

A Comic History of Late Republican Stylistic Debates: Dionysius of Haliarnassus' Attic  
Matron and Asiatic Courtesan in *On the Ancient Orators*

It has become commonplace to call the preface to Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *On the ancient orators* a "manifesto of Classicism" (Hidber 1996). While it is undeniable that this text is an important part of Dionysius' larger classicizing project, reading the preface as a *straightforwardly* programmatic statement for the author's entire body of work presents several problems. This paper reassesses the central structuring image of Dionysius' preface, the dichotomy between the Attic Muse and Asiatic courtesan, as an ironizing history of Roman stylistic debates from the late Republic. Such a reading is not only supported by tensions internal to the Dionysian oeuvre, but also by the narrative and especially language of the preface itself, which I argue emplot the simile of the matron and prostitute as a Menandrian comedy of errors. Without arguing that Dionysius' preface is not classicizing, I show how the preface sophisticatedly alludes to Roman intellectual history and dismantles an established Roman structure for thinking about style.

I begin by briefly highlighting how the dichotomy found in Dionysius' preface is incongruous with other portions of his stylistic theory. As previous scholars have noted (de Jonge 2008; Swain 1996), the Asianist-Atticist polarity does not rear its ugly head elsewhere in Dionysius' works. Nowhere else in Dionysius is Asian used as a stylistic reproach, though the extended description of Hegesias of Magnesia at *On composition* 18 would have been one ideal place to do so; this dichotomy, however, is famously present in *Brutus* and continues to play an important role in discussions of Cicero's quarrel with the Atticists (*Institutio oratoria* 12.10.12).

After briefly outlining this tension between the preface and other places in the oeuvre, I turn to the narrative and then to the diction of the preface itself. Dionysius' history of rhetoric maps onto a species of comic plots. The lengthy simile, which describes the decline of rhetoric in domestic terms, at first sight appears to fit a familiar Menandrian plot type in which the young protagonist breaks free from the spell of a tyrannical courtesan (Traill 2008). I further argue, however, that the texture of the passage's diction complicates this first impression and urges the careful reader to revise her judgment through a process of *anagnorisis*. In short, the process of grappling with the preface is analogous to the way in which comic characters transition from a state of ignorance to knowledge. As a result the reader is no longer an objective observer on the outside (as is the case when consuming comedy), but becomes enmeshed and entangled in the drama of recognition itself. This reading finds its clearest support in Dionysius' use of near homophones throughout the preface. While pairs of lexemes such as *ἐταίρα/ἑτέρα* and *μοῦσα/Μυσῆ* are used to describe perceived opposites, this phonetic similarity and some opaque syntax lead to the toppling of this surface distinction: are courtesan and wife so different after all?

In conclusion I suggest how this self-deconstructing dichotomy in Dionysius can be read in light of the stylistic debates waged between Cicero and Calvus as represented in *Brutus* where Cicero had presented himself as transcending the stark and wobbly constraints of the Asianist-Atticist polarity (Dugan 2004: 214). Though focusing predominantly on wordplay in Dionysius' preface, this paper partakes in larger debates about classicism, Greek engagement with Roman rhetorical theory and style, and the persistent debate surrounding Dionysius' relationship with Rome.

## Bibliography

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