Sophistic Encomiums and Invectives

Gorgias and Benjamin Franklin

Purpose

Encomiums and invectives are progymnasmata (preliminary writing exercises from the classical period) that require students to either praise a subject (encomium) or to criticize it (invective). The sophists, teachers of rhetoric, frequently reversed these tropes (e.g. they praised subjects most people considered negative or criticized things most felt were positive). The sophists took up these extreme stances, often extemporaneously, to entertain an audience, to display their persuasive powers, and, of course, to attract new students to their classes. In Gorgias' "Encomium of Helen" the sophist presents counter arguments to the common Greek opinion that Helen of Troy was a villainous woman. From their perspective, she facilitated the Trojan War by not resisting the advances of Alexander (who won her as a prize in a debate among the gods), even though the event is often characterized as the "rape" of Helen, which is one of Gorgias' primary arguments. By praising Helen to a Greek audience who generally disliked her, he is reversing the traditional encomium trope and also demonstrating his ability to shape an audience's opinion, however antithetical to his thesis. Benjamin Franklin's "Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistress" uses Enlightenment rationality to argue that it is preferable to select an old woman as a mistress, as opposed to someone closer to the young man's age; this likewise goes against conventional wisdom and, through its convincing, often hilarious points, boosts Franklin's public ethos as a wordsmith and clever logician.

Your assignment is to write either a sophistic encomium or invective. This topic clearly lends itself to humor, so feel free to choose a subject that is off color and/or extreme. You can pick an argument that is the opposite of your personal opinion, since this "decentering" assists the intellectual objectivity/flexibility that allows one to generate the pros/cons of any argument (and to anticipate them). This process follows the sophistic tradition of teaching students to "argue both sides equally well" (Protagoras). In the past, students have written encomiums of the university cafeteria, the flu, procrastination, Darth Vader, fast-food, and traffic jams. They have written invectives of babies, exercise, clothing, trees, Mother Theresa and Barney. The more extreme the argument, while being convincing, the more credit you receive. Rational and ethical limits, however, should still govern your subject choice; for example, please do not write encomiums of Hitler, Bin Laden or mass shooters. As you can see from Gorgias' and Franklin's examples, brevity is at a premium in this genre: 2 - 5 page maximum for this writing assignment. You can rely completely on logic, but sources generally assist argumentation.