INVESTIGATING ARGUMENTS

Readings for College Writing

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SAPPHO

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PREFACE

To The Instructor

Investigating Arguments treats rhetoric as a fundamentally dialogic art of critical thought and reasoned discourse—and rhetorical education as a process of gaining informed experience in rhetoric by engaging, in the context of a community discussion, with significant and challenging issues and arguments, and by inventing argumentation of one's own. In addition to the pragmatic goal of cultivating skill in discourse, a rhetorical education aims at the greater goal of helping students better exercise their freedom (and their responsibility) in the realm of ideas, a freedom (and responsibility) they all too frequently don't know they have. Rhetoric, after all, is the realm of thought in which things may always be otherwise.

What we offer, then, is a set of occasions for rhetorical experience in which students can exercise and develop their powers as critical readers and as writers of argumentative prose. In selecting these forty-one readings, at various levels of challenge and ranging over a broad historical spectrum from pre-Socratics to contemporaries, we have sought to enable students to examine issues and arguments in their intellectual-historical contexts; to examine a writer's argumentation critically, without being excessively reverential or thoughtlessly dismissive; to see the ways in which the argumentation of bygone writers still has (or can have) relevance today; to see relationships between different arguments, or the ways that differing arguments construct a conversation (or a set of conversations) among themselves; and, finally, to begin to take responsibility for their own place in the forum that has shaped, for better or for worse, the thinking of the civilization in which we live.

Though constrained by the number of readings we could realistically include, a part of our intent was to embody, or at least partially reflect, an intellectual history centered on the ancient and ongoing conflict between Sophistic and Platonic approaches to knowledge and discourse. This history includes some of the major shifts in Western thought, such as the emergence of scientific method, "natural reason," and the "rights of man"; Darwinism and the "death of God"; and the twentieth-century return to something like a Sophistic skepticism (but also an optimism) concerning the nature of "truth" and human belief. An important part of this history, moreover, is the emergence of strong critiques—from women, from Marxists, from African-Americans, and others—of the dominant culture and its values, and the increasing (though still limited) presence in the literary forum of voices formerly excluded from it. Though constrained by numbers, again, we have sought to represent this aspect of the story in our book. To represent the whole story fully would require, of course, an enormous volume; and to study it fully takes years, not weeks. Here, it functions as the background narrative in the choice and chronological arrangement of our readings—and, as represented by the readings themselves, as an introductory overview or sketch, and the beginnings of a full rhetorical education.

Features

Besides offering a collection of readings as occasions for critical reading, discussion, and argumentative writing, *Investigating Arguments* also includes a number of features meant to inform the student's experience and help the instructor guide it.

- The *Introduction* presents, in dialogue format, an informal but concise discussion of the main rhetorical principles to be applied throughout the book, with major emphases on critical reading and inventing and developing written argumentation.
- *Headnotes* provide background information for each reading, such as discussion of the writer's historical context and rhetorical situation, and explanation of key terms and concepts that are presupposed but unexplained in the text itself. Headnotes are meant to frame the student's reading and rhetorical analysis but not to constrain or predetermine it.
- *Questions for Discussion and Writing* appear in both the Introduction and the readings. Those in the Introduction are meant to reinforce its basic concerns, while those in the readings supplement and extend those concerns by focusing attention on particular aspects of a writer's rhetoric and particular issues the writer's argument may raise.
- *Extensions* ask students to work with groups of readings that raise alternative perspectives on a given issue or on a rhetorical principle; they are, in effect, "extended" Questions for Discussion and Writing. Extensions can be used as a way of pulling together readings that have been studied individually or as the basis for a course syllabus.
- The *Glossary* provides an easily accessible, cross-referenced review of all the key rhetorical terms and concepts in *Investigating Arguments*, in some cases giving further detail; it also includes selected terms and concepts that we have not used in the book but that students may encounter or instructors may want to introduce.
- The *Instructor's Resource Manual* (bound separately) provides detailed suggestions for using the materials in this book and includes discussions of the Introduction and each of the readings, and of ways to set up and conduct a course.

Acknowledgments

Rhetoricians will recognize that our approach owes much to the version of classical rhetoric rooted in Isocrates' *Antidosis*, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Cicero's *De Oratore*, and the counterarguments of Plato, from whom we have borrowed the speakers in our Introduction (though they have changed a lot since Plato's time)—and much as well to the modern work of Kenneth Burke, Chaim Perelman, and Stephen Toulmin. Beyond these major presences, particular debts become too numerous to list. We should, how-

ever, mention the professors and students of the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, to whom we owe special gratitude. Among the friends and colleagues from whom we have learned we should at least mention John T. Gage and Marie Secor. For their assistance and encouragement, Jeffrey Walker thanks the English Department of Pennsylvania State University, which granted leave time when this book was in the early stages of development, and Yoko and Eliot, for being who they are. Glen McClish wishes to thank Stephanie Tyler, David Gaines, Edward Weismiller, Jackie Bacon, and, of course, Oscar. Thanks go to the students we have worked with at Penn State and Southwestern, for giving us reasons to believe in what we do. And we thank the editors at Houghton Mifflin who worked closely with this project for their intelligence and reasonability.

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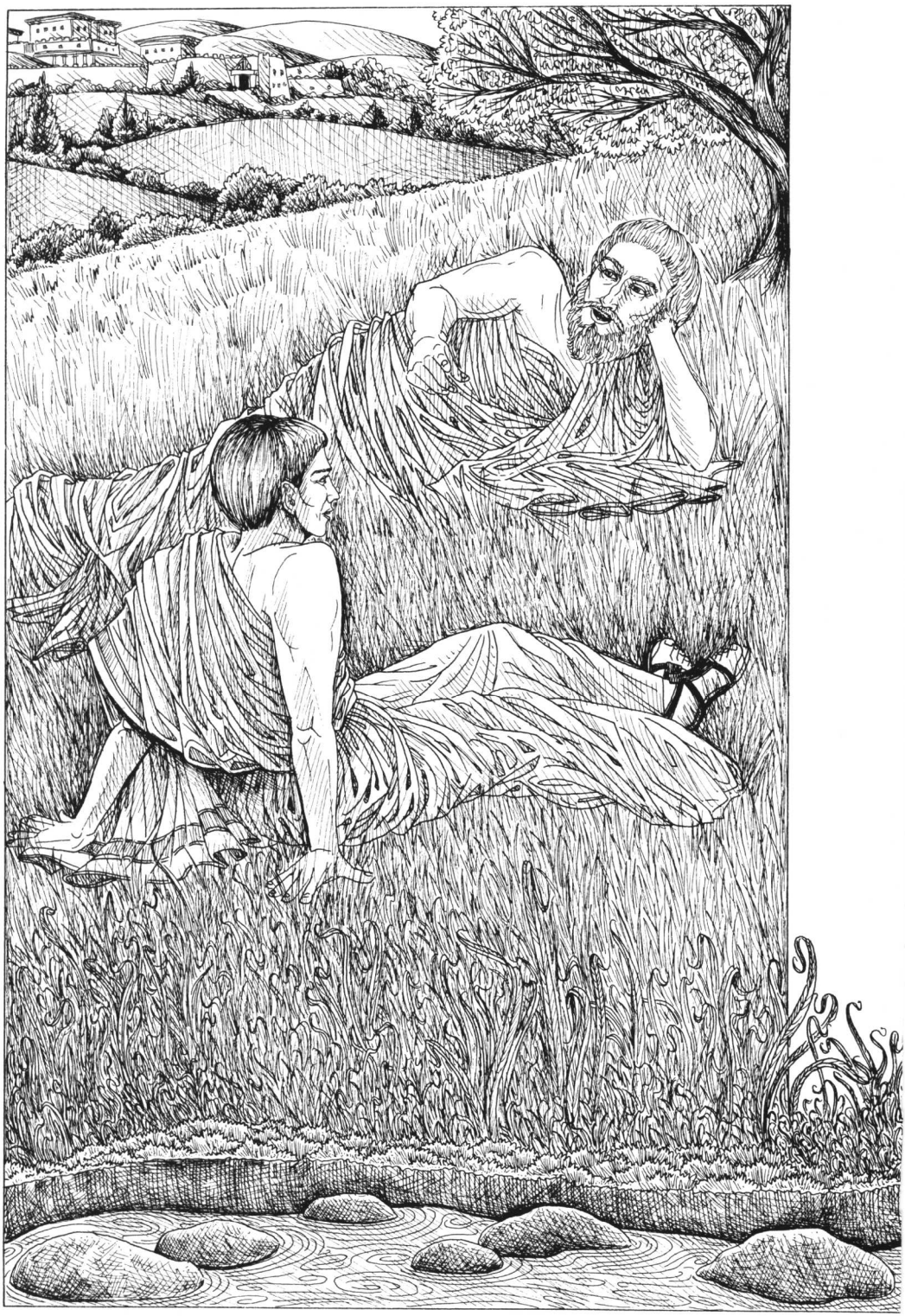
INTRODUCTION

READINGS

INTRODUCTION



I

A GENERAL PROLOGUE

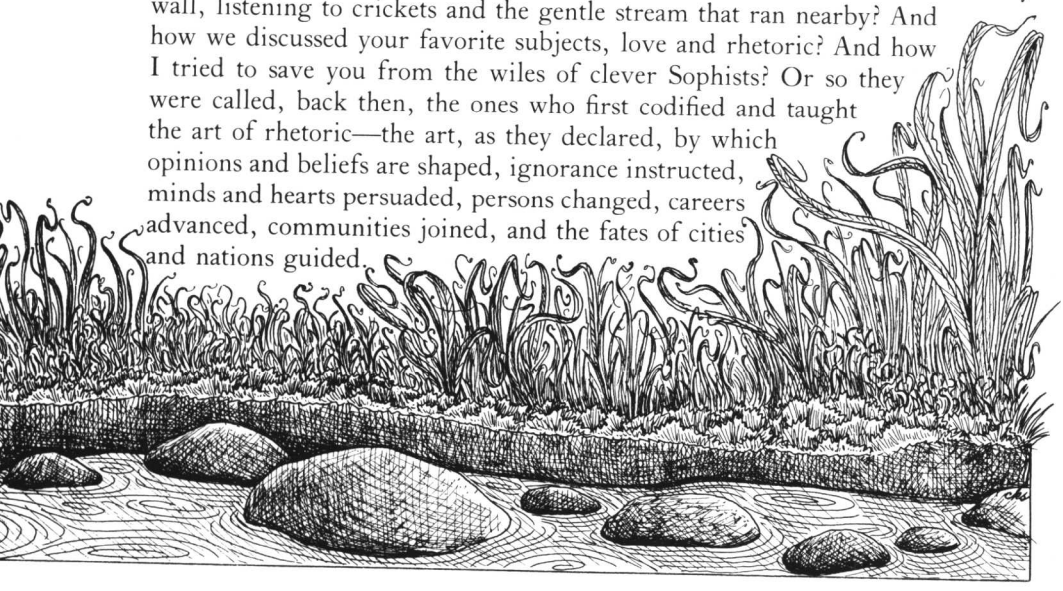
For reasons they themselves should make apparent, we have put our introduction into the mouths of Socrates and Phaedrus, speakers from a dialogue by Plato, though they are not quite the characters Plato portrays. Nor is this introduction really a Platonic dialogue. More than twenty centuries have passed since Plato wrote, and much has changed. Both speakers are aware of all that rhetoric has been between Plato's time and this. Both do, in fact, have modern minds. They represent the main positions in the debate about what rhetoric is or should be, a debate that extends from deep antiquity to now and that probably will never end, though from time to time one side or the other gets the upper hand.

The essence of our rationale, however, is this: Such doubleness of view is basic to rhetorical thought itself. Rhetoric, as we see it (and as others have said before us), is the realm in which things may always be otherwise, the realm in which belief stands open to change. It is, in fact, the realm in which virtually all the ideas we live by have been made. To learn to better exercise your freedom in this realm is the entire purpose of education. This book asks you to read, think, and write rhetorically—to read critically, examine arguments, and develop arguments of your own in the context of a "community" or group discussion—beginning with this introduction.

The dialogue from which our speakers come is Phaedrus, *a portion of which appears in this book (pp. 75–99).*

RHETORIC AND/OR PHILOSOPHY

SOCRATES Phaedrus, remember how we lay that time, in the heat of a summer afternoon, in cool wild grass and tree-cast shade outside the city wall, listening to crickets and the gentle stream that ran nearby? And how we discussed your favorite subjects, love and rhetoric? And how I tried to save you from the wiles of clever Sophists? Or so they were called, back then, the ones who first codified and taught the art of rhetoric—the art, as they declared, by which opinions and beliefs are shaped, ignorance instructed, minds and hearts persuaded, persons changed, careers advanced, communities joined, and the fates of cities and nations guided.



PHAEDRUS I remember it all quite well. And a great art rhetoric is indeed, just as you say: the art by which societies decide the things that matter to them most—and without which there is only violence, coercion, and war. But you were much too hard on them—the Sophists, I mean—and on me.

SOCRATES That may be so; but remember where we started from. You thought, as many did then and still do now, that rhetoric was simply a technique, or a collection of techniques, for composing "effective" discourse. Worse, you thought the practitioner didn't need to know the truth about the subject under discussion, and didn't need to be concerned about the truth, but needed only to know what his or her audience believed. The idea, it seemed, was to manipulate a crowd by playing on its preconceptions and emotions merely for personal gain, without caring much about the actual ideas one promoted. All that seemed to matter was personal success!

PHAEDRUS I'm not quite sure that's how it was; but have it as you will.

SOCRATES Those beliefs disturbed me greatly, just as they disturb me now, for they seemed to me not only foolish but immoral, irresponsible, and even dangerous. Shouldn't we care, for example, what justice is? Or should we care only about getting our way? Shouldn't the persuaders care if their persuasion helps or hurts the community? Or is the persuader just an isolated, disconnected, self-serving individual, a kind of privateer? And besides—can the superficial manipulator I'm describing really be successful with intelligent, well-informed, and thoughtful persons, those who care about the subject and have spent some time inquiring into it?

PHAEDRUS I doubt it.

SOCRATES Is rhetoric, then, merely a technique for preying on the ignorant and foolish? Is the rhetorician just a quack?

PHAEDRUS Socrates—

SOCRATES I tried to convince you, Phaedrus, that the rhetoric your teachers taught had little value. In fact, I tried to make you see that any genuine art of rhetoric must be philosophical, and that its best practitioner would also be a philosopher, by which I meant a "lover of wisdom"[1]—someone who knew the truth, or at least desired it, and could "cure" the "sickness" of false opinion with the "medicine" of knowledge. And didn't you agree with me?

PHAEDRUS Yes, I did, but only because I was young and inexperienced, and so easily manipulated. Had I been more skilled in rhetoric (I was just a beginner), I would have better exercised that skill the Sophists were so famous for: arguing both (or many) sides of a question with equal vigor and persuasiveness. And that, my friend, is really the heart of rhetoric. So, Socrates, let's first of all admit that you were less than fair to the Sophists.

[1] In Greek, *philo* means "friend" or "lover"; *sophia* means "wisdom."

You loved to satirize them, exaggerate their positions, and present them at their worst for the sake of effect.

SOCRATES Didn't everyone?

PHAEDRUS But what happened to your "truth" and "medicine of knowledge"? All you really did was play with *my conception* of the Sophists' teachings, and not with the actual teachings themselves. In other words, you based your rhetoric on what I happened to believe, and manipulated those beliefs to produce persuasion—I mean, to lead me to conclusions you desired. You were, in short, following the very principles you seemed to be refuting!

And you could not have done otherwise, in truth; for whenever anyone persuades (or even teaches) anyone else, that's just what happens. There is no other way. So the Sophists were quite right. As you yourself said at one point, Socrates, a speech must be adapted to the "soul" of its listener, or to the thinking of its audience.

SOCRATES Yes, but only to a point. It's not the speaker's job, for example, to make everything so easy that the audience must make no effort whatsoever. Speaker and audience must meet halfway; their meeting must be active, like a conversation. And further: There will be people we cannot persuade, no matter what we do; and there are limits to how much we can adjust or compromise the things we strongly believe! To adapt a speech *completely* to the soul of its listeners would be to tell them only what they already thought, and in the language most familiar to them. But the point of rhetoric is not to merely repeat what's obvious already, or to flatter people's prejudices (or even their thoughtless habits), or to betray ourselves. The point is to transform minds. And I don't see how anyone can do that, if they don't care about what's true. And I did, Phaedrus, care about what was true, even if I did manipulate your thinking.

PHAEDRUS But the Sophists weren't indifferent to the truth! Rather, they were skeptical about the human ability to know it. Indeed, some of them were skeptical about the existence of any permanent "truth" at all. The world, the universe itself, might be in endless flux—we know the surface of the earth has changed over millions of years, and we know there is change among the stars—and even the laws of nature may not be permanent, but instead may change with time, though perhaps too slowly for us to tell. The upshot, Socrates, is that nobody can claim an absolute or certain knowledge of what's true.

SOCRATES Well, who's to say? I myself did not reject this picture of an uncertain world, and I was always conscious of my ignorance and said so. But I wanted to believe in a truer, more permanent heaven of pure ideas that lay beyond this world, or behind it, or above it, somewhere. "Justice," for example, might be an actual eternal thing, with a permanent changeless nature: a thing confusedly, imperfectly reflected in the material world, but possibly seen and known by the reasoning power implanted in our souls. Sounds good, doesn't it?

PHAEDRUS It's quite a seductive, beautiful idea. But the Sophists weren't seduced. On one hand, what reason is there to believe that any such heaven of truth exists? On the other, even if it does exist, how can we know that we perceive it, and not just a figment of our own imagination?

SOCRATES Well, Phaedrus, I think I hear a sophistical line of thought advancing. Suppose we give it voice and say as follows: "Whatever the ultimate nature of reality may be, O Socrates, all we can ever know is *our experience of it*, and *our opinions or beliefs about that experience*. No human being ever directly knows the truth itself (if truth exists), and will never, in fact, know anything at all with certainty. All knowledge, all belief, is inescapably and thoroughly subjective, personal. And yet beliefs have consequences. Belief determines choice, and what we choose can bring us life or death, happiness or misery, wealth or poverty, success or failure, honor or shame. So we look for the best beliefs—the best opinions—by testing ideas through discussion, debate, and dialogue; by using our skill to find or make good arguments on every side of a question; and by constantly renewing and revising the possibilities of thought. What we call 'objectivity,' you truth-obsessed philosopher, is simply the result of all this comparing, testing, and revising of many subjectivities, many opinions. As we deem and declare, many eyes are better than two; diversity and difference of opinion improve our chance of judging well. Eventually we come, together, to some belief we find believeable enough, *persuasive enough*, to give the name of 'truth,' though temporarily. Accept this, Socrates. For if the world can change, as it assuredly does, and if our experience of it can change as well, then we never can afford to close our minds. Human beings, in sum, cannot have truth, but can achieve a flexible kind of wisdom, by considering the diverse arguments possible in any given case." How's that? Is that what your Sophists would have us say?

PHAEDRUS I like it, Socrates. That's just what they do say, or at least the better ones.

SOCRATES Yes, they do. And perhaps they would argue this way, too: "What if we did believe there was a fixed truth somewhere, and that some people knew it better, whereas others didn't? Don't you see the consequence, idealistic Socrates? We would end democracy. For only those who supposedly knew—the 'experts'—would be qualified to speak, or to have opinions, whereas the rest would be obliged to believe and do what experts told them. We would replace democratic dialogue with authoritarian monologue (although, of course, the authorities might have a dialogue among themselves). Freedom of speech would be curtailed. But what if we believe that *everyone is ignorant*, in varying degrees? And that's precisely what we ask you to believe. In this case, everyone (at least potentially) must have an equal right to speak in the public forum—and to be listened to—and everyone must have an equal right to judge." Would the Sophists argue this way, Phaedrus?

PHAEDRUS Very probably. You've put it well.

SOCRATES Then, it seems, the sophistical point of view is really democratic, whereas mine isn't—or wasn't, back then.