of the first documented examples of a pantomime in the international thymelic competitions comes precisely from Sparta, on a mid-to-late second-century inscription detailing the accounts for prizes to contestants.²⁷ Among the winners are a pantomime from Sidon, a *τραγωδός Σιδώνιος*, (observe that this is yet another such performer from

²² *Fouilles de Delphes* III.1, 551, cf. *IK* Ephesus 6. 2070–2071: first in Thebes. Strasser 2004 discusses but does not add to the dossier on the introduction of dancers into the eastern agonistic festivals.

²³ For another inscription of Apolaustos, Robert 1966b, 756–759 and *BullEp* 1967. 251, reviewing *Corinth* 8. 3 (Kent), nos. 370 + 693.

²⁴ For the date, see Behr 1981, 398 n. 1. The speech is described in the *Fifth Sacred Discourse*, 38–40.

²⁵ Aristid., *Orat.* 34.55 and 57.

²⁶ Behr 1981, 183, in his translation of Aristides' speech, misunderstands the three nouns in *Orat.* 34.55 and wrongly turns the mimes into pantomimes. He compounds the error when he translates the question in 34.57 (*τίς ἂν τῷ μίμῳ συγχωρήσειεν ἔξω φθέγγεσθαι*) 'Who would permit the pantomime to speak off stage?' One might also add that the article in this question is generic.

²⁷ *SEG* XI. 838.

greater Syria), a trumpeter, kithara-player, encomiast, painter, as well as the traditional runners and pentathletes. One of the winners is Aelius Granianus from Sicyon, a pentathlete and runner whom Pausanias mentions as honored with a bronze statue near Sicyon for his Olympic victories.²⁸ So this suggests a probable date for the Spartan inscription in the last decade of Marcus.²⁹ Louis Robert had emphasized long ago the proliferation of contests in later second-century Sparta, with its three festivals of the Kaisareia, Eurykleia, and Ourania. He was explaining the role of the presiding magistrate, who was called a *xystarch* there.³⁰ We should note that the late-second-century star Apolaustos included Sparta among the cities where he took the crown.³¹

Artemidorus, author of our one surviving book of dream interpretations, was, to judge from various chronological indications, working in the later second century. Hence it is instructive to observe that he registers pantomime dancing, to which he evidently alludes by the phrase 'dancing with writhing (ὄρχησις μετὰ στροφῆς)', as among the crown contests.³² Similarly the inscription from Heraclea Pontica, which we have cited earlier, refers to taking the 'the wreath of rhythmic tragedy', in other words pantomime, for the first time (τὸ πρῶτον). This is probably another sign of the recent introduction of tragic dance into Greek thymelic competitions. The language reappears in the third-century historian Herodian, who refers to 'rhythmic movement'.³³

In arguing against Aristides, Libanius resorts frequently to comparisons with athletes and Greek competitions.³⁴ His remarks clearly presuppose that Aristides took a highly positive view of boxers, pancratiasts, and pentathletes. Hence he michievously conjures up a male ath-

²⁸ Pausan. 2.11.8. See Cartledge and Spawforth 1989, 188 (Spawforth) with 264 n. 16, and Appendix IV, 'Foreign ἀγῶνισται at Sparta' (Spawforth) (232–233). There is little to be said for Spawforth's inclination to identify Granianus with Cranaus in Julius Africanus: cf. Moretti, 1957, 163, no. 848.

²⁹ Pausanias was writing in the middle 170's: Corinth founded 217 years before (5.1.2), and the Costoboci, who invaded in the early years of the decade (10.34.5). His first book was written earlier (7.20.6, on his omission of Herodes' odeion for Regilla), but the reference to Granianus occurs in the *Korinthiaka*.

³⁰ Robert 1966, 102–104 (Ξυστάρχης τῶν ἐν Λαικεδαίμονι ἀγῶνων).

³¹ Robert 1930, 114 (where 'Tib. Claudios Apolaustos' is erroneously written for 'Tib. Iulios Apolaustos'). Spawforth, in his list of foreign competitors at Sparta (n. 28 above), evidently missed Apolaustos.

³² Artemid., *Oneir.* 1.56 (p. 64 Pack): περὶ δὲ πυρρῆις καὶ ὄρχησεως μετὰ στροφῆς ἐν τοῖς περὶ στεφάνων.

³³ See n. 18 above.

³⁴ E.g., Lib. *Orat.* 64.61 and 119.

lete, duly oiled and garbed, who plays the female role in sexual activity.³⁵ This is one of Libanius' many illustrations to show that one miscreant does not impugn an entire category. Similarly, in response to the supposedly bad influence of dancers upon their viewers, Libanius asks whether those who watch a bloody pancration or a fierce boxing match are inspired to go out and do likewise.³⁶ Again the presupposition of Libanius' comment is that from Aristides' perspective viewing such activities would be wholly acceptable. Consequently Libanius can cunningly strengthen his argument by adducing the athletic prowess of pantomimes in accomplishing their formidable leaps on the stage, far beyond (as he points out) the ability of any pentathlete.³⁷ Yet clearly Aristides approved of the pentathlon. And finally, Libanius links pantomimes with trumpeters, who had long enjoyed a privileged place in Greek festivals.³⁸

Accordingly, Libanius' numerous comparisons with agonistic festivals may be taken to imply that Aristides had responded with particular indignation to the recent incorporation of the pantomimes in thymelic competitions. For him this public institutionalization of the dancers in the Greek festivals would have effectively constituted the elevation of a pantomime to the level of a sophist or rhetor, precisely as Hadrian of Tyre had proposed in his eulogy of Paris.

On present epigraphic evidence, Sparta was among the first to welcome this innovation in its festivals, and so Aristides' choice of the Spartans as his target may well reflect more than a simple desire to invoke old-fashioned austerity, such as that associated with Lycurgus. Libanius shrewdly observed that Aristides was in no position to denounce the audiences who had heard and admired him in Pergamum or Smyrna, and so, to make his point, he had to fix on a pantomime-loving city where he had not actually declaimed. Hence an address to Sparta, rendered in absence, allowed Aristides the luxury of venting his spleen at what he perceived to be a debasement of traditional Greek ἀγῶνες without insulting his enthusiasts in Asia Minor, in Athens, or in Rome.

But a little less than two hundred years later another of his enthusiasts called his bluff.

³⁵ Lib. *Orat.* 64.54: τὰ γυναικῶν ἔδοξε ποιεῖν.

³⁶ Lib. *Orat.* 64.119.

³⁷ Lib. *Orat.* 64.68–69: ...πεδῶντα τῶν πεντάθλων μακρότερα.

³⁸ Lib. *Orat.* 64.98.

