

Meretricious Rhetoric: Aristophanes and the Genealogy of a Gendered Metaphor

It is often remarked that the figure of the prostitute or courtesan (ἑταίρα, *meretrix*) serves in both Greek and Latin rhetorical and literary criticism as a personification of decadent style (e.g., D. H. *Orat. Vett.* 1). Nevertheless, despite its familiarity, neither the logic nor the genealogy of this traditional metaphor has been satisfactorily traced. As a preliminary contribution to such an effort, this paper situates the origin of the trope within the context of Aristophanic allegory and poetics based on the critical commonplace that “the style is the man” (e.g., Sen. *Ep.* 114.1). In this case, however, the woman is the style.

The derivation from Aristophanic metaphor of much aesthetic terminology in later literary criticism is well known (e.g., Clayman 1977). Both Greek and Roman writers often envision rhetoric or eloquence as a beloved or wife, with the orator imagined as her suitor or husband (e.g., Cic. *Brut.* 330, Luc. *Rh. Pr.* 6, *Bis Acc.* 31). Such personifications coexist alongside metaphorical descriptions of rhetorical ornament (κόσμος, *ornatus*) as feminine embellishment through makeup, jewelry, and fancy dress (e.g., Cic. *Orat.* 78-79, Luc. *Hist. Conscr.* 8), all associated with courtesans (e.g., Alex. 103 K-A, Dalby 2002). Personifications of poetry, music, comedy, and tragedy as female figures, either the poet’s wife or a *hetaira* courted by poetic rivals, is attested in Old Comedy for Cratinus and Pherecrates and appears in Aristophanes (Cratin. 193-94 K-A, Pherecr. 155 K-A, Ar. 466 K-A, *Eq.* 517, *Ra.* 92-97, Hall 2000, Sommerstein 2005).

The *hetaira* may also stand for the effeminate orator himself as male transvestite (e.g., Quint. *Inst.* 8.pr.20, Luc. *Rh. Pr.* 15), a variation on the prostitute metaphor with origins in Aristophanic comedy. In the *Thesmophoriazusae* (“Women at the

Thesmophoria”), the effeminate poetics of the transvestite tragedian Agathon is reflected in his feminine costume, part of a broader program of gender norm transgression undertaken in the service of his art (*Ar. Th.* 130-75). Upon his initial appearance onstage, Agathon is mistaken for the *hetaira* Cyrene (98), to whose professional craft the decadent poetry of Euripides is compared in the *Frogs* (*Ra.* 1325-28; cf. 1308). Tellingly, Lucian in the *Teacher of Public Speakers* describes his titular professor as Agathon or a Menandrian courtesan incarnate (*Rh. Pr.* 11-12).

Quintilian cautions even against exercises in which young students speak in the persona of insufficiently virile comic types, on the grounds that imitation passes into character (*Inst.* 1.11.1-3). By the same logic but to diametrically opposed ends, the Aristophanic Agathon explains his deliberate effeminization as a form of mimesis (*Ar. Th.* 148-56, Zeitlin 1996: 375-416, Mazzacchera 1999, Saetta Cottone 2003). Himself applying these poetic principles to rhetorical pedagogy, Lucian’s *Teacher* prescribes for the aspiring orator a regimen of effeminate living designed to inculcate the shamelessness requisite to success in the performance culture of the Second Sophistic (*Rh. Pr.* 23). Lucian thus satirically inverts the process by which the system of Imperial education appropriated ideologies of gender from classical texts in the formation and maintenance of a contemporary elite masculine identity (cf. Gleason 1995). Nonetheless, the traditional equation of ethics and aesthetics is not thereby questioned. Throughout antiquity, therefore, in the metaphor of degenerate speech as deviant woman, the personification of style remains inseparable from what Foucault called the “stylistics of existence” (Foucault 1986: 71).

Works Cited

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