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A Brief Summary and Analysis of Lysias' *For Mantiheus*

by

Daniel N. Erickson

University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND

Introduction

Lysias occupies an important position in the history of Greek oratory. Among the outstanding attributes of his writing are his unique ability to tailor a speech to a client's needs, his clever argumentation, and his plain and efficient style. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief summary and analysis of *For Mantiheus*, one of his best works, in order to isolate some characteristics of his writing which distinguish him as a great and admirable speechwriter.

Background

Lysias was born around 445 in Athens.¹ After his father Cephalus died (ca. 430), Lysias and his older brother Polemarchus voyaged to Thurii in southern Italy, where Lysias received his education in rhetoric. According to Lesky, they left Italy and returned to Athens after the horrific defeat of the Athenian fleet off Sicily in 413 because conditions in Thurii had become intolerable for those who sympathized with Athens (592).

Lysias and Polemarchus prospered after their return home by managing a successful shield factory at the Piraeus, but disaster befell them when the Thirty Tyrants came to power in 404. Adams observes that the Thirty were desperate for funds and seized the property of rich metics (resident aliens), such as Lysias and his brother, relying on false charges and offering their victims no opportunity to defend themselves (20). Polemarchus was executed, but Lysias managed to escape to Megara, a short distance to the west of Athens.

Soon after his flight, Lysias became a supporter of the democratic exiles and collaborated with them in their efforts to return to Athens. When democracy was restored, he was rewarded for his loyalty with a grant of citizenship. However, he retained this privilege only briefly, losing both this and the right to speak in public shortly after he impeached Eratosthenes, one of the Thirty, for the murder of Polemarchus. Nevertheless, Lysias maintained his passion for oratory, resolved to write speeches for others, and established a good reputation for himself as a speechwriter. Shuckburgh notes that he continued to be active in this profession until his death around 380 (xxxv).

Summary of *For Mantiheus*

Lysias wrote this oration for a young man who had to pass a scrutiny before he could assume office, perhaps that of senator. Mantiheus had been accused of being in the cavalry during the brutal rule of the Thirty, a charge used by his opponents to show that he was an unsuitable candidate. Lysias has

Mantitheus refute the accusation and put forth convincing arguments as to why he should be admitted to office. Jebb asserts that the defendant delivered his speech before the Athenian Senate around 392 (240-41).

The speech can be divided into five parts, the first of which encompasses sections 1-3 and contains both the *proimion* 'introduction' and a portion of the *prothesis* 'proposition,' the case to be proven (Adams 136). Mantitheus begins by stating that he is almost grateful to his accusers for bringing the charge against him because this gives him an opportunity to tell his life's story. He continues by asking the jury to grant him their approval and think worse of his opponents, should he prove the falsity of the charge. The speaker concludes part 1 with the confident assertion that he will demonstrate that he has been loyal to the democracy, lived moderately, and had nothing to do with either the Tyrants' cavalry or their government. These points are addressed in reverse order in parts 2-5.

In part 2 (sections 4-8), Mantitheus gives the *pisteis* 'proof' that he did not serve in the cavalry under the Thirty (Adams 136). To begin with, he states that he was living abroad at the court of King Satyrus of Bosphorus when the Thirty came to power. He goes on to claim that although the Thirty were still in power when he returned to the city, the political climate was such that it was unlikely that he would have wanted to associate himself with them. Besides, it was clear that they did not want additional accomplices in their schemes.

The defendant then attacks the credibility of a cavalry roster which lists him as active during the time in question. He does so with the claim that it is foolish to regard this as reliable because it does not include some men who were avowedly present whereas it records as present some who were in fact absent. However, he asserts that the greatest proof against the charge is that his name is not on another list, which was prepared by the phylarchs (tribal rulers) after the restoration of the democracy and supplies the names of all cavalry officers who had received equipment allowances so as to make their recovery possible. Since the phylarchs had to bear the losses themselves if they could not indicate who had the allowances, they had a vested interest in making an accurate account. Thus, the jurors would be much more fair if they believe the information from this list. Anyone could have had his name erased from the other one, so he says.

The last point which Mantitheus makes in part 2 is that even if he had served in the cavalry, he would not be ashamed to admit it. He would simply prove that he had not harmed any citizen and should thus pass the scrutiny. Besides, many who had been cavalry officers in the time of the Thirty subsequently became generals, cavalry commanders, or members of the Senate. Mantitheus ends this part of the speech with the claim that he is in the position of having to defend himself only because his accusers are attacking him with a lie.

Part 3 (section 9) continues the *prothesis*, which was begun in part 1 (Adams 137). Here the speaker observes that in ordinary trials the defendant must address only the charges with which he is faced. However, the rules governing a scrutiny allow him to give an account of his life. He then asks the jury to have the kindness to listen to his story, which encompasses sections 10-17.

In this, the fourth and longest part of the speech, Mantitheus delivers the *diegesis* 'narrative,' in which he relates important facts about himself which support his case (Adams 137). He starts with a description of his relations with his family, presenting himself as most generous towards them. For evidence of this liberality, he states that upon receipt of his modest inheritance, he provided two sisters with dowries and gave his brother more of the inheritance than he himself had claimed. As regards his private dealings with non-family members, he declares that nobody has a single complaint against him.

The young man next describes his good comportment in public. He asserts that the strongest evidence of his proper behavior is that the younger men who carouse and play dice both dislike and slander him, which shows that he does not belong to that dissolute crowd. He further claims that he has never experienced legal trouble even though lawsuits are prevalent in Athens, strengthening his stance that he is a good member of society.

In the remainder of part 4, Mantitheus presents his military record. He proudly asserts that in all campaigns up to the present, he has set a good example for others by fighting bravely in the front lines and carrying out all orders and duties zealously. These actions attest not only to his fine attributes as a soldier but also to his support of the democracy. He concludes part 4 by asking his listeners to regard his military service as an asset for political office.

The final part of the speech (sections 18-21) contains the *lysis* ‘rebuttal’ of two additional objections to his holding office (Adams 137). First, Mantitheus maintains that some disapprove of him because of his long hair, which Morgan tells us was suggestive of pro-Spartan inclinations (87). Be that as it may, he reminds the jurors that actions are more important than personal appearance, for some who follow conservative customs have brought great disaster upon the city, but others who do not have benefited it in no small measure. Secondly, he answers the complaint that his public ambitions are excessive. While he acknowledges that he has been somewhat too ambitious, he asserts that he is simply overwhelmed by the desire to continue his ancestors’ tradition of public service to the people of Athens. He closes with the observation that his audience admires loyal, civic-minded men and thus should not be irritated with him.

Attributes of Lysianic Oratory Illustrated

For Mantitheus furnishes a good example of Lysias’ ability to tailor a speech to a client’s personality, which is termed *ethopoiia* and is an art in which Lysias has no equal. It is so masterfully crafted that the listener does not realize that it was not written by the speaker. The words are perfectly natural and appropriate for one of Mantitheus’ demeanor and standing in society. Mantitheus is a bold and confident youth who is determined to refute the charge against him so that he can take office. Lysias conveys this attitude in a vigorous and convincing manner from beginning to end.

As seen in the synopsis, Lysias has the young man “take the bull by the horns” and capture the attention of his audience immediately, without wasting words. Mantitheus is pleased to have the opportunity to set the record straight, and we see him as he wishes to be seen: a man who is both innocent of the charge against him and an honorable, patriotic citizen. He lives exactly the kind of life most admired by the Athenians, one of action and involvement. What he says is powerful, convincing, and befitting his character; one might say that the writer conveys the essence of the speaker better than the speaker could himself. Through his mastery of *ethopoiia*, Lysias causes a vivid and lasting image of a guiltless man who would be a fine public official to be etched upon the listeners’ minds. It is not improbable that many of the jurors would have been so moved as to demand the young man’s acquittal. Although Mantitheus concludes quite abruptly, this should not be construed as a weakness. According to Lamb, “The very abruptness with which he ends the speech is in keeping with his bluff, inapprehensive personality” (373).

This oration also illustrates a type of argument frequent in Lysias, the argument from probability. Since neither party to an Athenian lawsuit knew before trial exactly what his opponent was going to say, as is the case today, Fairchild states that argumentation of this type was particularly appealing because it could be prepared in advance, presented as evidence, and could sway a jury when the facts were few and the evidence scarce (49, 53), which often occurred following a war. Though probability arguments are not considered evidence in our courts, they can still be observed in such instances as speculations concerning the motive for a crime (Fairchild 53).

We have seen two probability arguments in part 2, the first being somewhat better than the second. The former occurs where Mantitheus disavows any involvement in the regime of the Thirty and states that it is not *likely* that he would have endangered himself through entanglement in their perilous situation. The latter is seen when he advises the jurors that it would be much *fairer* of them when deciding whether he was in the cavalry under the Thirty to rely on the register of equipment allowances made by the phylarchs because it was prepared under financial penalty for inaccuracy.

Probability arguments are especially persuasive because they rely on ordinary common-sense reasoning and appeal to the sentiments of the listeners. Lysias crafted this speech so as to depict his client as a normal, rational man who would think before acting and not gamble unnecessarily with his life. Many of Mantitheus' listeners, being like minded, would have placed themselves in his situation and accepted his reasoning, thinking that they also would have opted for the safety of non-involvement with the Thirty. Concluding that it was improbable that Mantitheus would have joined the regime at the time in question, they would have discounted claims to the contrary. Likewise, there is a certain appeal to the inference that it is more likely that the phylarch's list represents his true military record; however, some jurors might have concluded that this proves nothing other than that Mantitheus was financially self sufficient and was therefore not granted an allowance.

Coupled with his command of *ethopoiia* and the argument from probability, Lysias uses his writing style to full advantage in making *For Mantitheus* an effective and exemplary speech. Lysias is a master of the plain style of oratory, for which he was much admired in antiquity. This clear and unadorned manner of expression gives a sincere, dignified quality to the speech and enables one to grasp easily Mantitheus' position, though to some it may appear somewhat lacking in emotional appeal. An important feature of this style is its simplicity of language, in terms of both vocabulary and sentence structure. Given the varying degrees of linguistic sophistication of the aspiring politician's listeners, this method of composition gives rise to a speech that would have been easily followed and understood by all.

The speech also benefits from the efficient manner in which Lysias organizes and presents his material. As seen above, its five parts progress logically and work together in the attempt to win over the jury expeditiously. Time is not wasted on matters which are not absolutely essential to the case. Brevity is an essential characteristic of this and other orations for two reasons: in the first place, nobody likes a long, boring speech; secondly, Athenian courts imposed time limits upon speakers. The speech's orderly arrangement and reasonable length assist in the swift production of a clear picture of a good, falsely accused man.

Summary

We have seen that Lysias wrote *For Mantitheus* for a young client who had to pass a scrutiny before he could assume an office to which he had been elected, his principal obstacle being a charge that he had been a cavalry officer during the despotic rule of the Thirty Tyrants. Though we do not know the outcome of the investigation (Morgan 76), the speech is clearly persuasive. First of all, it was written specifically for Mantitheus so as to convey his confidence, uprightness, and guiltless conscience. Further, it relies on ordinary reasoning to convince the jury of the falsity of the accusation. Finally, its plain, economical style contributes much to both the favorable impression which it makes on the mind and its effectiveness. In Lysias' time, good oratory was highly prized and valued both for its own sake and because it was an essential tool in law, government, and politics. Today, however, it has generally been replaced with techniques of Madison Avenue, which are often impressive but lacking in true substance. At a time when things modern are usually considered better, politicians would do well to look to Lysias and other fine Greek orators for guidance in improving the current state of political oratory. Perhaps the ancients were right after all.

Note

¹ All years are B.C.E.

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