Denouncing One's Friends

The Ending of Tacitus’ Dialogus

At the end of the conversation of Tacitus' Dialogus de Oratoribus, the host Maternus concludes the discussion and brings his friends' visit to an end as follows (42.2):


And getting up and embracing Aper, he said: "We are going to denounce you, I to the poets, but Messalla to all antiquarians." “Yes, and I will denounce you to the rhetoricians and schoolteachers", he said. They laughed, and we departed.

How should we understand this passage? Earlier in the dialogue, Aper has argued that poetry is inferior to rhetoric and defended the current standard of oratory, while Messalla and Maternus have, each in his own way, taken a more sombre view of the present state of rhetoric and rhetorical teaching. But why do the friends, after stressing repeatedly the friendly nature of their discussion, now suddenly threaten to denounce each other for their diverging opinions? And what could the consequences of a denouncement to poets, antiquarians or schoolteachers possibly be?


2 See 4.1, 14.2-3, 24.1 and especially 27.2, where Messalla responds to the suggestion that he might be offended by Aper's remarks: ‘Non sum’, inquit 'offensus Apri mei disputatione, nec vos offendi decebit, si quid forte aures vestras perstringit, cum scias hanc esse eius modi sermonum legem, iudicium animi citra damnunm adspectus proferre.'
Commentators on the *Dialogus* have, for the most part, not addressed this question at all, or assumed that the passage is to be taken literally. Only Güngerich and Mayer attempt to elucidate the content of the passage.

Mayer in his brief note offers the following explanation: “criminabimur returns us to the notion of a mock trial with which the dialogue got under way.” The ‘mock trial’ to which Mayer refers is the agreement between the interlocutors to conduct their discussion in the form of a trial: each pleads his case (for or against the writing of poetry, and then on the subject of the decline of oratory), while Secundus functions as the judge. It is not immediately obvious how precisely a denouncement (which would logically precede a trial) could form a part of the mock trial that has just been enacted, but Mayer is entirely correct in relating this threat of denouncement to the broader theme of trials and the trial imagery which has been present throughout the *Dialogus*. It has been argued that this use of imagery, especially in the speeches of Aper, can serve to create a threatening atmosphere when read against the political situation and Maternus’ dissident tendencies. A closer examination of the connotations of *criminari* will show how the ending of the *Dialogus* fits in with this suggestion.

Güngerich has a different explanation: “Die scherzhaft-neckenden Schlussworte sollen zeigen, dass von der Äußerung sachlicher Gegensätze keine persönliche Verstimmung zurückgeblieben ist.” I agree with Güngerich in identifying the exchange as ‘jocular’. However, he offers no further explana-

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3 See the commentaries of Gudeman (1914) and Michel (1962), who both confine themselves to textual and/or grammatical remarks.
5 See *Dial.* 4.1-5.2 for the arrangement.
6 *criminari* can sometimes mean ‘to accuse in court’ (cf. e.g. Cic. *Cael.* 25, *Att.* 4.15.4, Suet. *Calig.* 7, and (with a direct object) *Rhet. Her.* 1.4.), but it is never used in this way by Tacitus, and in any case the indirect objects here render this meaning logically impossible. Why would there suddenly be a jury composed of poets, antiquarians and rhetorical teachers? There are also no attested instances of *criminari* as ‘to accuse in court’ when used with both a direct and an indirect object. See *TLL* IV.1198.15-19.
7 See Strunk 2010, 250-1 with n. 23 for an overview.
8 Strunk 2010, 251: “Tacitus’ audience could read the trial language as playful, friendly banter, but they could also read it as an ominous allusion to what happens to those who offend the authorities . . . .”.
9 Güngerich (1980) *ad loc.* Cf. also Gudeman (1914), who calls the exchange “scherzhafte criminatio” (75) in his discussion of the role of Secundus and the lacuna between *Dial.* 35 and 36. He, too, does not elaborate on the joke.