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## Sounds Carefully Crafted: Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Literary Composition

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# SOUNDS CAREFULLY CRAFTED: DIONYSIUS OF HALICARNASSUS AND LITERARY COMPOSITION

by

FRANCISCO LOPEZ

Under the Direction of George Pullman

## ABSTRACT

Modern rhetoric takes many influences from the classical era, but aural components of rhetoric are not often included in rhetorical education. This paper examines the techniques used by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his essay *On Literary Composition*, where he explored the components of arrangement of words in clauses for greatest impact when read and spoken aloud. Dionysius utilized meter and aesthetic placement of words to create work that was technically skilled and appealing to the listener or reader.

Dionysius built on ideas from rhetoricians of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens for his definition of style. His writing on style is compared with the work of Demosthenes and Aristotle among others.

While many of his techniques and examples are specifically focused on Attic Greek, we can still use the concepts to improve modern written and especially spoken rhetoric. Spoken rhetoric on television and the internet in particular provides a venue to exercise the lessons of precisely planned wording and control of sounds through word placement.

INDEX WORDS: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Synthesis, Composition, Arrangement, Meter, Rhetoric, Ancient Greek, Atticism, Oratory,



SOUNDS CAREFULLY CRAFTED: DIONYSIUS OF HALICARNASSUS AND LITERARY COMPOSITION

by

FRANCISCO LOPEZ

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Modern Rhetoric is full of subtle visual cues such as the layout of a web page or the structure of an advertisement, even the colors in a fast food restaurant. Some of these are for persuasion, others for usability or aesthetic purposes, but all are highly deliberate. While we pay close attention to the way our words and images are laid out and to the visual context of nearly everything we do, far attention is given to what we hear.

This was not the case for scholars of rhetoric and rhetoricians two thousand years ago, whose rhetoric was primarily the spoken word, even when written. The visual component of the delivery of a speech was of great importance, but writers of rhetorical handbooks also used details as small as the placement of individual letters and sounds in a word when describing methods of writing documents or preparing speeches and even considered the uses of meter in writing prose.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a historian and teacher who lived during the earliest years of the Roman Empire, saw great need for skillful crafting of every sound used in oratory and writing. Among his works is an essay he wrote as a gift for a friend (a student perhaps) intended to teach him a lesson more private than one found in a classroom. For this student, he dissected the methods of putting sounds together in words and clauses and created a system of categorization of composition for his student to use to aid him in making his writing more powerful.(Dionysius, 1974)

The rise of new methods of communication drawn from modern technology has allowed for many new methods of communication which rely on sound. Perhaps it is time to reevaluate the place of these aural elements in modern rhetoric. I have chosen to examine Dionysius and *On Literary Composition* to study the ancient use of these features and see if I can discover a role for them today.



### 1.1 Limits and limitations

While there is much to learn about the Greek language from Dionysius' treatise, my goal is to look at its contribution to rhetoric. I am not writing specifically for classical Greek scholars, so all Greek terms will be translated using the translations given in my source materials or defined if there is no equivalent term. I will explore elements of the ancient Greek language, but only for clarification of the treatise. While I do examine some elements of Dionysius' literary criticism, a detailed look at literary criticism is beyond the scope of this work.

### 1.2 Literature Review

For the main text involved, I used two different translations of *On Literary Composition* for my research. W. Rhys Roberts's 1910 edition is well established and features an extensive introduction with an exhaustive analysis of the text and several appendices. Usher's 1974 translation in the Loeb Classical Library features simpler, more modern English but, for reasons of space, does not offer nearly as much analysis by the author. Both translations draw from the same Greek text edited by Hermann Usener and Ludwig Radermacher and both feature the Greek on facing pages.

I also turned to Roberts' *Greek Rhetoric and Literary Composition* for a broader look at Dionysius and his work, as well as a information on several other influential Greek writers. George Kennedy's *A New history of Classical Rhetoric* provided a lengthy historical background on rhetoric and very specific details about Dionysius, and his translation of Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* allowed me to compare Dionysius's views to work on rhetoric from 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens. S.F. Bonner's *Literary Treatises of Dionysius of Halicarnassus: A Study in the Development of Critical Method* contains a deeper view of the catalog of Dionysius' work. I used Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's *The Rhetorical Tradition* to compare Dionysius to rhetorical teaching from later times, for example, that of David Hume.

For other texts by Dionysius, I looked at W.K. Pritchett's annotated translation of *On Thucydides* and Cary's and Spelman's 1937 Loeb edition of *Roman Antiquities*. Dirk Marie Schenkeveld's



*Studies in Demetrius On Style* helped me to examine similar work along with a Loeb Classical Library volume containing *On Style* (translated by Doreen C. Innes based on a translation by Roberts), and *On the Sublime* attributed to Longinus and translated by W.H. Fyfe and Donald Russell.

In order to more fully understand poetic meter, I used Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form*, which explains concepts behind meter and verse in poetry from ancient times to modern and gives a very clear explanation of the changes in scansion across languages and years. Another useful resource was Liddell's and Scott's *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, which I turned to whenever I needed to look up Greek terms.

My research on Homer is drawn from several sources. First, the work of the poet himself, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. I found a wealth of information on the study of Homer in Sir John Sandys' *A Short History of Classical Scholarship: From the Sixth Century B.C. to the Present Day*. Despite the book's age, it provided much information about the opinions of the most celebrated authors in classical Greece on their favorite author. John A. Scott's *Homer and his Influence* was less relevant to the topics of this work, but the exuberance with which he celebrated Homer's work was congruous with the descriptions so frequent to ancient authors concerning use of verses from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

While searching for information on style, I came across Thomas De Quincy's *Style and Rhetoric*, a fiercely opinionated text that takes the rather unusual point of view that Virgil was the first true rhetorician, and that all of his Greek predecessors failed in their aspirations. More useful for striking quotes than for serious instruction on style, it nevertheless provided a strongly contrasting perspective to the Attic model.



## 2 Biography

Dionysius, a teacher and historian, describes himself as the son of Alexander and a native of Halicarnassus (Dionysius, Cary, & Spelman, 1937), site of modern day Bodrum in Turkey and renowned for the tomb of Mausolus, the great Mausoleum. The Greek geographer Strabo found him noteworthy enough to refer to him when describing famous men born in Halicarnassus, along with Herodotus the historian and an elegiac poet named Heraclitus. The date of his birth is uncertain, but comments that he made about events that occurred in his lifetime place his birth no later than 53 BC. Dionysius arrived in Italy “at the very time that Augustus Caesar put an end to the civil war, in the middle of the one hundred and eighty-seventh Olympiad,” which would place his arrival in 30 BC. He learned Latin and became a teacher, more than likely a tutor to a small group of sons of Roman nobles. He claimed to have spent the following twenty two years researching the Greek ancestry of Rome and the Romans (Dionysius, et al., 1937, pp. vii-ix).

Dionysius wrote on historiography, style, and mimesis (*μίμησις*), a term referring to imitation, originally of nature, but later of the work of preceding rhetors (Whitmarsh, 2001, p. 72). As a historian, modern critics have doubted his reliability and have accused him of placing rhetoric before historical methods or accuracy (Gabba, 1991). As a critic of historical treatises, he has been judged guilty of obsessing over his subject’s writing style over the validity of that writer’s history (Dionysius & Pritchett, 1975). Nevertheless, his history is considered to be of great value to this day and his methods, if questioned at times, are still more accurate than those of many of his peers. (Gabba, 1991)



## 2.1 Dionysius the Teacher

While Aristotle and Plato strongly influenced Dionysius, he disagreed strongly with their concept of mimesis. For those two earlier writers, imitation was the artistic representation of the natural world and an integral process in the creation of works in rhetoric and other fields. Dionysius, however, considered it an artful creation in direct opposition to the creation of nature. He agreed with Plato that the human created imitation of nature was different in value from the original, but, unlike Plato who believed that there was a superior object that all manmade objects imitated, Dionysius believed that the artificial nature of a human creation rendered it superior to its inspiration in nature, as sign of man overcoming nature and thereafter choosing to imitate the best of his fellow man (Whitmarsh, 2001, pp. 72-74).

As a teacher of Greek literature, Dionysius used the technique of teaching his students rhetoric through mimesis, having them learn specific works of the canon and, upon gaining enough familiarity with the author, learning to copy the author's style. Nevertheless, he was careful not to have his students too closely imitate some of the more highly regarded styles, such as Plato. He held Plato in tremendous esteem for his use of melody and rhythm, but believed that his diction was lacking and did not want his students to follow that example, especially if they did not have the genius of Plato to overcome that failing through his other writing qualities (Dionysius & Roberts, 1910).

Dionysius also taught through his writing. *On Literary Composition* is a birthday gift to a talented student, meant to prepare him for career in politics, a field in which rhetorical talent was critical (Dionysius & Roberts, 1910, p. 1).

## 2.2 Dionysius the Historian

In one of his most celebrated works, his *First Letter to Ammaeus*, Dionysius combines his skills as a historian and a rhetorician to defend Demosthenes against the charge of having taken all of his ideas from Aristotle. Dionysius put together a chronology which made it impossible for Demosthenes to have read Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* before he composed his own work regarding rhetoric, because he wrote at



the same time that Aristotle compiled his book. In modern times, we have cause to question the dates he gives, but his detective work and the proofs he gives are far more compelling evidence than techniques commonly used in such circumstances. (Roberts, 1928)

Dionysius spent much of his life working on Ῥωμαϊκῆς ἀρχαιολογίας, that is, Roman Antiquities, a twenty volume history of Rome which uses the rhetorical technique of amplification to legitimize Roman rule to his Greek audience by tracing an ancestry of Rome from the Greeks in the age of legends and reaches up to the Republic during the time of the Punic Wars (Kennedy, 1994, p. 161). In his own words introducing the work, he tells of his arrival in Rome during the one hundred and eighty seventh Olympiad, where he spent twenty two years learning Latin. During his research, he spent time speaking with men of “the greatest learning” and consulting the most highly regarded Roman histories (Dionysius, et al., 1937).

The goal of this work was to prove to the Greeks that the Romans were not barbarian invaders, but rather, the fruit of generations of Greek ancestry. As with his other works, and despite the subject matter, he wrote it entirely in Greek.

Dionysius gave great credit to many of the historians of Rome, but felt that most of them had focused too much on the events that occurred during their own lifetimes and gave only passing mention to the earliest history of Rome, an oversight which he meant to redress with his own research. His stated goals were that “the brave men who fulfilled their destiny will gain immortal glory and be extolled by posterity,” and secondly, that “the both the present and future descendants of those godlike men will choose, not the pleasantest and easiest of lives, but rather the noblest and most honorable.” He defended himself in advance against claims that it was written out of flattery, and contended instead that it was for the sake of “truth and justice, which ought to be the aim of every history.” Furthermore, the work would allow him to express his goodwill towards all who cherished noble deeds and gratitude



to the city and citizens of Rome for the education and other blessings which he received during his time living there (Dionysius, et al., 1937, pp. 22-23).

### 2.3 Works

According to Sir John Edwin Sandys, the works of Dionysius are of singular importance in literary criticism of the era. He states that: “In the minute and technical criticism of the art and craft of Greek literature, these works stand alone in all the centuries that elapsed between the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle and the treatise *On the Sublime* (Sandys, 1915, p. 75).”

While known best for the Roman Antiquities, Dionysius also composed several important essays, including *Περὶ συνθέσεως ὀνομάτων*, “On the Arrangement of Words” also known as “On literary Composition.” This text describes the use of sound and word placement in establishing moods and delivering information to the reader or listener in both poetry and prose. He examines the Greek language, from individual sounds of letters to the placement of clauses. (Roberts, 1928, p. 71)

Dionysius also wrote *Περὶ τῶν Ἀττικῶν ῥητόρων* or *On the Attic Orators*, essays about Lysias, Isocrates, and Isaeus. This series discussed many of the best-known orators of Athens, but it does not utilize the common format of writing about the commonly held canon of the ten greatest Attic orators who were: Antiphon, Andocides, Lysias, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Isaeus, Aeschines, Hyperides, Lycurgus, and Dinarchus. While these were mentioned, many were criticized, and Dionysius particularly had harsh words to say about Dinarchus. (Worthington, 1994) Specifically, Lysias, Isaeus, and Isocrates were subjects of the surviving first part, regarding the invention of eloquence, and Demosthenes, Hyperides, and Aeschines were the subjects of the lost second part, which dealt with the perfection of eloquence (Sandys, 1915, p. 74).

The work on the orators was followed by a larger work, also split into two, regarding Demosthenes alone. Dionysius credits Demosthenes with perfecting a mix of the writings styles of



Thucydides, Isocrates, and Lysias, creating a new style with the best parts of each. The later part, written after he took a break to write *On Literary Composition*, makes mention of the threefold division of composition used in, and possibly created for, that work (Sandys, 1915).

Dionysius devoted an essay to a detailed analysis of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, where he examined the historian's style, syntax, and historical methods. The original *History* was so highly regarded that Dionysius began with a defense of his right to criticize the work.

His *On Imitation*, the primary text detailing his theory of mimesis, only remains in fragments, but those remnants include chapters of great importance. In the surviving text, Dionysius defines imitation as "an activity receiving an impression of a model through inspection of it (Kennedy, 1994, p. 164)." He espouses imitation as a method of evoking the best qualities of previous writers into various subjects and teaches that one cannot produce great style while imitating only one model (Kennedy, 1994, p. 164).

In addition to his *First Letter to Ammaeus*, where he defends Demosthenes from the claim of owing all of his success and techniques to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, there is a second surviving letter to the same recipient, one which deals with the style of Thucydides and expands on topics from the preceding essay. His last extant correspondence, the *Letter to Pompeius*, along with a larger essay *On Dinarchus*, which criticized the reliability of extant information on the Attic orator, round out his surviving texts (Sandys, 1915). One of numerous works titled *The Art of Rhetoric* is often attributed to Dionysius, but scholars believe that the work is not his.

### Atticism

Alexander's domination of the Mediterranean world allowed the Greek language to spread and become the most influential language in the region, but the diversity of the speakers changed the language (Mastronarde, 1993). The lingua franca of the Macedonian Empire was not somewhat different from the language spoken by Plato, and just as some of the words differed from those spoken by Plato



and the Attic orators, so too did the rhetorical style. Rhetoric focused more heavily on ornamentation, in what was referred to as the Asian style (Bonner, 1969). As the centuries passed, rhetoric became less about politics and more about declamation and sophistic exercises.

This trend towards ornamentation and rhetoric for purposes of entertainment was not without examples in the earliest days of rhetoric, and the several of the Sophists, such as Gorgias of Leontoni, bore a similarity to the Asian rhetors in style (Kennedy, 1994, p. 96).

As Asianism took root, it also found detractors who considered it too artificial and sought to restore clarity to style. Taking inspiration from the audience focused work of the most famous rhetors of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens, Atticism was born in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Dionysius belonged firmly to the Atticist camp and wrote about the process of the decline of oratory and its new birth to his Greek speaking audience.

According to Kennedy, Dionysius' goal was to revive the style of the great orators and historians of the Attic period of classical Greece. As with other members of the Atticist movement in Rome, Dionysius was convinced that the centuries following the fifth century BCE had seen the gradual deterioration of Greek oratory, particularly after the death of Alexander. This trend was both part of a natural cycle of rise and decline, as well as a loss of virtue brought about by the Asiatic rhetors who lost the "manly" way of eloquence (Kennedy, 1994).

In *On the Ancient Orators*, Dionysius compares the trends in rhetoric to the rejection of an Attic wife, one scorned and insulted, for an Asian mistress. He sees Asianism as ignorant and theatrical, a severe misstep that was only corrected after virtuous men of Rome, in order to stimulate educational development throughout the empire, had the sound judgment to restore the Attic style.

Marcus Tullius Cicero, another heir to the Atticist movement, wrote of the Asian style as "fat and greasy." (Kennedy, 1994, p. 95. 96) He learned oratory with many Asian qualities in his youth, but he



later came to see it as undisciplined and a folly of his youth, which he claimed to have traded for the purity and simplicity of style of the Athenian rhetors (Cicero, May, & Wisse, 2001).

### 3 On Literary Composition

*Περὶ συνθέσεως ὀνομάτων* is usually translated as *On Literary Composition* or alternatively *On the Arrangement of Words*. The traditional Latin name is *De Compositione Verborum*. The preposition *περί* means about or regarding. The noun *σύνθεσις*, from which the genitive form *συνθέσεως* is derived, is “a putting together, composition, combination,” and *ὀνομάτων* is the plural genitive of *ὄνομα*, which means name, noun, or phrase (Liddell & Scott, 1889). A literal translation is “On the putting together of words.”

While the book does entail a great deal of literary criticism, it is not a criticism of the content of any specific work, but a look at broader techniques and the style of particular authors and orators. According to Bonner, in his look at the work of Dionysius:

we are turning to an essay which is not primarily a work of literary criticism in the sense that this term is to be applied to the essays on Lysias, Isocrates, Isaeus, and Demosthenes; instead, we are now dealing with a work of literary theory. Yet there is in the *De Comp. Verb.* a considerable comment on the style and practice of the individual authors, which, though incidental to the main purpose—that of showing the nature and importance of *συνθέσις*—is nevertheless worthy of consideration in the present study (Bonner, 1969).

Written as a birthday gift for his young pupil, Rufus Metilius, during a break in his “*On Demosthenes*,” *On Literary Composition* is an essay describing the application of poetic meter and word



arrangement to poetry and prose. It is, as the title suggests, centered very literally on the putting together of words, both the individual component parts of words, and the joining of those words into clauses and sentences in the manner which is most agreeable and instructive to the listener or reader.

George Kennedy describes *On Literary composition* as “the most detailed account we have of how educated Greeks reacted to the beauties of their native language (Kennedy, 1994, p. 165).” The text does deal with beauty, and the great appreciation that Dionysius had for the quirks of the language and the subtleties of its use. He seeks to show the effect of words and individual sounds on speech. In his own words he states that:

Composition is, as the name itself indicates, a certain process of arranging the parts of speech, or the elements of diction, as some call them. (Dionysius, 1974, p. 20)

Later, he describes the theme of the work:

What is the main gist of my argument? It is that the varied effect of the syllables is produced by the interweaving of letters, that the diverse nature of words is produced by the combination of syllables, and that the multiform character of a discourse is produced by the arrangement of the words.(Dionysius, 1974, p. 115)

*On Literary Composition* uses this detailed analysis to teach style. Dionysius based his concept of style on the divisions devised by Theophrastus, which looked first at word choice, then at composition, and finally, at use of figures (Bonner, 1969, p. 21). While he discusses word choice to an extent, it is mostly to show how it affects meter and the sounds of a phrase. He states that his work is



about composition and that he will save word choice for another work, however, no essay on word choice by Dionysius has been found or alluded to by any other works that have survived to present day.

While he gives reasons for each choice, the opinions are reminiscent of descriptions of taste used in centuries to come. Dionysius describes judgment of style as a faculty that cannot be taught, but that one develops with use, a sentiment that echoes Blair and Hume.

Dionysius uses many examples of prose and poetry drawn from Isocrates, Sappho, Thucydides, and the subject of his concurrent work, Demosthenes, as well as numerous others to make his points. But by far the most common example is Homer. The epic poet is represented as the finest example for every topic and examples from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* crop up to show how Homer used common words to great purpose, utilized meter to convey mood, and mastered a style that perfectly balanced the best elements of the other styles. It is perhaps to this that Alexander Pope refers in his *An Essay on Criticism* when he states : “See Dionysius Homer's Thoughts refine, And call new Beauties forth from ev'ry Line!” (Pope, 1716)

### 3.1 Composition

Going by the model of Theophrastus, in which style can be broken down into word choice, composition of the words, and use of figures, we find that Dionysius ignores the last entirely. To introduce the other two concepts, he turns to an analogy comparing style to painting. Whereas a painter must first choose pigments, before painting, the real test of skill for an artist is not the paint choice, but the composition of the actual painting. Likewise, word choice must come before composition, but it is not to be given the greater honor, since composition is the truer indicator of talent (Dionysius, 1974, p. 20).

In his look at style, or λέξις, in his third book of his Rhetoric, Aristotle states that the basis for style is purity of language and that this purity is found in five points:

1. The right use of connecting words or clauses



2. The use of proper or special names for things
3. the avoidance of ambiguous terms
4. the observance of the genders of nouns
5. the correct expression of numbers

(Aristotle & Kennedy, 2007)

Aristotle focuses on clarity and ease of communication and does not discuss word order except the right use of connective words (σύνδεσμοι) (Aristotle & Kennedy, 2007). Dionysius does, however, draw his concepts of meter and rhyme from that portion of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

Word order is crucial to Dionysius, so to convince the reader of its importance, he takes several famous lines and rewrites them without adding or removing a single word. In one example, he takes several lines from Homer and changes the word order, altering the meter from hexameter to tetrameter, and shows how the very different the same words can feel to the reader. In another example, he rewrites the opening of Herodotus' *History* and, comparing the rewriting with the original, claims that the writing is "no longer leisurely and historical, but rather direct and forensic."

He summarizes this concept by stating that "when the choice of words remains unchanged and only the arrangement is altered, the rhythm and the meter is changed, and with it the structure, the complexion, the character, the feeling and the general effectiveness of the lines. (Dionysius, 1974, pp. 37-38)"

### **3.2 Taste**

Throughout his treatise, Dionysius seeks to teach methods to charm an audience with pleasurable sounds and evocative meter. He is resolute that these techniques apply in all cases and shows no uncertainty in the utility of his techniques on varying listeners or readers. His absolute concept of the nature of effective composition relies on a very strict concept of taste. According to W. Rhys



Roberts, in writing *On Literary Composition*: “He has thus contributed not a little to confirm our belief in the essential continuity of critical principles – in the existence of a firm and permanent basis for the judgment of taste.” (Roberts, 1928, p. 93)

Despite its importance and unchanging nature, Dionysius is convinced that none have ever succeeded in writing about taste in a satisfactory way, even Gorgias of Leontoni, whom he considers the first to write on the topic. This is because “the nature of the subject is not such that it can be covered by an all-embracing, technical method of treatment, nor can good taste in general be pursued by science, but only by judgment” (Dionysius, 1974, p. 87).

Roberts infers from these lines that Dionysius believes that as important as training is, matters of euphony, that which is appealing to hear, must be left to individual perception, because much of style cannot be analyzed or defined. (Roberts, 1928)

Dionysius believes that a certain amount of taste for appealing sounds, which are termed euphonius, is natural and common to all humans, since people will jeer at a master musician who makes a single mistake no matter how renowned. At the same time, only practice of judgment will allow a person to develop that sense, while those who do not practice it will have an undeveloped sense. This duality between a common sort of taste and a highly refined form greatly resembles concepts of taste presented by enlightenment era thinker David Hume.

Hume saw taste as “the basis of judgments not only about what is beautiful (or personally pleasing) but also about what is virtuous.” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001) In his *Of the Standard of Taste* the concept of taste is presented as varying by individual person and culture: much of taste is therefore relative. Nevertheless, Hume also holds that some work is clearly better than others and that, likewise, some people have better taste than others. In any particular field, taste must be practiced to be developed, however, even with experience; a highly developed standard of taste can only be achieved



by certain rare individuals who are unusually gifted in that sense. No matter how much one practices, not all can achieve refined taste. (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001)

Dionysius also sought to teach writers how to use two qualities. He declares that “It seems to me that the two most important effects which those who write both poetry and prose should aim at are attractiveness and beauty.” (Dionysius, 1974, p. 64)

In this case, attractiveness is the nameless element which draws people to the work. Dionysius uses the term *ῥηδονή* for the attractive, a word which principally means pleasure, but which is also translated as delight, enjoyment, or that which is agreeable (Liddell & Scott, 1889). Beauty is the technical element, a showcase of the author’s proficiency with words. Dionysius uses the term *τό κάλόν* here, which, as a substantive adjective, that is an adjective used like a noun, refers to that which is beautiful.

While Hume had a broad concept of taste that applied to society on a large scale, Dionysius is only concerned with writing, but still it may not be unfair to draw parallels between the two. The attractive perhaps more closely resembles that which Hume referred to as the beautiful, while the beautiful takes on some of the character of virtue, not in a moral sense, but in a more limited context of writing as a stylistic virtue.

The concept of virtue, or perhaps excellence, another possible translation of the Greek term *ἀρετή*, in fact, has a strong presence in the history of style. Aristotle claimed that lucidity was the one virtue to seek in style, while later rhetoricians drew others from his work to make the list purity of language, lucidity, appropriateness, and ornament, and, sometimes, brevity (Bonner, 1969, p. 19).

Despite the fact that attractiveness and beauty are two very different features, Dionysius attributes the two to the same four skills: sound, mete, variety, and proper use.

The use of sound is where he examines the relationship between individual letters and syllables. Sounds must be used together in a pleasing way to be beautiful or attractive. The sounds can be the



most pleasant alone or mixed in with other sounds, but every syllable should take care not to clash in an unnatural sound with the preceding and subsequent syllables.

Meter is the use of poetic rhythm. It is not necessary for prose to follow a specific rhythm all the way through, which would render it poetry, but rather, the author must pay attention to specific syllable combinations and the rhythms they create.

Variety is the act of mixing various elements of style together. Dionysius criticizes the students of Isocrates for writing appealing clauses, but reusing the same format without variation.

Finally, all of these techniques must be used appropriately. Any rule may be broken if it makes sense, and the proper use of these techniques ensures that all the other elements come together properly. (Dionysius, 1974)

### 3.3 Words

While Dionysius focuses more on word arrangement than word choice, he does build upon his concept of taste in individual letters and syllables by putting them together into words. When discussing the use of beautiful words in style, Dionysius turns once more to Theophrastus. He states that:

Now I hold that whoever wishes to create a style which is beautiful in the composition of its sounds must combine in the same work words all of which convey beauty of sound, impressiveness or dignity. Something has been said on this subject in a more general way by the philosopher Theophrastus in his work *On Style*, where he distinguishes two classes of words—those which are naturally beautiful, which, for example, he thinks will make the expression beautiful and impressive when they are combined with one another; and those, on the other hand, which are paltry and mean, which he says will produce neither poetry nor prose that is of good quality (Dionysius, 1974, p. 121).



Theophrastus is the first known critic to measure the aesthetic value of words by sound and to place them into specific classes by that value, a concept which is at the root of *On Literary Composition*. Following this passage, Dionysius explains that if any subject could be described exclusively with words that were beautiful, it would be madness to use any words which were not as fine to describe the topic; but since that is unrealistic, lesser words must be used at times (Dionysius, 1974, p. 121).

The solution to this dilemma is demonstrated with one of the many Homeric examples in the book: the weaker words must be covered up by the juxtaposition of finer words. In this case, Homer gives a list of Boeotian towns with names that Dionysius finds lacking in grandeur and elegance, including Hyria, Mycalessus, Graea, and Eteonus. This list which Dionysius finds so troubling is interspersed throughout several lines which are mostly composed of much more appealing sounding words. Dionysius does not clarify which words are the more pleasant, but states that the poet has taken the offending names and “so beautifully interwoven them and dispersed them among supplementary words that sound pleasant that they appear as the most impressive of all names. (Dionysius, 1974, p. 123)”

### **3.4 The Greek Language**

In addition to its analysis of word arrangement as a component of style, *On Literary Composition* is also significant as a repository of knowledge on the pronunciation of Ancient Greek. As a method of illustrating the effects of different sounds upon each other, Dionysius gives specific positions of tongue and lips used to make all of the sounds that he discusses.

The language that Dionysius wrote in and greatly revered was centuries out of date by the time of the essay. He used Attic Greek of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the language spoken in Athens and the surrounding region and the mother tongue for Plato and the great Attic Orators. As trade and conquest spread the language, it simplified into a somewhat different form, and in the age of Dionysius, the



earlier language was an anachronism used primarily by the well-educated for the purpose of writing (Mastronarde, 1993, p. 4).

In his overview of letters in *On Literary Composition*, Dionysius distinguishes the letters into three categories which originated with Plato: vowels, semivowels, and voiceless consonants (Sandys, 1915, p. 22). The three terms represent how much sound a given letter produces when spoken. Vowels produce a great deal of acoustic power, consonants are low, and semivowels can shift between the two (Mastronarde, 1993).

Dionysius, much like Aristotle, chooses to build his case from as small a point as he can. In order to discuss the arrangement of words, he examines the arrangement of letters within words, establishing a hierarchy of more and less appealing letters that affect the creation of syllables.

Dionysius uses the arrangement of vowels, semivowels, and voiceless consonants to explain the way in which letters function and why some are more appealing than others. He is very specific in the methods used to create the sounds, which is not only useful for mapping the sounds used in ancient Greek, but also for providing a clear explanation for his preference of certain sounds over others. The voiceless consonants are split up by the use of your tongue and teeth when making sounds creating three sets of three sounds. The vowels are arranged by length, and the semivowels organized into single and double letter sounds.



Table 3.1

## Voiceless Consonants

Breathing	Velar	Labial	Dental
Rough	χ (ch)	Φ (p+h)	θ (t+h)
Intermediate	γ (g)	β (b)	δ (d)
Smooth	κ (k)	π (p)	τ (t)

The descriptions of these sounds serve as examples of how some of the letters were pronounced differently in the older Greek. Note the presence of *phi* and *theta* beside *chi* as versions of *pi* and *tau* followed by rough breathing. These letters came to represent “f” and “th” sounds in common Greek by the time Dionysius wrote, but the Attic Greek used an older pronunciation wherein phi was pronounced like a “p” with a rough breathing, that is an “h” like breath, after the consonant, and theta was like a “T” with the same effect.

Table 3.2

## Semivowels

	Simple	Double
Liquid	λ, ρ (l, r)	-
Nasal	μ, ν (m, n)	-
sibilant	σ (s)	ζ, ψ, ξ (z, ps, x)

The semivowels do not normally stand alone, but they may produce sounds that have voice without the presence of a vowel.



Table 3.3

## Vowels

Long	$\eta, \omega$ (ei, aw)
Variable	$\alpha, \iota, \upsilon$ (a, i, u)
Short	$\epsilon, \omicron$ (e, o)

*Eta* and *omega* are longer vowels, but numerous diphthongs, such as “eu” and “ai” functioned much like long single vowels instead of two separate vowels.

He declares that longer, breathed sounds, such as  $\eta$  (Eta, pronounced like the  $\hat{e}$  in *fête*) and  $\lambda$  (lambda, an L) are the most appealing to the listener, whereas the more clipped sounds, like  $\epsilon$  (epsilon, pronounced like a short E) and  $\tau$  (Tau, a T with no breath afterwards like the T in Spanish) are weaker.

Table 3.4

## Hierarchy of letters

Preference	Voiceless	Vowels	Semivowels	Double
Best	$\chi, \phi, \theta$	$\alpha, \eta, \omega$	$\lambda, \rho$	n/a
Appealing	$\gamma, \beta, \delta$	$\iota, \upsilon$	$\mu, \nu$	$\zeta$
Unappealing	$\kappa, \pi, \tau$	$\epsilon, \omicron$	$\sigma$	$\psi, \xi$



While this hierarchy of appealing sounds may seem trivial and arbitrary, it is vital to lay the groundwork for the concepts he later presents relating to styles. In addition to sounding pleasant or unpleasant, in his opinion, the letters also combine in particular ways that are or are not natural, whether to Greek, or to his ear, I cannot entirely say, but I have no doubt that the tendency to modify root words substantially when inflecting in Greek has some origin in letter combinations that were difficult to pronounce or unpleasant to the ear.

### 3.5 Meter

In addition to the ordering of words and syllables, Dionysius also discusses the use of meter, both in prose and poetry. His perspective on meter can be traced back to Aristotle (Roberts, 1928). According to Aristotle, in book 3 of the *Rhetoric*, delivery (ὑπόκρισις, or hypokrisis) of rhetoric shares three qualities with the delivery of poetry:

the voice should be used in expressing each emotion, sometimes loud and sometimes soft or intermediate, and how the pitch accents [τόνοι] should be intoned, whether as acute, grave, or circumflex, and what rhythms should be expressed in each case; for [those who study delivery] consider three things, and these are volume, change of pitch [ἁρμονία, or *harmonia*] and rhythm. Those [performers] who give careful attention to these are generally the ones who win poetic contests; and just as actors are more important than poets now in the poetic contests, so it is in the political contests because of the sad state of government. (Aristotle & Kennedy, 2007)



Aristotle did not seem to approve overly of the concept of applying meter to deliberative speech, but recognized the necessity for the sake of persuasion. He did, however consider the element of rhythm a necessity for speech. Describing the use of rhythm in prose, he states that “the form of language should be neither metrical nor unrhythmical. The former is unpersuasive (for it seems to have been consciously shaped) and at the same time also diverts attention... but what is unrhythmical is unlimited, and there should be a limit, but not by use of meter; for the unlimited is unpleasant and unknowable.” (Aristotle & Kennedy, 2007, p. 213)

As with Aristotle’s analysis of rhythm and meter, Dionysius sees the meter as a useful part of communication, even in prose. Also, like Aristotle, many of his examples derive from poetry, particularly from Homer, a practice which Kennedy sees as undermining Aristotle’s explanation with his examples of the paeon used in prose taken from the poetry of Simonides of Ceos . Like Aristotle, Dionysius does not recommend the use of any meter all throughout a prose work, as that would render it poetry, but rather, he suggests that one should utilize the power of rhythm to enhance prose by adding emphasis and affecting the mood of the work. Dionysius, however, takes the concept farther and chooses to apply elements of poetry to prose and prose to poetry, the latter portion of his work describing how to do so. According to Dionysius: “mere prose cannot come to resemble metrical and lyrical writing unless it contains metres and rhythms that have been introduced into it unobtrusively.” He clarifies that “It is not appropriate, however, for it to appear to be in metre or in rhythm (for in that case it will be a poem and a lyric, and will absolutely abandon its proper character), it is enough that it should simply appear rhythmical and metrical.”

Cicero considered consistent meter only permissible if it did not last more than a few sentences. Aristotle advised that prose should contain rhyme, but no meter. He favored the paeon for prose, feeling that other formats were too unnatural.



Meter in classical Greek was based on syllable length instead of stress. Ancient Greek often varied syllable length as it modified words, and accentuation was based on tones and syllable length. While most of the terms used to classify meter are of Ancient Greek origin, Greek meter is very different from that found in English (Fussell, 1979), and the examples that Dionysius uses are thus often rendered irrelevant to any who do not read ancient Greek.

Dionysius holds to the belief that different patterns of meter convey different sets of information and various emotions to readers or listeners. For an example, he turns to a scene from *The Odyssey* where Homer describes the toils of Sisyphus and uses rhythm and meter to express the difficulty of the labor and the rise and fall of his boulder.

Despite this power of meter that Dionysius describes, many of his critics accuse him of improper scansion of feet in many of his examples. Numerous authors have disagreed with his interpretation of specific meters in poetry and the use of meter in the work of Demosthenes. (Dionysius, 1974)

### **3.6 The three writing styles**

According to Dionysius:

“Style is beautiful when it contains beautiful words; that beauty of words is caused by beautiful syllables and letters; and that attractiveness of language is due to words, syllables, and letters which please the ear by virtue of some affinity; and that the difference in detail between these, through which are revealed the characters, feelings, dispositions, actions, and attendant qualities of the persons described are made what they are through the original grouping of letters. (Dionysius, 1974)

Dionysius returns to the metaphor of painting when describing his ideas on style. He states that there are many different types of composition and, just as every artist mixes paints differently, so too



does every writer combine words differently. Still, he states that there are only three truly different forms, which he welcomes the reader to name as they will.

While Dionysius wrote about three styles of writing in *On Demosthenes* as well, he changed the styles slightly during the break he took to write *On literary Composition*. Originally, he wrote about the traditional set of the plain, the grand, and the mixed styles, not that different from what is found in the works of Cicero and Demetrius. But his sabbatical brought about changes to the terms he used as well as his concept of the meaning of style. These “styles” are all referring to sentence structure only, not to the more general sense of style which includes word selection and figures of speech (Dionysius, 1974, p. 167).

The grand style represents ornamentation and grandeur. A chosen example of this is Thucydides, who is the “standard and canon” of style that is elaborate, extravagant, ornate, and ornamented (Kennedy, 1994, p. 164)."

The Plain style is based around the language of daily life, and Lysias is his chosen example to illustrate it. The Mixed style is a simple combination of elements of the two.

The new styles were the austere, the polished, and the tempered. Unlike the traditional styles, which represent word choice, these new styles represent the function of word composition in the sentence. The styles were:

The Austere: While Thucydides represented a formal, grand style, Dionysius also felt that he his words were often jarring when placed together and that his style had more of chaotic, unplanned quality that stood in contrast to highly planned speech, but was still capable of ornamentation. The austere style was natural, chaotic, and free of restraints. At the same time, it carried tradition from the past.

Dionysius sees Thucydides as discordant and rough. His style nevertheless has a certain archaic beauty. In his commentary *On Thucydides*, he mentions that “Thucydides, the very best of all historians,



at times fails in the purpose of his work and shows a falling off in power.” While he criticized some of Thucydides techniques as a historian, he also approved of his use of the austere style as fitting towards his origin and accepted that he showed artistic skill through his power in narrative, dignity, and pathos.(Dionysius & Pritchett, 1975)

The Polished style is the direct opposite. More mechanical about its use of language, perhaps even mathematical, the polished style is depicted by Isocrates among rhetors, but is frequently used by poets, such as Sappho. Above all else, it shows a great deal of craft and precision, since every word is measured and compared with the preceding and subsequent word so that the last letter of one does not clash with the first letter of the next and the sounds produced are smooth and flowing. The polished style is not necessarily formal, but it is exacting.

Dionysius depicts the third style, the tempered, as a mix of the two. The tempered style is carefully crafted, like the polished, but great care is taken to make it appear natural, like the austere. He considers this style the finest, saying that “this kind seems to me to deserve to carry off the first prize, since it represents a sort of mean, and virtue in life, conduct and the arts is a mean, in the view of Aristotle and the other philosophers of his school.”

The tempered style is not strictly defined, as he says it comes in many forms, but the greatest master of the style is that most celebrated of examples, Homer. Dionysius then holds up Demosthenes, Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus as skillful in the tempered style, despite their inferiority to Homer.

Table 3.5 Characteristics of the Three Styles

Style	Characteristics	Example
Austere	Natural	Thucydides
Polished	Smooth	Demosthenes
Tempered	Balanced	Homer



Pope wrote that:

True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance,  
 As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance,  
 'Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence,  
 The Sound must seem an Eccho to the Sense.(Pope, 1716)

This echoes Dionysius' sentiments on the use of style marvelously. Later in the poem, Pope gives examples of how the words can speed up or slow down a line and give life to the poem. It is this same sense that Dionysius wants to give not only to poetry, but to prose as well.

Soft is the Strain when Zephyr gently blows,  
 And the smooth Stream in smoother Numbers flows;  
 But when loud Surges lash the sounding Shore,  
 The hoarse, rough Verse shou'd like the Torrent roar.

These verses illustrate how the arrangement of the words interacts with the word choice and creates different tones in each line that fit the described actions. It also illustrates how two similar sounds can have different effects by contrasting the “s” sound and the “sh” sound.

### **3.7 Prose and Poetry**

*On Literary Composition* is written with the purpose of providing techniques that are of equal importance to both poetry and prose. Ultimately, even Demosthenes is found lacking. Dionysius only seems to consider Homer above reproach, due to his use of the well-mixed style. Homer comes out just as favorably in the final section of the work, where Dionysius describes how elements of poetry can benefit prose and vice versa.



He writes that “Any passage that is composed without metre is incapable of acquiring the music of spoken verse or the grace of lyric, at least through mere word arrangement.” He grudgingly provides an exception for word choice particular to the traditional “Grand” writing style (Dionysius, 1974).

Despite earlier mention of the utility of meter in prose, Dionysius does not favor writing any prose work entirely in verse, as he states that that would make it a song. Instead, he believes that inserting some meters in prose can assist the work and allow the author to convey mood or relate other information that the audience would not normally receive through text alone. Had he lived in an era with modern printing capacity, he might have compared the use of the poetic elements to the use of illustrations in a book to clarify elements of the book that the text cannot fully convey on its own.



## 4 Comparable works

Two other works are often regarded as a set with *On Literary Composition*. Those are *On Style* by a Demetrius, and *On the Sublime*, attributed to Longinus (Dionysius, 1974). Not a great deal is known about either author, and Longinus is disputed as the author. Nevertheless, the two are considered major works in the history of rhetoric, and are often paired together, as with the Loeb edition, which features the two along with Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle et al., 1995).

### 4.1 Demetrius on Style

While the date of περί ἑρμηνείας, or *On Style*, is uncertain, Demetrius is presumed to have lived in the first century BCE. While Demetrius of Phaleron, a student of Aristotle and ruler of Athens, has at times been identified as the author, it is not even certain that the actual author was named Demetrius. Despite the questions about the authorship, the merit of the text itself is undeniable.

*On Style* reads comfortably as a counterpart to *On Literary Composition*, and begins discussing how clauses are to prose much what meter is to poetry. The author discusses the period, the colon, and the comma, which are clauses, sentences, and pauses. The second part is devoted to style, the χαρακτῆρες τῆς ἑρμηνείας, examines types of style closely (Schenkeveld, 1964).

The specific styles according to Demetrius are: the Grand, Elegant, Plain, and Forceful styles. These four follow a more traditional definition of style than Dionysius, and refer more to word choice. He presents three aspects for each style: thought, diction, and arrangement. The four styles may also be combined, with the exception of the grand and the plain, to form various other styles (Schenkeveld, 1964).

The text is extremely technical and is focused on specific techniques that a rhetor may use in order to succeed stylistically. Dionysius, in contrast, presents his styles as a method of broad method of



analysis but requires a certain experience with imitation of specific writers and a measure of inspiration for success. (Dionysius, 1974)

Just as in Dionysius, *κάλος* and *ἡδονή* play a significant role. The elegant style is the opposite of the grand style, as the former must be smooth and the latter harsh sounding. The source of *χαριτας*, or charm, is the beautiful words that one uses. (Schenkeveld, 1964).

## 4.2 Longinus On the Sublime

Pope makes reference to Longinus with great honor in his *Essay on Literary Criticism*:

Thee, bold Longinus! all the Nine inspire,  
And bless their Critick with a Poet's Fire.  
An ardent Judge, who Zealous in his Trust,  
With Warmth gives Sentence, yet is always Just;  
Whose own Example strengthens all his Laws,  
And Is himself that great Sublime he draws.

While it is uncertain whether Demetrius was the author of *On Style*, it has been attributed to Cassius Longinus, a third century rhetorician, by some and to Dionysius Longinus by others. Nevertheless, scholars almost universally believe that the author of *On the Sublime* was not likely to have been named Longinus at all. One manuscript actually gives Dionysius as the author (Kennedy, 1994, p. 191). Nevertheless, the name of the once presumed author has stuck and this enduring work influenced many, possibly even Dionysius. About a third of the text has been lost, but what remains is a beautifully written study of beautiful writing.

The main thrust of the book is the Attic concern with the death of eloquent writing and speech. Longinus wants to assist a student with the imitation of great models, so he utilizes the three parts of



the Theophrastan model of style and further introduces the power to conceive great thoughts and the use of strong, inspired emotion, both drawn from the classical elements of invention outlined in Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* (Kennedy, 1994, p. 192).

Describing the difference between the true sublime and more common writing, he states that "The true sublime naturally elevates us: uplifted with a sense of proud exaltation, we are filled with joy and pride, as if we ourselves had produced the very thing we heard." The truly sublime is to affect the listener, in turn, with a sense of sublimity. This quality is derived from the uses of the styles, which are drawn from the speaker's life experiences. A speaker can only speak in the grand style if his life has followed a path that lets him do so. The same is true of the other styles. (Aristotle, et al., 1995, p. 185)

*On Style* takes an approach where a student can learn all the elements of the four styles in order to master them and can thereafter use those techniques in life. *On the Sublime*, on the other hand, essentially assumes that only the most gifted will be able to learn from the ancient masters and do more than copy their work (Dionysius, 1974).



## 5 Other Authors on Style

While *On Literary Composition* does not appear to have been mentioned much, if at all, in the prevailing work of rhetoric during Dionysius' life or in the next several centuries, his *On Imitation* was highly influential and quickly took root among the orators of Rome. Nevertheless, his concepts of style were founded on Greek principles which were quite widespread and many other authors wrote extensively on the concepts of style. Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* was of great importance in Dionysius' day, but others likely played a great role in forming and refining Dionysius' concepts of style before and after the historian lived. Style was a common topic for many other writers in the time period including a great many of those names which have come to us from antiquity.

### 5.1 Homer

All of the attributes which Dionysius gives Homer in *On Literary Composition* are superlatives that reach beyond the skill of any of his other subjects. For example: "Now when Homer, the poet with the most voices of all," when describing his use of fine vowels and soft semivowels, or (Dionysius, 1974, p. 117)

While Dionysius is quick to praise or condemn various orators and writers throughout the history of Greece, his chief example and the figure he most admires for use of style is Homer. Fittingly, the poet's work has been a part of the study of style since long before Dionysius wrote. *The Iliad* distinguishes between the styles of three specific figures: Odysseus, Nestor, and Menelaus (Kennedy, 1994, p. 26). Menelaus is given to clear, unornamented speech, which Antenor describes to Helen: "Menelaos indeed spoke rapidly, in few words but exceedingly lucid, since he was no long speaker nor one who wasted his words though he was only a young man." Odysseus in turn seems unremarkable, even foolish, until he speaks: "But when he let the great voice go from his chest, and the words came drifting



down like the winter snows, then no mortal man could stand up against Odysseus.” The third example comes near the beginning when Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel over the slave girl Briseis, Nestor seeks to mediate, and his words are described as “Nestor the fair-spoken rose up, the lucid speaker of Pylos, from whose lips the streams of words ran sweeter than honey (Homer, 1951).”

Menelaus clearly speaks in a plain style, while Odysseus speaks in the grand and Nestor in the smooth. This system is considered a likely influence for the three part method used by Cicero and many who came later (Aristotle, et al., 1995, p. 153).

Study of Homer was common since at least c. 600 BCE, when the poems were spoken out loud in public by rhapsodes, professional performers of poetry in Greece of the time. The actual age of the poems is unknown, although Lycurgus, a legislator of Sparta, is credited with introducing them to Greece from Crete in the eighth or ninth century BCE. The works were variously treated as historical by some and allegorical by others. (Sandys, 1915, pp. 1-2).

For three centuries between 600 and 300 B.C. the Homeric poems were the subject of a considerable amount of uncritical study. Homer was “the educator of Hellas”; and during the fifth century B.C., the Sophists, who were among the most active educators of their age, had naturally much to say of one whose poems formed the foundation of all education at Athens. Thus Protagoras (C. 480-411 B.C.), who classified the modes of expression under the heads of question, answer, prayer and command, ventured to criticize the opening words of the *Illiad*, for expressing what was meant as a *prayer* to the Muse in the form of a *command*, μῆνιν ἄειδε θεά (Sandys, 1915, p. 4).

Dionysius is, indeed, far from alone in his enthusiastic praise of Homer and his remarkably natural, yet eloquent style. While there were minor complaints, such as the quoted



example from Protagoras, critics from ancient times until modern have had nothing but the highest praise for his verses. John A. Scott, in his 1963 *Homer and his Influence* gushed just as fervently when he stated that “Somehow Homer was able to reach poetic effects which seem easy and natural but which have been reached by none besides (Scott, 1963, p. 25).”

## 5.2 Theophrastus

The earliest roots of the three-part study of style within rhetoric are often attributed to Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle, as well as successor to his Peripatetic School. Out of his numerous works on rhetoric, his most influential was *On Style*, where he built on his teacher’s ideas about style and refined them substantially. Aristotle held clarity as the only virtue of style, but Theophrastus came up with four virtues and codified a system that was subsequently refined by many other writers, but remained a standard until the time of Hermogenes. These four virtues are purity, which is the correct use of language, including proper use of case, tense, gender, and number of all words; clarity, which uses common words and simple figures to avoid ambiguity and avoids overly long phrases; propriety, which seeks to avoid extremes; and ornamentation, which is the use of beautiful and distinguished words (Kennedy, 1994, pp. 85-86).

Theophrastus also used the existing concepts of a natural style and an opposing ornate style, which became the plain and grand styles, and added a further mean or middle style (Kennedy, 1994, p. 26). This laid the groundwork for Dionysius and his austere, polished, and mixed styles. In addition, Kennedy claims that Theophrastus may have been the first to have taken an implied division between word choice and composition in style found in Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric* and made it explicit.

Theophrastus’ *On Style* survived into the time of Cicero and was mentioned in the Roman Statesman’s *De Oratore*. In addition to borrowing his selection of styles, Cicero also quoted him



regarding the virtues of style, the rhythm of prose, and the effect of delivery on emotions (Sandys, 1915, p. 27).

### 5.3 Demosthenes

It is not difficult to believe that Demosthenes was a personal hero of Dionysius after reading *On Literary Composition*, which was written right in the middle of the two segments of his *On Demosthenes*. The *First Letter to Ammaeus* certainly adds to that impression with its defense of Demosthenes' originality against accusations that he was merely parroting Aristotle.

Demosthenes was known primarily as a speechwriter, first writing for the courts, but he later wrote what are the first known published deliberative speeches. He wrote a well-known series of speeches against Philip of Macedon attempting to raise Athens up against the Macedonian threat, but to no avail. (Kennedy, 1994, p. 68).

Dionysius was not alone in considering him the master of all styles. Hermogenes concurred, claiming that Demosthenes diversified his style more than anyone else in oratory. He even went so far as to state that "if we discuss him and what is found in his work, we shall in effect have discussed all the types of style (Hermogenes, 1987, p. 2)." The greatest skill that he showed to Hermogenes was the ability to mix the characteristics of three types of rhetoric, deliberative, judicial, and epideictic, all into a single speech regardless of which category it really fell into.

The writing of Demosthenes shaped Hermogenes definition of the types of style. Hermogenes categorized the elements of Demosthenes' style into Clarity, Grandeur, Beauty, Rapidity, Character, Sincerity, and Force, and he used these seven as the basis for his own system of classification of style. The rest of *On Types of Style* continues to use Demosthenes as a frequent point of reference (Hermogenes, 1987).



## 5.4 Cicero

Marcus Tullius Cicero was in his grave before Dionysius began to teach Greek to the sons of Roman nobility, but his work was also rooted strongly in the classical Greece of Aristotle and Plato. Cicero may have lived centuries after Aristotle and Theophrastus, but the rediscovery and republishing of much of Aristotle's work in his lifetime allowed the Peripatetic to influence him as it did Dionysius. Cicero had studied in the east as a young man, and had taken part in rites of the Greek mystery religions. As a Roman politician, he was also an orator, and it was in that capacity that he put the teachings of the Peripatetic masters into practice.

Cicero's chief text in the field of rhetoric is *De Oratore*, translated as *On the Ideal Orator*. In this text, he portrays statesmen and rhetors of his youth, including his teacher, in a lengthy, sometimes heated dialogue discussing the importance of rhetoric and attempting to discern the qualities necessary for the best possible oratory.

The third book of *De Oratore* focuses mostly on style and touches upon both word arrangement and rhythm. Cicero has his mentor, Lucius Licinius Crassus, as a mouthpiece, in the tradition of Plato's use of Socrates, when he states that:

The next point is the connection of words, which involves, in particular, two requirements: they must, in the first place, be arranged, and in the second, have a certain cadence and form. Their arrangement includes putting together and positioning the words in such a way that their juxtaposition is neither harsh nor gaping, but well joined and smooth (Cicero, et al., 2001, p. 276).

Crassus continues the discussion, explaining how Isocrates is credited with first applying rhythms to smooth out the rough nature of the ancient way of speaking, applying the techniques of the musicians to eloquent prose. He gives the ability to merge thoughts and words



together skillfully into a rhythmic fashion as a hallmark of an orator. This capacity does not come from unusual words, as the speech of an orator draws from the same words as a conversation, but rather, the appropriate use of the three styles (Cicero, et al., 2001, pp. 278-279).

## 5.5 [Cicero]

Cicero was long credited with writing the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (Rhetoric to Herrenius), a highly Aristotelian look at rhetoric which dealt primarily with the three styles, the plain, the middle, and the grand. While his authorship is disputed, and indeed highly unlikely, as no reference to the work is found in discussion of his catalog until the time of St. Jerome (<Cicero> *Ad C. Herennium de ratione dicendi* (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*), 1954, p. viii), the work devotes the entirety of its fourth and final book to a treatise on style.

The author of the text claims that understanding of the Greek work in style will help the reader better understand his own method, but he also discredits the Greek habit of using classical work for examples and provides a lengthy explanation on why the Greek writers are so prone to seek within their canon for illustration of concepts. According to the author, the four reasons for the Greeks to avoid crafting their own examples are to avoid showing off, the example functions like the testimony of another to give credit to their points, the prestige of the classical writers gives credence to the example, and the technique of selecting diverse examples is itself an artform and proves the knowledge of the writer(<Cicero> *Ad C. Herennium de ratione dicendi* (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*), 1954, pp. 229-235).

The unknown writer skewers each of these reasons. The claim of modesty he refutes by pointing out that if a writer is to be truly modest and avoid self-aggrandizement, he would not be able to present his own ideas at all and could not write. This does not seem to be a particularly valid reason to Dionysius, who shows respect to the very best writers, Demosthenes, Isocrates, and Homer, but has no sense of humility in the majority of his words. Many of his examples are negative; in particular those



which he claims are put together with no artistry, such as his quote from the sophist Hegesias recalling the torture of a Syrian commander who opposed Alexander. Dionysius criticizes Hegesias for believing himself better than the writers who came before him, and then compares the passage where the man is dragged behind a chariot to his death with the an excerpt from the *Iliad* recounting Achilles' desecration of Hector's body with his own chariot. The comparison is not favorable.

The second point and third points, that the examples serve to give the testimony of the ancients and that their prestige extends to your own work, he refutes by stating that examples should not serve as testimony, but to clarify a point. He writes that "The difference between testimony and example is this: by example we clarify the nature of our statement, while by testimony we establish its truth." He finds fault with the idea that a writer teaches his own original ideas mostly by presenting the ideas of others. Dionysius does not, however, claim to have invented the system of style, rather, he analyses and categorizes it.

The fourth point, that selecting appropriate quotes from the works of the classic authors demonstrates skill and knowledge, he tackles by pointing out that it takes more skill and knowledge to craft your own examples. Anyone who has knowledge of the topic will have the capacity to recognize examples in the given style, but it takes a master to craft those examples. Dionysius does utilize classical quotes to makes his points, but he also innovated with his technique of rewriting famous lines in different orders to prove the importance of word order. Perhaps it takes less skill to rewrite a line badly than to create a beautiful line whole cloth, but it allows Dionysius to make his point effectively (<Cicero> *Ad C. Herennium de ratione dicendi (Rhetorica ad Herennium)*, 1954).

The author points to three qualities that he sees necessary for a style to be "appropriate and finished" which are derived from the Theophrastan model. These are Taste, Artistic Composition, and Distinction, which shuffle around some of the prior ideas but reject appropriateness entirely. Taste is a



matter of grammatical purity of the language (*Latinitas*, corresponding to the Greek *Ελληνισμος*) and clarity.

The author describes Artistic Composition in a manner similar to Dionysius, but much simpler. He is concerned with avoidance of any combination of vowels that lead to a harsh sounding style or that frequently repeat the same letter or word. Overly long sentences are also out.

## 5.6 Philodemus

One figure whose lifespan overlapped with Dionysius also played a great role in contributing to the modern understanding of classical Greek. Philodemus the Epicurean, student of Zeno and teacher of the poet Virgil, known for his poetry and his texts on rhetoric. Excavations in Herculaneum have discovered a wealthy villa with a very large number of sticks that seemed to be charcoal around. Investigations show that the sticks are actually scrolls, the writing of Philodemus, a frequent houseguest of the home's owner. Archaeologists have been working for many years now to read and decipher these terribly damaged old documents, but it is very slow due to the delicate nature of the material.

Philodemus separates epideictic rhetoric from forensic and deliberative, believing that only the former is artistic, albeit useless in any practical way, whereas the latter two are skills which improve only with practice. He sees six qualities to be found in good prose. Those are: Style, Correctness, Clarity, Forcefulness, Brevity, and Propriety.

Forcefulness is an addition of his own to a list which otherwise comes intact from the stoics as an interpretation of the Theophrastus' virtues of style. Dionysius is also highly interested in the quality of forcefulness or emphasis, which Dionysius refers to as "δεινότες" (deinotes) in his own work.

Kennedy states that there is no reason to believe that Dionysius was familiar with the work of Philodemus, but Philodemus was also a believer in the idea that practice was vital for the creation of great rhetoric. Philodemus argued for the union of the style, in particular the arrangement of *stoichea*,



or units of sound, and content in any work, the two served to provide intellectual pleasure together. .  
(Kennedy, 1994, p. 94).

## 5.7 Hermogenes

While Hermogenes of Tarsus lived almost two centuries later, his work was founded on the same Attic principles as Dionysius. Hermogenes was so highly regarded that, according to legend, emperor Marcus Aurelius went to hear him speak when the orator was only fifteen. His chief work, *On Types of Style*, takes an exhaustive look at categorizing every possible style that the author can conceive of. While Dionysius and Cicero believed that no matter the name, there were really only three types of style, Hermogenes wrote of seven styles and then broke several of those into variants, producing twenty types of styles (Hermogenes, 1987, p. xi).

While these styles are partly concerned with word choice and use of figures of speech, they also take into account word order, cadence, and rhythm. These seven are Clarity, Grandeur, Beauty, Rapidity, Character, Sincerity, and Force. These, in turn branch out into thirteen additional categories, creating a total of twenty different styles. While many of these styles could be grouped into plain, middle, or grand, there are still several that are not found at all in Cicero or Dionysius. The concept is also closer to Demetrius in the idea that the styles are not all mutually exclusive. Many of these styles are categorized as components of styles or even elements necessary for writing by some of his predecessors. For example, clarity is a style according to Hermogenes, but Aristotle treats clarity as an element of style that plays a role in all work (Hermogenes, 1987, p. 133).

Hermogenes presents his case that the types of style (ιδεαι) are the most critical area of knowledge for an orator, as knowledge of the types of style allows evaluation of the style of others. This knowledge can be applied to the works of the ancient orators or those of his own time to become a



“craftsman of fine and noble speeches (Hermogenes, 1987, p. 1).” In fact, he believes that any who attempt to imitate the ancients without this knowledge, no matter how gifted, are doomed to fail.

Unlike Dionysius, Hermogenes places a great deal of the burden for stylistic effect of a passage on the actual content. While his predecessors held that only certain styles were appropriate to certain content, Hermogenes uses the content as his basis for all stylistic effects (Hermogenes, 1987, p. 133). By placing this emphasis on content, Hermogenes not only distinguishes his concept of style, but also manages to dig deeper in his analysis.

Hermogenes has much to say about Demosthenes as well. He points to Demosthenes as one who utilized every type of style in his own writing, masterfully melding styles as necessary due to his skill in political oratory. He was quick to overstep the boundaries that Aristotle placed separating Deliberative, Forensic, and Epideictic oratory. Still, he claims that Demosthenes most used Clarity, Grandeur, Beauty, Rapidity, Character, Sincerity, and Force, all mixed together to some extent.

Hermogenes is concerned with rhythm and meter as well, but distinguishes rhythm as the pattern caused by the arrangement of words and the natural pauses in a clause.

Beauty (*καλος*) is another goal which Hermogenes has shifted into a style. In this case, however, it is a matter of word choice, as it means use of beautiful words which can serve to soften a speech and charm an audience. According to Hermogenes:

The beauty that is found in a passage would properly be the kind that is created by all those elements that produce all the types in it, that is thoughts, approaches, diction, etc. It must be harmonious and well-tempered, with a certain uniform quality of character appropriate to the type throughout the entire passage, just as complexion in the body. What I have said is true whether one chooses to working one particular style



or to blend them all together, in whatever varied way they lend themselves to combination, to pursue a varied and typically Demostheneic kind of style that is really suited to political discourse, or to combine only certain styles with others (Hermogenes, 1987, p. 54).

Hermogenes, like Dionysius, sees beauty in the work of Isocrates. The clauses flow smoothly, without clashing vowels, and the whole is held together by harmonious sounds. In addition, Hermogenes claims that the short clauses are linked together very closely, in a way which shows great craftsmanship and some ornamentation (Hermogenes, 1987, p. 61). Dionysius does not discuss ornamentation much, but his polished and tempered styles both thrive when the author shows skill and effort.

According to Wooten, in his introduction to his translation of *On Types of Style*, this system of styles replaced the three traditional styles, plain, middle, and grand, which had cropped up during the Hellenistic period. They were influenced by Theophrastus's virtues of style, but more numerous and used as a classification system for elements found in style. This system not only survived, but flourished and made its way through the Byzantine Empire to be reintroduced to the West in 1426. It was translated into Latin in 1614, in time to participate in the Renaissance, where Wooten claims it became a standard text that influenced countless more (Hermogenes, 1987).



## 6 The Present Day

Rhetoric exists in changed ways in the present, but a great many of the classical forms still survive. Declamation may not have the prominence it once held in education, but debate teams still exist, and public speaking classes are considered essential by many schools. Deliberative rhetoric still plays a role in politics, and Johnny Cochran proved that Forensic rhetoric is still relevant in an age where evidence is given such prominence in court. Epideictic rhetoric may have waned in its classical usages, although funerary oratory still matters, but there are plenty of new forms that have stepped in to take its place.

*On Literary Composition* is clearly of use to linguists and scholars of classical Greek, and it provides an example of ancient literary criticism to those who study literature, but the question remains whether it can teach anything of value to the modern rhetorician.

One example is to look at the popularity of internet communication, such as blogs and youtube videos. These are often very informal, but those which are meant to educate and those which are meant to persuade are very different in style from those which are meant to entertain.

In order to consider the text useful for a modern student of rhetoric, it would have to teach lessons that can carry across into modern applications of rhetoric, which still finds a great deal of use in both persuasion and entertainment.

### 6.1 Historical value for rhetoric

Just as *On Literary Composition* provides insight into the ancient Greek language and preserves excerpts from lost poetry, so too does the content provide historical value in the field of rhetoric. Dionysius provides a view of the conflict in Asian and Attic styles that took place during the reign of Augustus. By explaining and defending the classic style with classic examples, he fought the battle himself while only rarely mentioning the Asiatics such as Hegesias (Reid, 1996).



Dionysius provides the same service as Hermogenes, allowing the student of rhetoric a clearer understanding of what has come before by providing a detailed categorization system that builds on the classic concepts. Whereas Hermogenes attempts to map every possible branch of style, Dionysius provides a streamlined system by examining only a part of style and limiting the possible categories to three. The number may be restrictive, but it also allows easy comparison of the two opposing styles and provides the third as a middle ground. This allows for a simpler contrast between Demosthenes and Thucydides, which irks many who have analyzed the work, but it also lets a student of the classics form a quick frame of reference to mentally categorize the work of each.

In addition, Dionysius gives a modern student of rhetoric an alternative view, one which is unabashedly critical of many highly regarded writers and orators of ancient Greece, reserving perfection only for the demigod Homer.

## 6.2 Rhetorical value

According to Robert Reid in his analysis of *On Literary Composition for Rhetoric Review*: “Dionysius by assessing distinctions in literate compositional style, argues that careful attention to form is as important as consideration of content and should be considered “prior in potency.”” A speaker uses the form to create a context that not only delivers the content to the audience, but makes it more forceful and persuasive (Reid, 1996).

Content is vital, but, as with the classical writers, Reid argues for the importance of the presentation of that content. A clear style will make it easier to understand, words that fit together smoothly will make it more appealing, and proper arrangement will affect the listener’s understanding of the topic. Dionysius would not have been likely to argue, like Gorgias, that his knowledge and subject matter were unimportant in comparison to his rhetorical ability, but the essay focuses entirely on the method of packaging that content for more effective delivery to the intended audience.



### 6.3 Modern opinions

Just as Dionysius was seen as foolish despite his education and unable to see past himself in his criticism of Thucydides by modern reviewers, so too has *On Literary Composition* suffered barbs from critics. In particular, he has often been criticized for his own criticism of other authors, especially those who came long before, such as Thucydides.

In his introduction to *On Thucydides*, Pritchett includes a series of excerpts from reviews of Dionysius' commentary on Thucydides. Most of the critics find Dionysius small-minded and take offense at the idea that Dionysius would have liked to have seen Thucydides use elements in his history that were not developed until centuries later. He decried the formal and unnatural style of the text, but that was the prevailing style of the time. One of the critics that Pritchett presents states in 1970 that:

Dionysus writing from a strict-school rhetorician's point of view, and condemning Thucydides accordingly is rather like Bentley criticizing Milton from the point of view of a stricter, and tamer, standard of English than Milton's own.

Another, writing in 1881, complains that the commentary:

Adds nothing to our knowledge of the book; but it throws a striking light on the narrow and feeble intelligence of the Graeco-Roman rhetorician and historian of the first century B.C., and of the world for which he wrote. (Dionysius & Pritchett, 1975)

S.F. Bonner is critical of many of the same flaws in his book on the work of Dionysius, but he is more forgiving of the whole. He sees a lack of mental elasticity on the part of Dionysius that is derived



from his rhetorical training which is dominated by either/or binary conclusions. He also sees Dionysius as prone to use weak evidence derived from a compulsion to defend his argument at all costs. He also accuses Dionysius of dividing feet in his examples in manners that are most suited to defend his claims, but not necessarily accurate (Bonner, 1969, p. 73).

Nevertheless, he also sees great value in the work. If his scansion is questionable, his analysis of style is still so extremely detailed that it impresses Bonner significantly. He sees the choice of examples and their microscopic examination in the sections dealing with sound choice as the most detailed analysis in Dionysius's work and states that:

All this is indeed excellent analysis, which reveals not only a penetrating mind, but a real enthusiasm for literature. It is true that Dionysius may have to face the objection that much of Homer's artistry may have been unconscious, or at any rate subconscious; but as an example of methodical study this passage would be hard to surpass (Bonner, 1969).

Bonner is also intrigued by Dionysius's use of recasting example sentences in "a novel and convincing manner," which contrasts with the less than convincing divisions of his earlier examples into metric feet.

W. Rhys Roberts, in the introduction to his translation of *On Literary Composition*, quotes several critics of Dionysius who have a more respectful view of the essay. In particular, one 1901 critic gives such glowing praise that Roberts sees fit to end the introduction with the quote:

In this treatise Dionysius reviews and attempts to explain the art of literature. It is a brilliant effort to analyze the sensuous emotions produced by the harmonious arrangement of beautiful words. Its eternal truth might make it a textbook for to-day.



## 6.4 Aural Rhetoric

Aural rhetoric pertains to the studied use of sound in communication beyond the mere speaking of words. It is the auditory counterpart to visual rhetoric. Just as the use of colors, layout, and images aids text in visual communication, so can spoken words be supplemented?

The ubiquity of electronic devices that provide sight and sound playback means that anyone can communicate verbally with a large audience. While television and radio had rhetorical qualities from their origins, society is now accustomed to receiving short bursts of communication from all over in ways that are unprecedented, and advertisers, politicians, and any trying to persuade the public must fight to get their idea across in what is often a very limited amount of time and in competition with countless other similar messages. This means that messages must be particularly well crafted and carry as much information as possible. Music and visuals will often set a mood, but if the words can carry more information than mere content, that space will be used much more efficiently. The lessons of Dionysius on use of style and on the impact of particular arrangement of words are as relevant as ever. Consistent style will mark a brand and help a customer to associate certain words with the brand.

While we cannot copy the same uses of meter that Dionysius uses, due to the very different nature of English from Attic Greek, phrases that contain elements of verse can be particularly powerful in any language. Advertisements often use short verses of song, even when the rest of the advertisement is spoken, due to the effectiveness of the words in meter. Thus, while meter may not be as important as style, especially in prose, it is still relevant.

In a 2009 article in *Computers and Composition*, Jeff Rice of Wayne State University proposed the necessity of aurality for educational purposes in the digital age. Modern students learn in very different ways from past students, and they are far more likely to be drawn to visual and aural elements in education due to the context of their lives (Rice, 2006).



Perhaps most modern rhetors will not examine every single letter as closely as Dionysius, but the concept that a single letter or syllable can matter due to the context it provides can be extremely helpful when one must be brief and informative or entertaining.



## 7 Conclusion

While it is impossible to recommend the work for any other group as strongly as students of classical Greek, the book does have great value in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Dionysius presents word arrangement, meter, and other elements useful for orators and examines each in exhaustive depth. The text also preserves fragments of poetry and prose which were otherwise lost in entirety, serving as an excellent resource for students of classical Greek literature.

The chief lesson that Dionysius intended to teach Rufus Metilius was that hard work was necessary to provide effective composition no matter the natural talent of the writer. Even the tempered style of the greatest writers, which combined the thorough polished style and the more natural austere style, required a great deal of effort, perhaps even more than the polished style.

By approaching rhetoric from this perspective, Dionysius gave his student the opportunity to gain mastery without even if they were not naturally gifted in the rhetorical skills. He also provided a system for his students to learn that required more practice and application than the rote distribution of preprepared elements that sophistic teachers and handbook writers often provided their students and readers.

Using the core elements of melody, rhythm, variety, and propriety, even though our application may be different, will still provide benefits to the speaker and writer in modern times, and may be even more useful in making the author stand out in the age of the personal spotlight afforded by blogging, podcasting, and Youtube.

Perhaps the awareness of our words and the careful task of arranging them is the greatest lesson to be learned from Dionysius. As he tells young Metilius, regardless of which techniques we use, as meticulous orators and writers, we can achieve much more with our work than those who put little thought or effort into their words.



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