

On Beauty: Past, Present and Politics in Dio of Prusa, Oration 21

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Dio of Prusa's twenty-first oration is a fragmentary dialogue on beauty. Dio and an anonymous interlocutor discuss the beauty of a 'sublime and handsome young man' with a classic appearance such as can be found only in very old statues at Olympia. Masculine beauty seems to be dying out, just like the lions in Europe; feminine beauty on the other hand is flourishing. A discussion of Persian aesthetics and eunuchs leads Dio to talk about Nero's effeminacy and male lovers. When the interlocutor shows himself surprised at this example from contemporary politics, Dio criticizes the habit of those men who strive to name the ancients on any pretext, knowing that their audience always prefers old stories and ancient books to new ones. The discussion returns to the beauty of the young man, whose modesty (*aidōs*) inspires enthusiasm and entrancement. The young man is said to be utterly Greek and no one's son; Dio distinguishes Greek beauty from barbarian beauty, citing as evidence Homer's treatment of Achilles, Hector and other heroes; at that point the dialogue breaks off.

Key to our understanding of this intriguing dialogue on beauty are several contrasts: Greek beauty is contrasted with barbarian (and Roman) beauty; masculine beauty is contrasted with feminine beauty; and the beauty of the past is contrasted with the beauty (ideal) of the present. The masculine, Greek beauty of the past is thus preferred to the feminine, non-Greek beauty of the present. These categories are characteristic of the language of classicism in the early imperial period: Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Longinus tell similar stories of decline. It should be noted, however, that Dio's classicism (here and elsewhere) is very much engaged with the present. Dio insists on talking at length about emperor Nero, even if his interlocutor might prefer old stories about Alcibiades or Cyrus. The effect is that the anonymous Greek male is implicitly contrasted with Nero, or rather with his eunuch Sporus; an unknown model of inspiring modesty versus the shameless boyfriend of the emperor, who was so popular that 'even now everybody wishes he were still alive' (21.10). The latter remark has been interpreted as criticism of emperor Domitian, who was generally considered to be even worse than Nero.

The beauty of the male youth, whose classical modesty inspires the eyes of Dio's contemporaries, could be compared to that of the three Philoctetes plays that Dio reads in oration 52. Like the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the classic statue brings to life the values of the classical Greek past, while likewise affecting enthusiasm (*enthousiasmos*) and amazement

(ekplēxis). This paper will explore Dio's concept of 'sublime' beauty (of human beings, statues, and literature), its moral dimensions, and its impact. For this purpose Dio's discourse will be compared not only with classicizing narratives in Dionysius and Longinus, but also with the views of Quintilian, a direct contemporary of Dio. Quintilian severely criticizes the aesthetics of some of his contemporaries, who prefer feminine over masculine beauty (5.12.17-21): 'any real man is handsomer to me than any eunuch'. It will be suggested that the literary form of the dialogue (which recalls Platonic dialogues on love) supports Dio's political message.