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Review of Neil O'Sullivan, *Alcidamas, Aristophanes and the Beginnings of Greek Stylistic Theory*

Abstract
Most of us tend to think of the fourth century BC as the time when a reasonably standardized vocabulary for rhetoric developed, and along with it an increasingly selfconscious and systematized notion of the TE/XNH of persuasion. There is certainly some truth in this; but it is also very likely that, if we simply had more evidence from the fifth century, particularly about the sophists, we would have to reformulate significantly our understanding not only of the development of rhetoric but of the entire contemporary intellectual landscape as well. O'Sullivan's monograph, a revision of a 1986 Cambridge PhD dissertation, cannot of course conjure up a new body of fifth-century evidence, but it does make us rethink many of the common presumptions about the early development of Greek rhetorical theory.

Comments
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Neil O'Sullivan, *Alcidamas, Aristophanes and the Beginnings of Greek Stylistic Theory*. Hermes Einzelschriften Heft 60. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992. Pp. 162. ISBN 3-515-05420-0.

Reviewed by Ralph M. Rosen, University of Pennsylvania.

Most of us tend to think of the fourth century BC as the time when a reasonably standardized vocabulary for rhetoric developed, and along with it an increasingly self-conscious and systematized notion of the TE/XNH of persuasion. There is certainly some truth in this; but it is also very likely that, if we simply had more evidence from the fifth century, particularly about the sophists, we would have to reformulate significantly our understanding not only of the development of rhetoric but of the entire contemporary intellectual landscape as well. O'Sullivan's monograph, a revision of a 1986 Cambridge PhD dissertation, cannot of course conjure up a new body of fifth-century evidence, but it does make us rethink many of the common presumptions about the early development of Greek rhetorical theory.

O'Sullivan's central claim is deceptively simple, namely that the polarity between the "grand" and "thin" styles so prevalent in rhetorical writings of the fourth century can be traced to various debates of the previous century, especially in the kind of positions maintained by Gorgias and Prodicus. He makes much of the agon between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, and argues that each tragedian there represents an opposing LE/CIS (the fourth-century technical term for "style"). At first glance, one might wonder why anyone would consider such claims controversial or new. But in fact, as O'Sullivan makes clear in his introductory first chapter, while studies in fifth-century rhetoric and poetics abound, very few bother to examine fifth-century material in the light of later traditions. In the case of Aristophanes, O'Sullivan is justifiably concerned that there has not been "sufficient methodical analysis of Aristophanes' language and ideas in the *Frogs* in comparison with later theory to ma ke it clear just how fixed were the characteristics of two opposing styles by the end of the fifth century" (p. 8). What makes O'Sullivan's approach to familiar material unusual is that he looks back at the fifth century from a fourth-century (and later) perspective. His expertise in fourth-century stylistics enables him to analyze the diffuse and disembodied fifth-century evidence more acutely than those who more commonly begin in the fifth century and work forward. Although this sort of "reading backward" can be a perilous methodology, O'Sullivan seems aware of the dangers and almost always displays good judgment in delicate moments, avoiding heavy-handed dogmatism where the evidence is suggestive but inconclusive. In the process of arguing for his thesis, he connects a host of well-known topics and themes in fresh and subtle ways which ultimately enhance and augment our view of the fifth-century intellectual milieu.

The main body of the book, consisting of two central chapters (Chapter II: "Alcidamas and Isocrates on Style"; Chapter III: "Alcidamas and the *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi*"), concerns the stylistic theories of Alcidamas, his notorious professional rivalry with Isocrates, and the programmatic significance of the *Certamen* (a work which probably goes back to a version by Alcidamas). O'Sullivan focuses on Alcidamas and Isocrates because they represent so well the explicit dichotomy between the "grand" and "thin" that appears inchoate in Aristophanes. The terms of this dichotomy had evolved somewhat by the fourth century, when, as O'Sullivan argues, the battle was specifically being waged between proponents of the extemporaneous, oral style of speechwriting (Alcidamas) with its characteristic penchant for dramatic effect and emotional display, and proponents of the opposite, carefully crafted, "written" style (Isocrates), with its emphasis on verbal A)KRI/BEIA and clear exposition. Having analyzed the ways in which the fourth century conceptualized the more general conflict between the "grand" and "thin" styles, O'Sullivan then returns to Aristophanes in the final chapter (Chapter IV: "Aristophanes on Orators' Styles"), where he examines how the poet speaks of orators, and argues quite persuasively that he did indeed have a conception of and distinct vocabulary for differing oratorical styles. O'Sullivan hopes to show in the end that Aristophanes also distinguished orators' styles according to the "grand-thin" stylistic opposition, and therefore that the manifestations of this opposition in later rhetorical theory can be seen to have their origin in the rhetorical discourse of the fifth century.

Chapter II focuses in particular on Alcidamas' extant PERI\ SOFISTW=N in an effort to show (a) that the style of the work mirrors its content, namely a defense what Aristotle calls the "competitive" style (LE/CIS A)GWNISTIKH/) as superior to the "written" style (LE/CIS GRAFIKH/); and (b) that the "level of stylistic consciousness and differentiation which the speech exhibits" offers the "earliest evidence for a clear distinction between different Greek prose styles that we have" (31). By analyzing Alcidamas' actual style -- with its preponderance of abstract nouns, redundant words, awkward periphrases, uneven syntax, and the like -- and by suggesting that this style is of the sort that someone trained in extemporaneous rhetoric might use, O'Sullivan succeeds in clarifying just where the battle-lines were drawn in the confusing fourth-century controversies over style. For example, earlier scholars, influenced by Aristotle's famous criticism of Alcidamas at *Rhet.* 3.3, where he accuses the sophist of stylistic "frigidity" and poeticism, tended to consider the "poetic" style of Alcidamas to be similar to Isocrates'. Both sophists, after all, were held in antiquity to be students of Gorgias, and both are commonly thought of as practitioners of "artistic" prose. But O'Sullivan has shown that such a conception obscures a much more subtle state of affairs in the literary polemics of the day. As he argues, "poetic" prose was hardly a monolithic concept at the time, and just because Aristotle censures Alcidamas for "poeticism" (mainly in his use of metaphor) does not mean, as many have concluded, that his prose style resembled the famously "poetic" prose of Isocrates (cf. p. 40). In fact, O'Sullivan shows clearly how labile the very notion of "poetic" was in the prose theory of the time, and how incomplete our usual characterizations about it are, when both Alcidamas and Isocrates considered the charge of poeticism in prose to be derogatory and "defined 'poetic' prose by the other's practice" (51). O'Sullivan's stylistic analysis of the PERI\ SOFISTW=N, then, shows Alcidamas

writing in a manner quite distinct from Isocrates, one which embraced the rhetorical theory that distinguished him from the Isocratean camp.

O'Sullivan elaborates in the third section of Chapter II (pp. 42-62) the subtle and often confusing details of the stylistic antagonism by examining a variety of fourth-century evidence, including Plato, Aristotle and of course the speeches of Isocrates himself. As is typical of so much of the intellectual discourse of the period, we find the entire dispute articulated in terms of polarities. Alcidamas, the champion of the LE/CIS A)GWNISTIKH/, valued TU/XH over TE/XNH, since spontaneity in composition allowed for last-minute insertions, making it particularly suitable for forensic, agonistic contexts. For him, attention to polish and craft takes the edge off a speech, and renders it less effective. Isocrates, on the other hand, a proponent of the LE/CIS GRAFIKH/, prized A)KRI/BEIA, TE/XNH and KOMYO/THS above all, and faulted the opposite style for A(PLO/THS and A)FE/LEIA. Interestingly, the terms of the dispute were agreed upon by each side -- each would no doubt agree to any charges leveled at the other -- but a fundamental disagreement remained over which style was more persuasive, and to some extent, O'Sullivan suggests, which was more ethical (cf. p. 59). Throughout this chapter O'Sullivan negotiates the subtle twists and turns of this ongoing fourth-century debate and shows how the contrast between an "unwritten" and "written" style is really an updated version of the "grand" -- "thin" dichotomy first articulated a century earlier.

Before returning to Aristophanes in the last chapter to argue for this position in greater detail, O'Sullivan examines the *Certamen Hesiodi et Homeri* in Chapter III as another possible source of Alcidamantine literary polemics. The chapter brings up some old chestnuts -- e.g., problems of authorship, the significance of the Homer-Hesiod rivalry for Alcidamas' literary program -- but O'Sullivan's interpretation of the work goes farther than others in situating its ideas in a broader intellectual and literary context. O'Sullivan argues that the contest between Homer and Hesiod reflects much more of Alcidamas' views on literature and rhetoric than has traditionally been discussed. To this end, O'Sullivan examines in fascinating detail the role of Homer and Hesiod in sophistic thought of the fifth century, and shows that even this early on literary theorists could speak of Homer in terms that anticipated the hellenistic dichotomy between *ingenium* and *ars.* Democritus (cf. DK B 18, 21) and Plato (e.g. in the *Ion*) opposed FU/SIS and TE/XNH as yardsticks of poetic quality, but, O'Sullivan maintains, this contrast was equally "being used to characterize different *styles* of poetry and oratory at the time Democritus and Plato were writing. To identify the source of 'good' poetry was, however vaguely, to make a stylistic judgement" (p. 70-1).

In examining the status of Homer and Hesiod in fifth-century thought, O'Sullivan exposes various conflicts that existed among the sophists of the time. Basically he is arguing for a line of influence as follows: Gorgias (champion of Homer, PA/QOS in rhetoric, linguistic indeterminacy, YUXAGWGI/A of the audience) > Alcidamas; Prodicus (proponent of O)RQO/THS O)NOMA/TWN, A)KRI/BEIA, TE/XNH) > Isocrates. But even to establish this simple genealogy, O'Sullivan must confront a number of problems: Was there an articulated theoretical dispute between Prodicus and Gorgias? (O'Sullivan argues that there was); Did Prodicus champion Hesiod as Gorgias championed Homer? (cf. pp.

76-77 on the Hesiodic influence on Prodicus' (*W(=RAI and his appeal to Hesiod at Plato *Protagoras* 339b); Did Prodicus influence Isocrates in any direct sense? (for evidence cf. p. 73, with n. 67); How would such influence square with the strong ancient tradition that Isocrates too was a student of Gorgias? O'Sullivan's answer to this last question reveals a bifurcated line of influence (cf. pp. 57-58): even though Isocrates seems to have aligned himself with the theoretical school represented by Prodicus, he also took from Gorgias "poetic" elements of *composition* as opposed to *diction* (e.g., prose rhythm as opposed to the jarring "frigid" metaphors for which Aristotle censured Alcidamas).

The most provocative section of Chapter III is perhaps the last part, in which O'Sullivan detects traces of Alcidamantine theory in the *Certamen* and argues that the actual contest between Hesiod and Homer reflects a host of opposing rhetorical strategies in which Alcidamas would have an obvious interest. When, for example, Hesiod asks Homer what is the best thing he can say in the shortest space of time (E)N D' E)LAXI/STW| A)/RISTON E)/XEIS O(/ TI FU/ETAI EI)PEI=N; 166), O'Sullivan sees behind this a debate over BRAXULOGI/A and MAKROLOGI/A in speechmaking, a debate that he earlier traced to Gorgias and Prodicus (cf. p. 19), and which he now relates to Alcidamas and Isocrates. Similarly, O'Sullivan detects in *Certamen* 170-71 hints of the extremely important debate over KAIRO/S in rhetoric (a complex problem in the case of Isocrates, who seemed to use the term differently than Alcidamas, cf. pp. 92-94). No one would doubt that Alcidamas composed a version of the *Certamen* for programmatic reasons, but O'Sullivan has successfully isolated in it a number of specific connections with Alcidamas' other work and with contemporary stylistic theory. Moreover, he has shown that framing the issues in terms of an opposition between Homer and Hesiod was probably not Alcidamas' own invention, but rather the legacy of the fifth-century sophists who had already begun to exploit the two poets for their own literary, educational and rhetorical polemics.

With the final chapter (Chapter IV: "Aristophanes on Orators' Styles") we reach the true denouement of the book. O'Sullivan here returns to the issues that he broached in the Introduction. There he had argued that Aristophanes conceived of Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs* as discrete "stylistic types", representing the "grand" and the "thin" styles respectively, and he suggested that this stylistic division reflected a prevailing contemporary rhetorical debate represented by (if not originating in) a rivalry between Gorgias and Prodicus. In Chapter IV, O'Sullivan turns his attention from Aristophanes' characterizations of poets to his descriptions of orators, and argues that in this arena too the same sort of opposition between "grand" and "thin" can be found. In many ways this chapter will have the most widespread appeal, and should be required reading of all students of Aristophanes, for it offers a very sensitive and careful reevaluation of an author on whom we rely heavily for our notions of fifth-century aesthetics.

O'Sullivan argues that Aristophanes has a perception of the *genus grande* and *genus tenue* that links a variety of writers and speakers. The poet regards, in other words, the oratory of Pericles or Cleon as essentially analogous to the rhetorical ideas of Gorgias and the poetics of Aeschylus *in terms of style.* Likewise, Aristophanes sees the

"chatterbox" orator Phaeax (cf. *Knights* 1375-78), Prodicus, Socrates, and Euripides operating within the same basic style. This is, on the surface anyway, certainly an appealing conclusion, but is ultimately persuasive only because of O'Sullivan's subtle argumentation. A good example of this is the case of Pericles' notoriously thunderous public performances. Ancient tradition, going back at least to Cicero (*Orat.* 29), regarded Pericles as a representative of the grand style, and Plutarch (*Per.* 8) cites his characterization in *Acharnians* 531 (H)/STRAPT', E)BRO/NTA) as evidence. But modern scholars have been generally skeptical of this. O'Sullivan sets out the methodological problems honestly: "It is one thing to acknowledge that BRONTA=N and so on characterize Pericles' oratory, but quite another to claim that such descriptions show a stylistic discrimination on the part of the poets ... A more promising approach to the problem might be found if we look beyond the metaphor of thunder to see what quality of sound it was trying to catch" (pp. 108-9). Here is where O'Sullivan's earlier chapters on fifth-century poetics and fourth-century rhetoric come into play, for if "loudness" was associated in the case of Aristophanes' Aeschylus with the grand style of poetry, and, later, with the grand style of oratory (cf. p. 111), then it makes sense that "the comparison of [Pericles'] oratory with thunder is not just a reference to decibels" (112), but rather is a specific *stylistic* characterization. But there is much more to the characterization of Pericles: a famous passage from Eupolis' *Demes* (102KA) describes Pericles as "most forceful at speaking" (KRA/TISTOS LE/GEIN<), a "fast" speaker (TAXU/S), one who could "charm" (E)KH/LEI) his audience and prick them with a "goad" (KE/NTRON). O'Sullivan shows convincingly that that these were all considered hallmarks of the grand style, aligning Pericles stylistically with Aeschylus, Gorgias, and Alcidamas.

The ensuing discussion of Cleon's portrait in comedy is similarly deft, and, not surprisingly, shows him too as a practitioner of the grand style of rhetoric, but I do find it somewhat disingenuous of O'Sullivan to claim in a footnote (p. 124, n. 119) that Thucydides' presentation of Cleon is beyond his scope. There is no reason why O'Sullivan should ignore Thucydides in favor of, say, comedy, especially since Thucydides is a fifth-century author with much to reveal about contemporary rhetoric. O'Sullivan does cite in the note a number of scholars who have analyzed Cleon's rhetoric in Thucydides in specifically stylistic terms, but these studies have a direct bearing on O'Sullivan's central thesis about the early development of Greek stylistics, and they probably deserve greater credit in general than he gives them.

A discussion of the *genus tenue* in Aristophanes concludes the book, and offers a close analysis of the terms associated with the style. Since there are no sustained portraits of orators representing this style in Aristophanes, as there were for the opposite style, O'Sullivan must make much of the fact that a grand style was so well delineated in the first place (i.e., it must imply its opposite), and rely heavily on the portrait of Euripides in *Frogs.* Although much of the evidence, and many of the characters -- Euripides, Prodicus, Socrates, Agathon -- are familiar, O'Sullivan manages to weave the diverse strands together with appealing insight and coherence. It is no news to anyone, for example, that Euripides has ideological affinities with Socrates in Aristophanes, but O'Sullivan shows how the two are linked in Aristophanes also by the terms used to describe them and to

characterize their respective rhetoric. All the metaphors used to characterize the "Euripidean" orientation -- e.g., chattering, garrulity, chiseling, scratching, bird-like sounds, as well as those associated with "thinness" itself -- are analyzed in such a way as to give a strong indication of a distinct stylistic consciousness.

This is, then, a stimulating study of a subject that crosses many disciplinary boundaries, and will thus be of interest to a variety of classical scholars. While the central thesis of the book is straightforward, the argument is in fact complicated and often, of necessity, indirect. Generally O'Sullivan writes clearly and cogently, and progresses in a smooth logical direction, although I do find that the complexity of the arguments often demands better transitions, summaries and the like. The last chapter, for example, begins as if picking up on the Introduction, but no explicit connection is made at the outset with the chapters immediately preceding. Another related problem with O'Sullivan's own rhetoric is that he sometimes does not sufficiently articulate exactly how a given argument he is making is actually new. As I mentioned earlier, O'Sullivan is working with much well-worn material, and his contributions have more to do with how he establishes a new interpretive framework than with radically reformulating our fundamental perceptions of a period's cultural history. It is difficult on occasion to see just where he diverges from traditional views on certain matters and where he takes over with his own spin. In spite of such problems, O'Sullivan's monograph remains an important and enjoyable work in the history of Greek (and Roman) rhetoric, poetics and aesthetics. It will play a particularly useful role in current discussions about orality and literacy in fifth- and fourth-century Greece, and about the relationships between speakers and audiences (forensic and theatrical) of that period.