

Dionysius I of Syracuse was a tyrant who not only patronized tragic poets, as other tyrants before him had done, but who wrote tragedies himself. Although he won first place at the Lenaia in 368, the anecdotal tradition that has come down to us ridicules him as a terrible poet. He is alleged to have cruelly mistreated poets and intellectuals at his court who dared to criticize his poetry, and he is rumored to have gone to absurd and vicious lengths to protect himself from assassination (Diod. Sic. 15.74; Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 5.20-23; Plut. *de Alex. fort.* 2.1.334c; ps.-Plut. *X Orat.* 1.833b-c; Lucian *adv. indoct.* 15). Eubulus' *Dionysius*, Philoxenos' *Cyclops*, Ehippos' *Homoioi*, and Strattis' *Atalanta* and *Zopyros Perikaiomenos* all lampooned the tyrant as a brute and a bad playwright. Plato's portrait of the tyrant in *Rep.* 8.566e-569c as a paranoid, isolated despot is thought to be based on Dionysius as well.

Scholars such as Sanders and Caven have argued that the hostile anecdotal, comic, and philosophical traditions arose from the political tensions between Athens and Sicily in the first third of the fourth century, and have argued for a reassessment of Dionysius' reign as less despotic and more measured than ancient sources would allow – but they have not pressed for a reassessment of his poetry. This paper undertakes that reassessment. It argues that some of the fragments of Dionysius' poetry suggest that he wrote historical tragedies, in the vein of Phrynichus' *Sack of Miletus*, Aeschylus' *Persians*, or Theodectes' *Mausolus*. Dionysius apparently went these other poets one better by dramatizing *his own* life and reign: “Doris, the wife of Dionysius, is dead,” reads one fragment (fr.9). Another (fr.10) reads, “Alas, what a good wife I have lost!” It is possible these fragments are from the same play, which leads to the conclusion that Dionysius himself was a character in it – presumably the protagonist. Another fragment (fr.4) refers to tyranny as “the mother of injustice,” and Tzetzes (*Chil.* V.182-85) claims that Dionysius wrote a play attacking Plato, who is known to have visited Dionysius' court. Thus the hostile tradition of Dionysius as a bad poet, especially the stories of his ridicule by other poets, could have as much to do with his self-referential poetic innovations as with his politics.

If this is true, then it has significance not only for the history of tragedy, but for the history of kingship in the ancient world. Evidence of another fourth-century historical tragedy would suggest that this was an occasional occurrence, rather than a fifth-century experiment that was never repeated; it could even be taken as possible influence on the Roman *fabula praetexta*. Evidence of a fourth-century ruler depicting himself as a tragic hero in a play he wrote would add to our picture of kingship in the late Classical/early Hellenistic period. Sanders (1987) has suggested the possibility that Dionysius wore a tragic actor's purple cloak as part of an attempt to present himself as a “western Great King.” Dionysius' written and visual self-presentation as a tragic king suggests that tragedy had a pronounced influence on the development and legitimization of ruler-cult in the Hellenistic period, a development that produced figures such as Alexander, Mithridates VI, and, ultimately, Nero.