

Cringing at Favorinus: Lexicography and the dismantling of a legacy

“I cringed when I found this word in Favorinus,” says the lexicographer Phrynichus. In the *Selection (Ecloga) of Attic Words and Phrases*, Phrynichus presents perhaps the most prescriptive articulation of Atticism available, and in some four hundred twenty entries he highlights ostensible flaws in many different authors’ Greek. Not even Plato escapes criticism. Yet Phrynichus directs particular ire at Favorinus and makes him the target of more censure than any other. Such disproportionate treatment of Favorinus suggests a greater scope than highlighting a handful of pet peeves. This paper argues that, via the polemical references to Favorinus throughout the *Selection*, Phrynichus aims to disrupt a prominent social circle in the Imperial Greek intellectual community and recreate it—with himself at the center.

Favorinus’ multicultural background is noteworthy among his contemporaries, but not atypical (Rochette 2015). More notable, however, is the unanimity of ancient accounts in portraying him as a uniquely colorful character—to his benefit or detriment. Philostratus (*VS* 489-2) suggests a charlatan, Polemo a monster (*On Physiognomy*), and Lucian a laughingstock (*Eunuch, Demonax*). Conversely, Gellius, Favorinus’ pupil and no great friend of lexicography (Quiroga Puertas 2013), represents him as a witty Renaissance man and fount of authority in the social world depicted in the *Attic Nights* (Beall 2001, Holford-Strevens 2003). He moved in powerful company too, given his connection with not only Herodes Atticus but the emperor Hadrian. Nevertheless, the sophistic status granted to Favorinus hinges on acceptance of his expertise by intellectuals. Phrynichus seeks to demonstrate that Favorinus—and by extension those who look to him for guidance—lacks the linguistic credentials to justify the authority vested in him.

A valuable point of comparison to better grasp Phrynichus’ treatment of Favorinus is the only other writer who receives the same level of negative attention: Menander. Like the speeches of Favorinus, Menander’s plays found a wide audience in the second century; they became the archetypal Greek comedies and were popular subjects in visual art (Nervegna 2013). Likewise, Favorinus was a renowned orator who drew large crowds and whose appeal was such that, allegedly, even those who knew no Greek at all admired his orations (*VS* 492). Menander was also well received among the literary elite, and in a lengthy diatribe (*Ecl.* 394) Phrynichus rails against scholars who in their frenzy have shunted the reputable Attic writers to the side to make room for the popular Menander. Phrynichus’ deprecation of Menander’s Greek countervails his popular currency and questions his value and canonicity (Tribulato 2014). Standards, readers are to understand, must never yield to trends.

Rejecting both Favorinus and Menander distills the connoisseurship and archaism essential to the agonistic nature of Phrynichus’ Atticizing project (Strobel 2009). Favorinus may be *ἀνὴρ λόγου ἄξιος* (*Ecl.* 216), but his sloppy Greek precludes his having the intellectual credentials for true sophistic expertise—no one who uses the cringeworthy redundant *κορυφαϊότητα* (*Ecl.* 213) is thus qualified. So Phrynichus undermines the Attic expertise of Favorinus, his pupils, and his devotees to expel them from the literary elite. Meanwhile he dedicates his *Selection*, a guide for using Attic *ἀρχαίως*, *ἀκριβῶς*, and *δοκίμως*, to the Imperial secretary and Attic enthusiast Cornelianus. The effect is to claim an Imperial connection for his project and move his own star into the emperor-adjacent space Favorinus is famed for occupying.

Phrynichus’ *Selection* is written from the perspective that the sole correct form of Attic Greek must be purged of its accumulated defects, and assumes that clear prescriptions with sufficient evidence demonstrate its author’s qualification to do so. The influence of Favorinus is, as Phrynichus tells it, the most recent of these defects he seeks to remove. By demonstrating that the basis for Favorinus’ popularity is incompatible with the principles of expertise upon which Atticizing intellectuals predicate their movement, Phrynichus aims at eliminating the circle of Favorinus and making his own, more authentic Atticism the basis for Greek in the Imperial court.

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