

CLASSICAL RHETORICS AND RHETORICIANS

Critical Studies and Sources



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INTRODUCTION

Michelle Ballif and Michael G. Moran

Although classical rhetoric has survived a multiple-millennia history, at times subject to slander as well as praise, it has only recently, within the last century, been historicized more generally within the history of rhetoric. Writing in 1983, James J. Murphy noted that it “is indeed ironic” that rhetoric—“one of the very oldest and most truly international human disciplines”—“should even today suffer from the lack of a complete historical account of its development” (1). Although this volume cannot claim to provide a “complete historical account,” it seeks to contribute to the project of writing, specifically rewriting, the history of rhetoric in the Western tradition by refiguring classical rhetorics and rhetoricians.

Since the time of Murphy’s lament, rhetoric scholars have produced a generous number of important contributions to the history of rhetoric. This is not to say that the historiography of rhetoric was altogether neglected prior to the past few decades; indeed, classical authors themselves historicized the rhetorical tradition. However, the history of rhetoric has certainly garnered the recent attention of a multitude of researchers—George Kennedy, Richard Enos, Jeffrey Walker, Sharon Crowley, and Edward Schiappa, to name only a handful—resulting in a rich body of historical work, which informs the theory and practice of contemporary rhetoric and composition studies.

In exciting and interesting ways, much of this current work challenges our historical understanding, calling into question the authorship of rhetorical texts as well as the very existence of some rhetorical figures, such as the infamous “Tisias,” one of the supposed inventors of rhetoric. Additionally, scholars pose an even greater challenge to the history of rhetoric: alongside this proliferation of new histories is a concern for revising the historical tradition by exposing its prejudices and its blind spots, and for composing more inclusive histories. Specifically, scholars of rhetoric have challenged the rhetorical tradition and the histories thereof for their exclusions of women and of sophistry.

That is, scholars have cast a gendered lens on the rhetorical tradition, inquiring how classical rhetoric has been theorized as a practice—as “public, deliberative discourse”—which by its very definition excluded women as participants, as Kennedy notes: “Classical rhetoric was largely a male phenomenon [...] Women were not allowed to speak in the law courts or political assemblies in Greece or Rome; public speaking by women was largely restricted to a few queens ruling in their own right in Greek-speaking portions of Asia Minor or in Egypt” (“Classical Rhetoric” 93). In response, Cheryl Glenn writes, “Rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment (including who may speak, who may listen or who will agree to listen, and what can be said); therefore, canonical rhetorical history has represented the experience of males, powerful males, with no provision or allowance for females” (1–2). Glenn continues with a call for “inclusionary rhetorics of the future, rhetorics that will account for the regendered rhetorical terrain on which feminist archaeologists and researchers have already begun to identify women’s bodies” (2). Examples of such inclusionary rhetorics would include the work of Andrea Lunsford, Susan C. Jarratt, and Patricia Bizzell, and would employ a variety of methodological strategies. According to Bizzell, there are at least three such strategies for regendering the history of rhetoric. One is to be a “resisting reader,” to “notice aspects of the canonical texts that the reader is not supposed to notice, but that disturb, when the reader is a woman, and create resistance to the view of reality the work seems to want to purvey” (51). Another strategy is to recover women who were practicing rhetoric as traditionally defined, to include them alongside the already canonized male rhetors. A third is to redefine what rhetoric is by including in the history of rhetoric discursive practices of women (51).

Likewise, and often adopting similar revisionary strategies, rhetorical scholars have interrogated the rhetorical tradition to reveal how its exclusionary practices result in what Victor J. Vitanza calls the repression or even the extermination of sophistry (*Negation* 27–56). That is, although the older Sophists played a determining role in the “invention” of rhetoric—in theory, practice, and education—they have historically suffered from a bad reputation, denounced as flippant stylists, manipulative liars, and vulgar relativists, as Plato’s infamous case against the Sophists in the *Gorgias* details. Scholars have attempted to reread—if not to redeem—the Sophists by resisting the Platonic—that is, philosophic—condemnation by examining the Sophists firsthand, by investigating sophistic practices and individual Sophists, insofar as possible with what textual evidence remains, and thereby to work against the tradition’s hegemony of what Kennedy has characterized as the “philosophic” rhetoric of Aristotle in particular. “In most histories,” Susan C. Jarratt notes, “the sophists are buried under the sweep of ‘philosophy’ in its progress toward the fully ‘rational’ mind” (48) and its demand for logical, rational communication. Because, Jarratt continues, “of the traces of oral, poetic,” and even magical language in sophistic discourse, the Sophists—in the philosopher’s estimation—will always “fall short” (48). That is, the rhetorical tradition has privileged logical and deliberative language games in an attempt to control what one might call the tropic: the seductive, poetic, or magical element of language, which, in

the words of Paul de Man, “radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration” (10).

Such efforts at revisionary histories of rhetoric have been motivated by the presumption that the history of rhetoric is itself a rhetorical construction, as James Berlin et al. noted: “The difficulty for the historian is that, even when evidence is available and extensive, the writing of history is itself a rhetorical act” (11) and indeed a political act: “The historian is herself underwriting a version of the normal, of the proper arrangement of classes, races, and genders. History does not write itself, having in itself no inherent pattern of development. Historians cannot escape this play of power, inherent in all signifying practices” (11). Such acknowledgments have prompted rhetorical historians to examine not only the ideological formation of history in terms of who gets included and who does not—but also in terms of the ideological nature of historical narrativization, as a process of reifying the individual by perpetuating the “great man” idea of history, which obscures the material conditions of possibility for anyone to do anything. History, then, becomes the history of “great actors” (Poulakos, “Nietzsche and Histories of Rhetoric” 86), the tracing of “one great individual to another” (88). Such linkages—those that stress the continuity or progress of such linkages—serve, according to Carole Blair, to “preserve the ‘politics of preservation’ and the ‘tracing of influence’” (405), resulting in what Poulakos characterizes as an “uncritical acceptance of the past as the reservoir of all meaning for human existence” (89). For our purposes, we could rewrite Poulakos to add that some histories adopt an uncritical acceptance of classical rhetoric as the basis for contemporary rhetorical practices. Revisionary histories, on the contrary, critically reexamine the rhetorical tradition, querying its exclusions, investigating its presuppositions.

ROTATING THE TROPES

Thomas Sloane’s edited *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* abstracts rhetoric as a set of principles and practices, divorcing it from individual rhetoricians. And so, he tells us, “Although rhetoric is a people art, not one person is listed among the entries of this encyclopedia—not even Aristotle, not even Nietzsche. That decision was based on our effort to abstract rhetoric as far as we could, not only from this or that discipline but also from this or that theorist, time, place, culture, and to endeavor to search for its principles” (xi). The editors of this volume wished to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of historiography. That is, our focus on individual figures of rhetoric could be viewed as traditional “great man” canonizing. Yet, unlike Sloane (although he acknowledges the paradoxical nature of his attempt), we did not want to divorce rhetoric from the history of rhetoric: that is, we wanted to acknowledge that rhetoric is a historical construct as well: a function of particular times, places, cultures, and political influences. Hence, each figure is situated in his or her historical and political moment to stress the material conditions of possibility for the figure’s rhetorical theorization.

However, lest we reify the politics of the individual with our focus on individual rhetorical figures, we invite the reader to think of these entries as, indeed, rhetorical figures, as tropes to be turned, which we have attempted to do. If, according to Steven Mailloux, one mobilizes tropes in order to rotate the troops (299), we have—through our selection process of featured figures—attempted just that. That is, we have attempted to rotate the canon by:

1. Including figures not traditionally included in the history of rhetoric—women, poets, historians, pre-Socratic philosophers, lesser-known figures, and, indeed, figures for whom there are no extant rhetorical works
2. Shifting, ever so slightly, the relative importance of the traditionally canonized figures by, for example, granting Gorgias as much coverage as Aristotle, Aspasia as much as Socrates, in an attempt to reshuffle the deck of future influence
3. Encouraging our contributors to focus on contemporary uses for and significances of the figures

Our attempt to rotate the tropes/troops of classical rhetoric is an attempt “‘to break up and dissolve a part of the past’ [. . .], specifically that part that interferes with present living” (Poulakos, “Nietzsche” 90). As John Poulakos argues, “I assume that one studies the past not in order to become familiar with it, and thus learned, but in order to make sense out of it and come to terms with some of the irresolutions of the present. At the same time, I assume that one looks at the past futuristically, so as to go beyond it, to forget it even temporarily, to work against its burdens, and thus to become able to express the hitherto unexpressed” (*Sophistical Rhetoric* 3). This volume, then, will—by featuring specific figures—participate in the traditional historiography of classical rhetoric, but it will also—by including figures heretofore neglected—contribute to the demand to revise the history of rhetoric in order to contribute to the future invention of the history of rhetoric or, in a revision of Roland Barthes, to invent the history of rhetoric that does not yet exist (“The Old Rhetoric” 11).

Of course, our selection of figures constructs not only a particular history but a particular definition of rhetoric. According to Barthes, rhetoric has been defined variously as a technique, a teaching, a science, an ethic, and a social practice, as well as a ludic practice (13–14). Within this volume, you will encounter such variety of definition. We have attempted to include figures whose rhetorics instantiate the traditional definition of rhetoric as “the art of persuasive communication” and “the systematization of natural eloquence” (Vickers 1), as well as those that expand and even belie traditional definitions.

Additionally, our selection of figures defines—or redefines—the classical period. That is, we have included figures who may be viewed by some as predating as well as postdating the classical period, “historically defined,” according to Kennedy, as “the total record [. . .] of Greek and Roman rhetorical teaching and practice from the time of the Homeric and Hesiodic epics to that of the Sophists, orators, dramatists, and philosophers of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE; to Roman speakers and writers beginning in the second century BCE; to speeches, sermons,

rhetoical poetry, and handbooks of composition dating from the time of the Roman Empire” (“Classical Rhetoric” 92–93). That is, if one presupposes, as many historicans do, that rhetoric, proper—as systematized eloquence—did not come into being until roughly the time of Plato, then the classical period of rhetoric would not, likewise, begin until the time of Plato. As you will see, however, we have included figures predating Plato, predating traditional definitions of rhetoric. Likewise, we have included figures that some may view as belonging to the medieval period, such as St. Augustine or Boethius. We do so because we view such figures as transitional, cohabiting—despite their years—several periods of rhetorical practice and theorization. Murphy identifies St. Augustine as the “clearest bridge to the Middle Ages,” and notes that he “is sometimes called ‘the last classical man and the first medieval man’” (“The End of the Ancient World” 211), and Kennedy identifies Boethius as “the major figure in transmitting Aristotle’s logical works to the medieval West” (*A New History* 282). And Corbett and Connors define classical rhetoric not as rhetoric of the classical period but as rhetoric practiced in the classical tradition, and this period “covers more than two thousand years, from the fifth century BCE, until the first quarter of the nineteenth century” (“A Survey of Rhetoric” 489). The reader of *Classical Rhetorics and Rhetoricians*, then, will encounter a variety of rhetorics of the classical tradition.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF CLASSICAL RHETORICS

In addition to the book-length histories of rhetoric currently available, there are many shorter surveys that can provide the interested reader with a more detailed survey of the history of classical rhetoric in the Western tradition (see the bibliographic essay in this volume for sources). For the purposes of this volume, the following brief overview—a generalized “standard story” of classical rhetoric—will serve to contextualize and historicize the various figures featured in this collection. This traditional account is, of course, subject to reinterpretation and challenge, which current research continues to maintain and demonstrate.

Of course, where to begin the history of rhetoric depends on one’s definition of rhetoric. If one defines rhetoric as simply persuasion or eloquence, then the history of rhetoric begins with the proverbial dawn of time or at least since humans began communicating with each other. Many scholars, however, prefer to locate the coming into being of rhetoric—as the “art” of rhetoric—with the dawn of democracy, when political reforms necessitated a civic body equipped to determine itself by deliberating past, present, and future fact. Or so the story goes.

Prior to the “invention” of rhetoric, the practice of persuasion, “conceived of as persuasive oratory,” according to Corbett and Connors, “figured prominently in the speeches and debates in the Homeric epics, in the plays of the Greek dramatists, in the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, and in the philosophical treatises of Hesiod” (490). Kennedy refers to such persuasion as “rhetoric before rhetoric” (“Historical Survey” 7), whereas Cole characterizes it as “arhetorical” (x). Cole argues,

"Rhetoric is to poetry and eloquence what science is to magic, or philosophy to mythology, or politics and jurisprudence to the rule of ancestral tradition" (1). That is, rhetoric is not reducible to natural eloquence or persuasively performed orations; rhetoric, according to Cole and others, is the systematization of such persuasion, the codification of eloquence, and the development of handbooks of rhetorical techniques. "These include," Kennedy notes, "techniques of logical, ethical, and emotional appeal; the arrangement of formal speeches into logical parts; the use of different styles by different speakers or on different occasions; and the ornamentation of speech by tropes and figures" ("Classical Rhetoric" 94).

Theorists speculate that the "invention" of rhetoric as a codifiable practice—as *technē*—was a function of the "literate revolution" of fifth-century Greece, a period of transition from a largely oral society to an increasingly literate one, from the mythic world dominated by poetic thought and expression to a world dominated by rational thought and expression (see Connors, "Greek Rhetoric and the Transition from Orality"). Scholars such as Eric Havelock, most notably in his *Preface to Plato*, have speculated that the shift to literacy affects particular kinds of cognitive developments, specifically the ability to think abstractly; indeed, Havelock suggests, the "linguistic task of the presocratics" was to think thoughts about thought: to theorize in a meta-analytical way. Likewise, it may be said that the rhetorical task of the prerrhetoricians was to compose rhetoric about rhetoric: to construct a systematization of practices and render it a codified discipline, which is precisely what the early handbook writers accomplished in the second half of the fifth century BCE. Although this is the standard account—that persuasion does not become rhetoric until it has transmogrified from unself-conscious acts of eloquence (characteristic of the "verbal virtuosity" of the lyric poets and Homeric heroes [Cole ix]) to self-conscious acts of systematized persuasion—scholars are questioning it. Susan C. Jarratt's *Rereading the Sophists* challenges the assumption "that certain mental operations, specifically an elaborated syllogistic logic and the introspection or critical distance presumed necessary for such logic, are not possible within an 'oral' or 'mythic consciousness'" (31). Jeffrey Walker's *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* revises this traditional historical account, which privileges rhetoric by subordinating poetry, by demonstrating "'poetry' and 'poetics' as essential, central parts of 'rhetoric's' domain" (ix); (see Heraclitus, Homer, Pythagorean Women, Sappho).

Scholars also contest the standard narrative of rhetoric's "invention," traditionally dated at 467 BCE and attributed to a pair of Sicilians, Corax and his student, Tisias, who offered systematic rhetorical instruction as well as a handbook to aid those who wished to reclaim their property, which had been previously seized by tyrants, now deposed. Although ancient sources, including Aristotle and Plato, speak of Corax and/or Tisias's art of rhetoric, current scholars cast doubt on this originary tale, most by challenging the details, some by calling it apocryphal (see Schiappa, "The Standard Account of Rhetoric's Beginnings"). Most scholars agree, however, that rhetoric, as an art, flourished in the fifth century BCE in response to newly formed democracies in Syracuse and Athens (see Katula, "Greek Democracy," for a discussion of the political and historical context). Kennedy explains, "Under

democracies citizens were expected to participate in political debate, and they were expected to speak on their own behalf in courts of law” (*A New History* 3).

Capitalizing on this new need, Sophists—traveling teachers or “wisdom-bearers”—instructed citizens in a variety of subjects, including the art of public speaking, for a fee; additionally, the Sophists composed handbooks of rhetorical precepts. Although we are wisely cautioned against attributing a common, unifying sophistic pedagogical or practical art, we can acknowledge some approaches or practices that may be fairly characterized as sophistic. One such practice is the argumentative strategy of arguing from probability. Especially in litigious arguments concerning property ownership, where no certain evidence existed to definitively prove one’s case, claimants found it necessary to make claims based on probability. “Argument from probability,” Katula and Murphy explain, “is based upon the precept that one of two propositions is *more likely* to be true than the other one. In the ancient tradition, the classic example of probability is that of the little man accused of beating a larger man: ‘It is not likely (probable) that I would do so,’ he would reply, ‘for the bigger man is stronger than I am and would defeat me. Since I would know that, I would not anger him by hitting him’” (19). Also attributed to the Sophists is the argumentative aim of “making the weaker case the stronger,” based on the ability to see the same issue from two different vantage points. Attributed to the Sophist Protagoras, the art of “antilogic,” is, as Conley explains, “the method of resolving disputes by examining the arguments on both sides of the question, without recourse to some objective criterion of truth or to some traditional standard of behavior” (5; see also *Dissoi Logoi*).

This art, this approach to argument, has been characterized as rhetorical as opposed to philosophical. That is, the sophistic, rhetorical approach to disputation is to assert that there is no objective (and/or accessible) standard of truth to which one can appeal to determine the truthfulness of claims; rather, one appeals to probability, to conventional values, and to the judgment of public opinion, which will determine the “truth” of any case. Philosophers and philosophically prone rhetoricians, such as Plato, however, fiercely denounced the Sophists, with their rhetorical strategies and presuppositions, as liars, as flatterers, as word stylists without substance, and as lovers of the appearance (of truth) rather than of the reality (of truth). Even more rhetorically oriented philosophers, such as Aristotle, condemned sophistry as fallacious argument, as illogical. Regardless, argue Katula and Murphy, sophistry

proved a useful and effective art in the courts and assemblies of Athens. In such situations, truth is elusive. People see past [and present] events differently, each according to their interests and their recollections, and decisions about policies that will shape the future can only be based on what is “probably” going to be the best course of action. In such public affairs, where exigencies of the situation make each decision unique, rhetoric was an effective method for deciding the appropriate course of action; that is, each person with a position on the matter at hand gave his speech and decisions were based upon which speech seemed most accurate, persuasive, appropriate at the time. In an uncertain world, there is no better way. (20)