The History and Theory of Rhetoric

An Introduction

James A. Herrick

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PREFACE

The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction is intended to provide students with an interesting and readable survey of the history of rhetoric and to equip them with an accessible conceptual framework for both evaluating and practicing persuasive writing and speaking. This text introduces readers to the perceptive theories of rhetoric as they were developed and taught by many of the Western world's greatest minds. As a result, readers will be empowered to develop their own rhetorical abilities. Studying this text will also enhance the reader's understanding of the symbolic activities and strategies that mark every phase of our social and private lives.

From my first encounter with rhetoric as an undergraduate student, I was fascinated by the topic. I recall, however, my frustration at never being presented a unifying and organizing definition of the sweep of rhetorical activity that would help me make sense of such diverse theories as that of Aristotle, George Campbell, and Kenneth Burke. After completing my preliminary undergraduate courses in rhetorical theory and criticism, I was still left with questions such as: What *is* rhetoric, anyway? What does rhetoric *do?* What are the common themes that unite these intriguing but oddly different theories?

My purpose in *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction* is to tell the story of rhetoric in such a way as to answer these and other questions for the undergraduate student. I also hope to stimulate the interest of the student who is encountering rhetoric for the first time.

Chapter One presents the defining characteristics and functions of rhetoric as themes that run throughout its history. These themes include rhetoric's relationship to power and knowledge, the role of the art of rhetoric in building human societies, and rhetoric's relationship to conceptions of truth and ethics. Subsequent chapters covering different historical eras return to these themes. Focus on these themes makes the point that rhetoric has been marked by a fascinating set of unifying concerns that make it both a relevant and an intriguing topic of study for the contemporary student.

Chapters Two through Eight trace rhetoric's historical progression from classical Greece through eighteenth-century Britain. Chapter Two presents the Sophists as early teachers and practitioners of rhetoric. The Sophists' experiments in the power of language are explored and the controversy they generated by their exotic claims and iconoclastic theories is set in its historical context. Chapter Three examines Plato's famous criticism of the Sophistic approach to rhetoric in the dialogue *Gorgias*, as well

as the philosopher's own suggestions about a true art of rhetoric in the dialogue *Phaedrus.*

Chapter Four explores Aristotle's highly influential theory advanced in his *Rhetoric.* The chapter discusses Aristotle's affirmative answer to Plato's question of whether rhetoric qualifies as a true art. The notions of the enthymeme and artistic proofs and topics of argumentation are reviewed. Chapter Five completes the discussion of the classical period by considering Roman adaptations of Greek rhetoric to a new social situation. Key components in the rhetorical theory of Cicero and the contributions of Quintilian and Longinus to rhetorical thought are also explored.

Chapter Six considers the theories and uses of rhetoric that characterized the long period of Christian dominance in Europe from the fifth through the fourteenth centuries. St. Augustine's rapprochement between the "pagan" rhetoric of Greece and Rome and the educational needs of the Christian church is discussed. The chapter also examines the rhetorical arts that developed in the later Middle Ages, including the arts of preaching, letter writing, and versification.

Renaissance rhetorical theory, particularly the contributions of the Italian Humanists, is the topic of Chapter Seven. The period's intense interest in classical texts and languages and the Renaissance's fascination with rhetoric generally are seen as forces that produced an era of extraordinary influence for rhetoric in European education.

Chapter Eight directs attention from the European continent of the Renaissance to the British Isles of the eighteenth century. It examines the diverse impulses animating the elocutionism of Thomas Sheridan, the psychological rhetoric of George Campbell, the argument theory of Richard Whately, and the stylistic concerns of Hugh Blair.

The dramatic renewal of interest in rhetoric during the twentieth century is treated in Chapters Nine, Ten, and Eleven. I have elected to consider contemporary rhetorical theory under three headings because of the remarkable variety of voices and concerns that have characterized our own century's return to rhetoric. Chapter Nine takes up the themes of argument and audience that are central to Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* and Chaim Perelman and Madame L. Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric.* This chapter also considers the recent work of theorists and critics in the rhetoric of science.

Chapter Ten traces a different thread through twentieth-century rhetorical theory, one that runs from Kenneth Burke's dramatism through Wayne Booth's and Walter Fisher's narrativity. These rhetorical theories see rhetoric as shaped by both the situations common to human experience and the narrative structures inherent to the human mind. Other theorists discussed in this chapter include Mikhail Bakhtin, Ernest Bormann, and Lloyd Bitzer.

Finally, Chapter Eleven covers recent theories of rhetoric and discourse that explore the intersection of language, culture, and power. Michel Foucault's insights into the connection between the uses of discourse and the distribution of power in a society are discussed, as is Jacques Derrida's critique of the instability of language. Richard Weaver's concern for rhetoric's potential to preserve cultural values over time is explored, as is the highly influential feminist criticism of this phenomenon. The discussion of feminist rhetoricians also presents their insights regarding rhetoric's relationship to power—to the tendency of Western rhetoric itself to exclude women from full participation in social power structures.

I have included several items in the text to make it a more useful and convenient educational tool. Each chapter begins with a timeline showing significant dates in the history of rhetoric. The chapter closes with a list of key terms, questions for review, and questions for discussion. At the end of the book, students will find the complete glossary of rhetorical terms useful for review. The bibliography will also assist students who wish to do additional reading on a particular topic or theorist. For those who teach from the text, an Instructor's Manual is available, which recommends additional assignments, exercises, and examination questions.

I believe that the central, inevitable role that rhetorical activity plays in social and private human life accounts for our continuing interest in symbols and their instrumental use. The written record of this interest we term "the history of rhetoric." Our individual and corporate rhetorical nature and our reliance upon rhetorical interaction in the maintenance of peaceful social arrangements make the history and theory of rhetoric a crucial study for all thinking people today.

Given the pluralistic nature of contemporary society and the resulting need to improve our means of finding working compromises through discourse, the study of rhetoric is perhaps more relevant today than it ever has been. It is my hope that this book conveys to readers the vitality of this essential art. I also hope to provide a sense of the intense intellectual electricity that crackles around the thinking of so many brilliant minds as they seek to understand for themselves and to educate their own students about the inherent power of artfully managed symbols.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I began writing this book, I did not realize how many other people would become involved in the project in one way or another. I have benefitted from the advice and assistance of a number of students, colleagues, and support staff both here at Hope College and at other institutions.

I would like to thank those who have made particularly helpful contributions to the finished product.

Many of my rhetorical theory students at Hope College have contributed significantly to development of this text over the past three years. I wish especially to thank Greg Brown for his contributions on Petrarch, Mary Frances Cline for her help in locating sources on feminist rhetoric, Mark Maxson for his research into Richard Weaver, and Brian Calandra for his contributions regarding Wayne Booth. Students who have helped through careful proofreading of the text include Valerie Pacheco, Shannon Niven, Lorraine Gardner, Jonathan Pott, Amy Grasman, Brent Vander Kolk, and Jennifer Weaver.

Special thanks also are due to my colleague Julie Brown for her substantial contributions to the material that appears in the sections on Mikhail Bakhtin in Chapter Nine and Jacques Derrida in Chapter Ten. Other colleagues at Hope College who have provided valuable assistance include Rick Smith, who made helpful comments on my treatment of medieval rhetoric; Albert Bell, who gave a careful and helpful reading to Chapter Five, on Roman rhetoric; and Kelley Osborne, who helped me apprehend the nuances of some nettlesome Greek terms.

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Finally, my wife and children were very supportive during the entire process of developing this text. Their interest in this project was one of the factors that gave me the initiative to see it through to completion.

James A. Herrick

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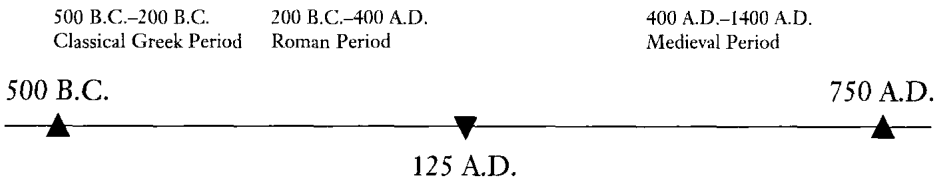
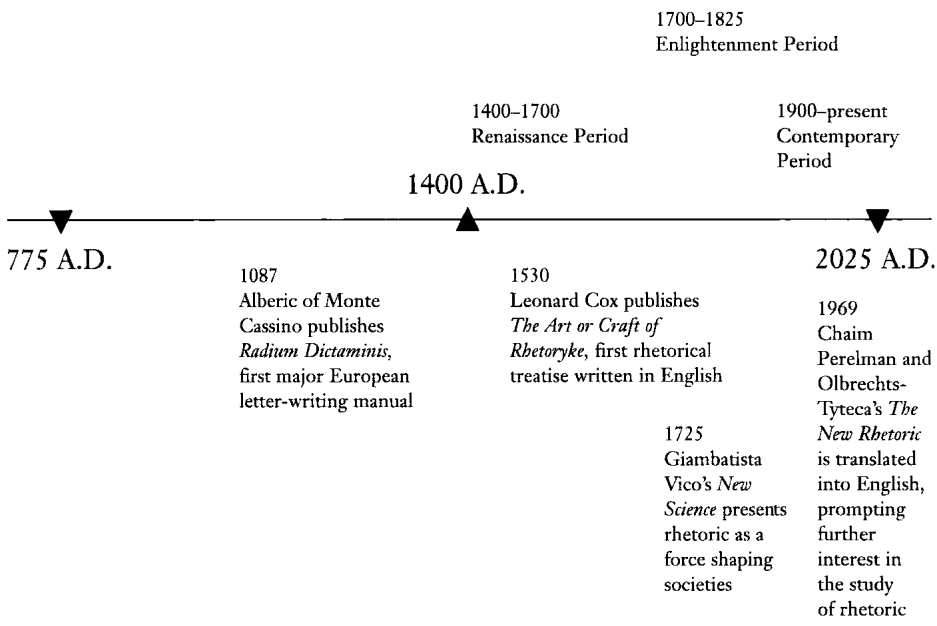


CHAPTER ONE

An Overview of Rhetoric

In this text we will explore the history, theories, and practices of rhetoric. As literary critic Wayne Booth suggests, however, the term "rhetoric" may pose some problems at the outset because of the various meanings it has acquired. For some people "rhetoric" is synonymous with "empty talk" or even "deception." The cliches "That's mere rhetoric" and "That's just empty rhetoric" are used as insults. Meanwhile, rhetoric has become an important topic of study in recent years. Its significance to public discussion of important political, social, and even scientific issues has been widely recognized. Scholars and teachers have expressed great interest in the topic. Many colleges and universities are offering courses in rhetoric, and dozens of books with "rhetoric" in their titles are published every year. Clearly, "rhetoric" arouses mixed feelings. It is both condemned and widely studied; used as an insult and recommended to students as something they should master. What is going on here?

The negative attitude toward rhetoric reflected in comments such as "That's empty rhetoric" is not of recent origin. One of the earliest and



My first problem lies of course in the very word "rhetoric."

Wayne Booth
The Vocation of a Teacher

most influential discussions of rhetoric, Plato's *Gorgias*, written in the opening decades of the fourth century B.C. when rhetoric was highly popular in Athens, takes a dim view of the practice. In this dialogue the character Socrates, apparently representing Plato's own perspective, says rhetoric is simply a means by which "naturally clever" people "flatter" their unsuspecting listeners into agreeing with them and doing their bidding. Plato calls rhetoric "foul" and "ugly."[1] We will explore his criticisms of rhetoric in Chapter Three.

Rhetoric-bashing continues in an almost unbroken tradition from Plato's day to the present. In 1690 another great philosopher, John Locke, advanced a view of rhetoric not unlike—and perhaps influenced by—Plato's:

> If we speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats. . . .[2]

Many similar condemnations of rhetoric could be discovered in Western literature over the past two thousand years. But it is also true that opinion about rhetoric has always been divided. Plato's criticisms of rhetoric were themselves answers to someone else's claims about its power and usefulness, and Locke's view often has been answered as well. Recent writers have reevaluated rhetoric, and they sometimes have come to surprising conclusions. For instance, Wayne Booth wrote just a few years ago that he believed rhetoric held "entire dominion over all verbal pursuits. Logic, dialectic, grammar, philosophy, history, poetry—*all* are rhetoric."[3] Can Booth be talking about the same rhetoric that Plato condemned as "foul" and "ugly," or about those elements of eloquence that Locke referred to as "perfect cheats?" How is it that rhetoric can elicit such sharply opposed judgments about its nature or value? Almost certainly, part of the answer to this question is found in rhetoric's association with persuasion.

Though I will be taking the position that rhetoric is more than persuasion, rhetoric traditionally has been concerned with the techniques used to gain compliance from other people. This connection with persuasion is likely at the heart of the various attitudes toward rhetoric we have noted already. Rhetoric sometimes is defined broadly as the persuasive use of language. This definition would give a person a reason for some interest in, and at the same time suspicion of, rhetoric. We all try to persuade at one time or another. Most of us also have had some bad experiences as the object of someone else's persuasive efforts.

Think of the last time you knew you were being persuaded by a telephone solicitor, a religious advocate in an airport, a high-pressure salesperson, a politician, a professor, or simply a friend or family member. Something inside you may have resisted the persuasion effort, and you even may have felt some irritation. But you also may have felt you were being drawn in by the appeal, that you were actually being persuaded. If the person doing the persuading was employing the techniques of rhetoric, you probably think you have a reason to distrust both rhetoric and the people who practice it.

Although we sometimes are suspicious of persuasion, we also engage almost daily in the practice in our interactions with friends, colleagues at work, and members of our family. We may attempt to influence friends or family members to adopt our political views; we will happily argue the merits of a movie we like. We *are* that salesperson, religious advocate, or politician. It is difficult to imagine a human relationship in which persuasion has no role, or a human institution that does not depend to some extent on efforts to change other people's thoughts and actions.

Consider some examples of how universal persuasion can be. We think of sport as the domain of physical competition and not of verbal battles. Yet, even in sports, disagreements arise over things such as inter-