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THE DISCOVERY OF LATE-CLASSICAL EPIDEICTIC THEORY  
IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

by Pernille Harsting\*

There are two highpoints in the history of epideictic rhetoric: Late Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. These highpoints are in many ways intimately connected. Most importantly, in both periods we see an endeavour to restore the virtues of bygone classicism. In the first centuries AD this endeavour was manifested in the return to classical linguistic ideals; in the 15th and 16th centuries in the Humanist goal of reviving classical learning. Moreover, the so-called Second Sophistic of Late Antiquity can be seen as a precondition of the Renaissance of the 15th century. For it was to a great extent in the late-classical writings that Renaissance scholars found a key to understanding the culture and literature of Antiquity.

This article is concerned with the transmission of epideictic theory from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance. First it gives a brief presentation of the three major late-classical treatises on epideictic rhetoric. Then it deals with the discovery and dissemination of these Greek texts in the Latin West. And finally it discusses the importance of epideictic theory to the humanists' (and their followers') reading and interpretation of classical literature.

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\* This article presents some of the results of a comprehensive research project, which examines the transmission and reception of ancient epideictic rhetoric in Western Europe from 1400-1700. I would like to thank the Danish Research Council for the Humanities (project no. 9502823) and the Julie von Müllen Foundation for their financial support, which made this research possible, not least the necessary travel to various European libraries. Thanks also go to Russell L. Friedman for looking over my English.

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In the two treatises on epideictic rhetoric from around the end of the third century AD attributed to the Greek rhetorician Menander of Laodicea – better known as Menander Rhetor – we find detailed, practical guide-lines for the writing of a variety of both religious and non-religious epideictic speeches. The epideictic subgenres covered by the treatises range from hymns to the Gods to public and private funeral speeches, wedding speeches, and valedictory speeches, all of these illustrated with examples from mainly classical Greek prose and poetry.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the chapter on the wedding speech, the epithalamium, Menander Rhetor refers to Sappho's wedding poems as well as to the works of Homer and Hesiod as ample sources of material for the third century rhetor or poet.<sup>2</sup>

Menander Rhetor's collections of prescriptions for the various epideictic subgenres are the most comprehensive works of their kind that are preserved from Late Antiquity, but the two treatises represent a type of handbook that was probably not uncommon in that period. Another example of the genre is Pseudo-Dionysius of Halicarnassus' or, for short, Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor's *Techne rhetorike* of which only seven chapters are extant today.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the work of Menander Rhetor, its dating, and the question of authorship, see Russell and Wilson 1981; and Pernot 1986 and 1993.

<sup>2</sup> "There is much information of this kind [i.e. about marriages of gods] in poets and in prose-writers, from whom you can draw supplies. You should also quote from Sappho's love poems, from Homer, and from Hesiod, who also has said a great deal about unions and marriages of gods in his *Catalogues of Women*", Menander Rhetor 402.15-20, translation quoted from Russell and Wilson 1981, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Due to a misinterpretation of a later scholion (from the 12th century) in the oldest manuscript containing the Greek text (ms. Par. gr. 1741 from the 10th century), the *Techne* (in Latin: *Ars rhetorica*) was wrongly attributed to the Greek historian and rhetorician Dionysius of Halicarnassus of the 1st century BC. This mistake was only corrected in the beginning of the 20th century by Ludwig Radermacher in his edition

In Byzantium, the epideictic treatises formed part of the school curriculum, and familiarity with the late-classical genre prescriptions contributed to the existence of an unbroken tradition of epideictic theory and practice.<sup>4</sup> In the Latin Middle Ages, on the other hand, knowledge of the theory of epideictics appears to have been limited to general descriptions of the rhetorical genre as found in the works of Cicero, in the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and in Quintilian.

Nevertheless, at least part of the epideictic genre terminology must have been known to some of the medieval scribes in the West who made manuscript copies of classical Latin texts, as well as to the grammarians who added their comments to these texts in the margins of the manuscripts. Thus, for example, several of the epideictic genre terms used in the late-classical Greek treatises can also be found in some of the medieval manuscripts containing the Latin poetry of Horace and Statius. In these manuscripts, the relevant genre terms are inserted at the beginning of the poems as a rubric describing the content of the text: "Epithalamium" (wedding poem), "Propempticon" (valedictory poem), etc.<sup>5</sup>

However, it was not until the beginning of the 15th century that the Latin West experienced a revival of interest in epideictic rhetoric. This was brought about by scholars from Byzantium, who introduced Western humanists to the living tradition of epideictic practice in Greek literature. The Italian humanist Niccolò Perotti (1429-80) offers a good illustration of this

of the text (see Radermacher 1905, *Praefatio*, p. xxii). An English translation of the seven extant chapters is found in Russell and Wilson 1981, pp. 362-381.

<sup>4</sup> See Hunger 1978:1, esp. pp. 88-89

<sup>5</sup> In the critical apparatus of his text edition of 1959, Klingner registered the genre titles in some of the Horace manuscripts. In modern genre studies, however, the occurrence of *tituli* in the medieval manuscripts is often misunderstood as an indication of systematic "generic composition" in classical literature, cf. below, p. 50.

process of transmission and rediscovery of the epideictic genre. In the preface (written c. 1471) to his Latin translation of a series of Greek “monodies”, Perotti explains that he learned about the genre, a species of the funeral speech, through Cardinal Bessarion (c. 1400-72). This renowned Byzantine scholar had himself composed a Greek monody and thus inspired his secretary and translator Perotti to try out the genre in the Latin tongue. The result of this – a monody lamenting the death of his younger brother – made Perotti proudly consider himself the first to use the genre in the Latin West.<sup>6</sup>

The introduction of the treatises by Menander Rhetor and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor intensified this revival of epideictic literature in Renaissance Italy: in contrast to the merely descriptive works by the classical rhetoricians, the late-classical handbooks offered concrete paradigms for the various subgenres and gave directions for their use in a social context.

In fact, Menander Rhetor’s prescriptions on the monody – the genre that Niccolò Perotti claimed to have been the first to use in the Latin West – were introduced into Italy and available in a Latin translation as early as the beginning of the 15th century. We know of no less than three extant manuscript copies of this first translation of a part of Menander Rhetor’s work, the earliest of which dates from before September 13, 1423.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the few scholars who were able to read Greek would have had access to the manuscript copies of Menander Rhetor’s work in the original language, which were imported from Byzantium into Italy and propagated

<sup>6</sup> See Harsting 1997, pp. 16-18. I am currently preparing an edition of Perotti’s translated monodies as well as of his own composition, based on the autograph manuscript in the Vatican Library.

<sup>7</sup> On this translation, see Harsting 1997 and 1999.

there in the 15th and early 16th centuries. From 1508, they would even have had access to the printed *editio princeps* of Menander Rhetor’s two treatises, published by Aldus Manutius in Venice in the first part of the famous collection of *Rhetores Graeci*.<sup>8</sup>

As far as we know, the chapter on the monody was the only part of Menander Rhetor’s work that was translated from Greek until well into the 16th century. Then, in 1553, the Neapolitan Andrea Londano (dates unknown) had his Italian translation of the prescriptions on the “imperial speech” (in Greek: *basilikos logos*), printed either in Padua or Venice. This translation was intended, as the editor Luigi Leopardi emphasizes in the preface, to provide material for the composition of encomiastic speeches in celebration of the newly elected Doge of Venice.<sup>9</sup>

A nearly complete Latin translation of Menander Rhetor’s epideictic treatises appeared in Venice five years later, in 1558. It was made by the Venetian Natale Conti (1520-82), who had previously, in 1550, published a translation of the *progymnasmata* of Hermogenes and Aphthonius. Both these translations and the Menander Rhetor translation of 1558 were clearly based on the two Aldine volumes of *Rhetores Graeci* from 1508 and 1509. As appears from Conti’s introductory letter to the Menander Rhetor translation, the work was supposed to meet a general interest in epideictics – on which subject, as Conti writes, “no one ever wrote more elaborately or copiously (...) than Menander”.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Which also contains, e.g., the *editio princeps* of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.

<sup>9</sup> See Harsting 1992, pp. 143-148.

<sup>10</sup> On Conti’s Menander Rhetor translation, see Harsting 1992, pp. 148-150. The edition and translation of Conti’s Latin letter are found in art.cit., pp. 154-155; the quotation is from p. 155.

In several of the Greek manuscripts, Menander Rhetor's two epideictic treatises are found together with the seven extant chapters of the Pseudo-Dionysian *Techne*. This is also the case in the oldest of the Byzantine manuscripts, which was probably used as a source for the earliest Latin translation of part of Menander Rhetor's work.<sup>11</sup> Thus, there is reason to believe that the Pseudo-Dionysian chapters were introduced into Italy at about the same time as Menander Rhetor's treatises. We know of several Italian manuscript copies from the 15th and 16th centuries of Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor's Greek text, and just like Menander Rhetor's work, the Greek *editio princeps* of the *Techne* forms part of the first volume of Aldus Manutius' *Rhetores Graeci*.

The seven extant chapters of Pseudo-Dionysius' *Techne* contain prescriptions for the general panegyric speech, for two kinds of wedding speeches, for the birthday speech, for the public address, for the funeral speech, and for "exhortation of athletes".

The earliest translation of a part of the *Techne* comprises the chapters on the wedding speeches and on the birthday speech. It dates from 1444 and is the work of an influential Greek scholar in Italy, namely Theodorus Gaza (1400-c. 1475). The date appears from Gaza's preface to the translation, and both the chronology of Gaza's work and the evidence of the preface itself indicate that this is in fact Gaza's first translation of a Greek text into Latin.<sup>12</sup> In the preface, Gaza excuses the somewhat unpolished Latin and stresses that he has only undertaken the task of translating the text in order to make the Greek prescriptions available to Luchino de' Medici (who remains uniden-

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the manuscript source (cf. above, note 3), see Harsting 1992.

<sup>12</sup> See also Santoro 1994.

tified).<sup>13</sup> We know of as many as seven extant manuscript copies (five from the 15th and two from the 16th century) of Gaza's translation, and of three incunabula versions, all printed in the 1490s.<sup>14</sup>

Gaza's translation of the Pseudo-Dionysian prescriptions thus appears to have been widely disseminated, and it was only in 1540 that another Latin translation was published in Basel. This was made by Marcantonio Antimacho of Mantua (c. 1473-1551) and includes the chapters on the wedding speeches and the funeral speech along with the first chapter of the *Techne*, the prescriptions on the panegyric speech.<sup>15</sup> There is no doubt that Antimacho was familiar with Gaza's work, and part of his own translation seems, in fact, to have been based on that of his predecessor.<sup>16</sup> The popularity

<sup>13</sup> "Theororus Gazes Thesalonicensis Luchino de Medicis s. d. p:// Feci mi suavissime Luchine quod a me tam vehementer petieras" (Theodorus Gaza from Thessaloniki greets Luchino de' Medici. My dear Luchino, I have now done what you so ardently asked me). These are the first lines in the incunabula versions and in the manuscript copies of the text, with the exception of the anonymous manuscript copy found in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (ms. 30061). In this ms. the address is omitted and the beginning of the text runs as follows: "Feci mi suavissime Johannes quod a me tam vehementer petieras" (fol. 171v).

<sup>14</sup> I have examined three of the original manuscripts in: the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milano; the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Firenze; and the Bodleian Library, Oxford. I am grateful to the staffs of these libraries for giving me access to the material. The Newberry Library, Chicago; the British Library, London; the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin; and the Biblioteka Muzeum Narodowego, Krakow, all kindly provided me with microfilms of the manuscript copies in their possession. I also wish to thank the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana and the Biblioteca Augusta, Perugia, where I was given access to the incunabula versions of Gaza's translation.

<sup>15</sup> Printed in Antimacho 1540, pp. 65-79, along with Antimacho's translation into Latin of Gemistus Pletho's *Historia de gestis Graecorum post proelium ad Mantineam*. - Antimacho was a mere two years old in 1475 when Theodorus Gaza died. Thus, Cosenza's claim in his indispensable *Dictionary of Italian Humanists* that Antimacho was a pupil of Gaza, is probably due to a misreading of a contemporary source, cf. Cosenza 1967, no. 99.

<sup>16</sup> See the analysis of similarities between Antimacho's and Gaza's translations in Santoro 1994, p. 182, esp. note 2.

of Antimacho's translation is proven by the fact that it was reprinted in various editions from 1586 well into the 18th century.<sup>17</sup>

\*

The increasing interest in epideictic theory in the 15th and 16th centuries can also be inferred from the ever greater attention paid to the genre in contemporary treatises on rhetoric and poetics. An early example is the Dutch Humanist Johannes Despauterius' textbook, *De figuris grammaticalibus* from 1519. Among Despauterius' "grammatical figures" are included a series of short definitions of various epideictic subgenres such as the wedding speech, the birthday speech, the valedictory speech, and the funeral speech.<sup>18</sup> Despauterius' book undoubtedly helped make knowledge of the Greek genre terms more widespread. Thus, in Denmark, the work was reprinted three times, from 1556 through 1558, as part of a textbook that was to be used in all Danish grammar schools.<sup>19</sup>

An important example of the incorporation of epideictic theory into the period's treatises is Julius Caesar Scaliger's influential *Poetices libri septem*, which was published posthumously in Lyon in 1561. Although he does not make explicit his late-classical sources, Scaliger is certainly dependent on the

<sup>17</sup> E.g. in the edition by Friderich Sylburg of *Dionysii Halicarnassei Scripta quae extant, Tomus II, Rhetoricos eius et criticos libros continens* (ed. princ. Frankfurt: Apud haeredes Andreae Wechelii, 1586).

<sup>18</sup> An example is Despauterius' definition of the wedding speech: "Epithalamium est carmen nuptiale, ut apud Catullum, Claudianum et Ausonium. Dicitur ab Epi et Thalamus, id est geniale cubiculum" (An epithalamium is a wedding poem, as in Catullus, Claudian, and Ausonius. It is derived from [the Greek words] "epi" and "thalamus", i.e. wedding chamber); cf. the edition of Despauterius in Palladius 1556, p. 41v.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Palladius 1556. On this work, which was intended to replace Melanchthon's textbooks in the Danish schools, see Harsting 1996, which also contains an edition and Danish translation of Palladius' Latin preface to the textbook.

prescriptions by Menander Rhetor for his treatment of various epideictic genres. This is clearly illustrated in Scaliger's chapter on the propemptic (or valedictory) composition: here, not only the content of the prescriptions, but Scaliger's very wording of them closely resemble what is found in Menander Rhetor.<sup>20</sup>

In Northern Europe, explicit references to Menander Rhetor's and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor's works began to appear at the beginning of the 17th century. In the Dane Hans Poulsen Resen's textbook, *Parva rhetorica*, from 1606, the reader wanting to know more about the theory of epideictics is advised to study Natale Conti's Latin translation from 1558 (mentioned above, p. 43) of Menander Rhetor's work.<sup>21</sup> The first Northern European to quote directly from Menander Rhetor and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor was the Dutch polymath, Gerhard Johannes Vossius, who in his presentation of the epideictic subgenres in the extensive *Rhetorica contracta* gives many examples from the late-classical treatises. Vossius' textbook was first published in 1621 and reprinted in numerous editions, both in and outside of the Netherlands, until the middle of the 19th century.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The prescriptions on the various epideictic genres ("Silvae") are found in Scaliger 1561, book 3, chapters 100ff, in the section on "Praecepta in unoquoque genere poematum" (Prescriptions on every single poetical genre). On Scaliger's use of Menander Rhetor, especially concerning the *propempticon*, see Barner 1970, p. 68-70, and Cairns 1986. Cf. also Harsting 1995, p. 217.

<sup>21</sup> "(...) Menander, de genere demonstrativo, cum suis speciebus, quem transtulit (...) ex Graeco Natalis de Comitibus, Venetus etc." (Menander on the demonstrative genre and its subgenres, which was translated from the Greek by Natale Conti of Venice), Resen 1606, p. K4v.

<sup>22</sup> The latest of the editions listed in Radermaker 1981 (pp. 358-360) was printed in 1839.

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The three types of sources that I have been dealing with thus far – (1) manuscript copies and printed versions of the Greek epideictic treatises, (2) translations of these Greek texts into Latin and the vernacular in the 15th and 16th centuries, and (3) various forms of testimony (including references and quotations) to the use of the late-classical epideictic prescriptions in 16th and 17th century textbooks and treatises on rhetoric and poetics – all demonstrate the growing interest in epideictic theory in the Latin West from the beginning of the 15th century on. I have also used the example of Niccolò Perotti and the monody to illustrate how the translation of Byzantine epideictic literature contributed to the Italian humanists' knowledge of the various epideictic subgenres. But still the question remains: what made the late-classical epideictic treatises so popular in the Latin West?

I believe that this is best answered by turning to one of the most influential humanists and philologists of the 15th century, Angelo Poliziano (1454-94). When, in 1480-81, Poliziano taught his first classes as a young professor of rhetoric and poetry at the Studio Fiorentino, he chose to lecture, not on the traditional texts of Cicero and Horace (as did his older colleague, Cristoforo Landino),<sup>23</sup> but on two newly rediscovered Latin texts from the first century AD, namely Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* and Statius' *Silvae*. Not only can Poliziano's choice of texts best be described as "modern", so can his method of expounding these texts. Thus, it is remarkable that Poliziano, in his extensive handwritten lecture notes on the *Silvae* of the Latin poet Statius, included excerpts from and paraphrases of parts of Menander Rhetor's and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor's treatises. Evidently, in

<sup>23</sup> Professor in rhetoric and poetry at the Studio Fiorentino 1458-92.

his classes on the classical occasional poems, Poliziano drew parallels between classical literary practice and the late-classical genre theory, and explicated Statius' poems according to the relevant genre descriptions, which he had found in Menander Rhetor and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Poliziano read the epideictic theory of Late Antiquity back into Statius' poetry, which had been composed around two centuries earlier.

In the same way, in their commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* of 1550, Vincenzo Maggi and Bartolomeo Lombardi explicitly refer to Menander Rhetor and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor as authorities on a par with Aristotle on the genre of dithyrambs, which comprised the various subgenres of lyrical poetry.<sup>25</sup>

In their use of examples from both classical and late-classical literature, Menander Rhetor's and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor's treatises are indeed important documents with regard to our knowledge of the rhetorical training and the classicism of Late Antiquity. However, the late-classical treatises were read by Poliziano and his followers as more than just practical instructions in writing epideictic speeches and epideictic poetry. Above all, in the works of Menander Rhetor and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor the humanists found valuable guides to the understanding of – what they considered to be – classical literary genres. Thus, in the Italian Renaissance, the late-classical treatises were regarded not only as a reliable witness to the literary practice of the period in which they were composed, but also as testimony to the preceding long tradition of classical Greek and Latin literature.

<sup>24</sup> Harsting 2001 exemplifies how Poliziano employs Menander Rhetor's treatises – especially the prescriptions for the wedding poem – in his lecture notes.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Maggi and Lombardi 1550, p. 35.

This way of looking at classical literature from the point of view of Late Antiquity is, in fact, not completely alien to modern scholarship. I only need to mention Francis Cairns' theory of generic composition in Greece and Rome (1972), which is a further development of Friedrich Vollmer's (1898) and of R. G. M. Nisbeth and M. Hubbard's (1970) use of Menander Rhetor in their commentaries on respectively Statius' and Horace's classical Latin poetry. More than an anachronistic approach to classical literature – and an approach that erroneously, as I see it, insists on an unchanged literary genre *system* and a “time-free zone” covering the many centuries that separate Homer from Menander Rhetor<sup>26</sup> – these are in fact examples of modern scholarship looking at classical literature in the same way as did the Renaissance humanists, namely through the filter of Late Antiquity.

<sup>26</sup> “(...) in a very real sense antiquity was in comparison with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a time-free zone. Generic studies reflect this fact and show as much development in the genres and no more than is found for instance in ancient technology”, Cairns 1972, p. 32.

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