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### Rhetoric

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# Rhetoric

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## Abstract

Traces “rhetoric” beginning in the classical Greco-Roman era through a few key referential/definitional moments during the long nineteenth century to its scholarly resurgence in the mid-twentieth century New Rhetorics and continuing to the present day. Focus is on the most formative moments in the study and practice of rhetoric, especially those that mark the radical and substantial shift from the sense of rhetoric as public argument and ornamentation to the marriage of rhetoric and writing instruction that becomes embedded in the university system in the United States.

## INTRODUCTION

The word “rhetoric” is frequently used pejoratively as a lay term to identify a political attempt to obscure the truth or avoid saying anything of real substance. Scholars, however, see rhetoric very differently—as both a phenomenon that can be studied and as a practice (or set of practices) that produce meaning in very specific cultural or social circumstances (i.e., women’s rhetoric, African American rhetoric, etc.). For many scholars, rhetoric can be broadly described as a *techné*, an art of knowing, “transferable guides and strategies. . . knowledge [that] is stable enough to be taught and transferred but flexible enough to be adapted to particular situations and purposes” (p. 7).<sup>[1]</sup> Thus rhetoric is concerned with how individuals know, create, and invent within the ever-shifting and dynamic social, political, and economic contexts in which they operate.

The story of rhetoric is a complicated one that has developed and changed over time and across diverse geographical locations. Historically, scholars who study and theorize about rhetoric have been broadly concerned with effective and ethical participation by individuals in civic discourse within particular historical and cultural contexts. In order to come to a nuanced understanding of the term “rhetoric,” and its history as an area of scholarly inquiry, it is important to be able to understand the dominant conceptions of rhetoric that have held sway throughout that long history. The historical and cultural origins of the formal discipline of rhetoric are most often associated with classical era Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions that classified types of discourse and offered solutions for using spoken language in persuasive ways. However, contemporary rhetoricians have, over the past 50 years,

begun to recover evidence of other rich intellectual traditions of rhetorical study and practice. These scholars are exploring how traditional notions about rhetoric can be revised in order to tell a more encompassing story about human meaning-making practices that include a variety of technologies, media, and materials beyond the spoken or written word. Because the story of rhetoric happens along multiple paths that wend across time and space, this definition will focus on only a few key referential/definitional moments that are widely seen as the most formative moments in the history of rhetoric. We will begin with the classical era Greek and Roman traditions and the famous orators of the Greco-Roman *polis*. This origin story was created during the more generalized rediscovery of the classics during the European Renaissance era, and is a story that still holds sway for many rhetoric historians.

We then make a rather large temporal leap from those Greco-Roman roots to the long nineteenth century (1776–1900). We do so to mark the radical and substantial shift from the sense of rhetoric as public argument and ornamentation to the marriage of rhetoric and writing instruction that becomes embedded in the American university system during this time period. Next, we revisit two key movements of the twentieth century: first, the New Rhetoric movement’s solidification of the turn toward language and discourse as central to theoretical understandings of human experience that dominated intellectual history during most of that century; and, second, the multiple revisionist strains of the late twentieth century that were prompted by the radical changes of the Civil Rights era and its influence on U.S. scholarship. As we stop to reflect on these particular moments in the history of rhetoric,

we want to reiterate that “rhetoric” cannot be divorced from changes within the society in which it is being studied in a given moment. This is especially true of the university settings where rhetoric is studied and taught across multiple disciplinary and institutional structures—English, Communication, Philosophy, Rhetoric and Composition, Professional Writing, Technical Communication, and First-Year Writing (to name just a few). Historically, as well as in the present moment, different scholarly disciplines hold contrasting ideas about the meaning of the term “rhetoric,” about what can be studied rhetorically, and about what constitutes the key texts of a rhetorical canon. We aim not for a comprehensive understanding or mapping of this terrain, but for a treatment that will illuminate past definitions and practices in a way that links them to the present.

## CLASSICAL GREEK AND ROMAN RHETORIC

In classical Greece between the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., the formal study and practice of rhetoric consisted of the composition and performance of persuasive speeches in the public, political space of the *polis*, the forum that supposedly represented the collective citizens of the city-state as well as the city-state itself. Prolific rhetors were revered as the great intellectuals of their time and consequently garnered much political acclaim. For example, Pericles is often credited for establishing a democracy in ancient Athens due to his oratory that promoted a fair system of laws that free people could believe in.

Due to the increasingly influential role rhetoric played in the new Athenian democracy, Athens influenced and attracted rhetoric teachers, mentors, and practitioners from near and far. Historians have dubbed one of these groups of teachers the Older Sophists and typically include the rhetorical work of Gorgias, Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus, Antiphon, Thrasymachus, Lycophron, Callicles, and Cratylus in this grouping. Few primary texts of the Sophists have survived history, due in part to the harsh critique from their opponents (mainly Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates). However, the rhetoric of these opponents, albeit biased, in tandem with the few remaining textual artifacts from the Older Sophists nonetheless still reveal a few common features of their rhetorical and pedagogical practices.

An underpinning of Sophist rhetoric is the rejection of a universal truth. Sophists believed truth to be contextual and dependent upon both the orator’s own knowledge and what their audiences believed to be of value, thus truth was seen as subjective and relative. However, Sophists did argue for a form of “probable knowledge can be refined by pitting opposing positions against one another and examining the arguments thus brought forward” (p. 22).<sup>[2]</sup> Sophists such as Protagoras suggested that at least two *dissoi logoi*, opposing or contradictory arguments,

should be explored to strengthen arguments. The Sophists taught such argumentation by composing and delivering model speeches that they subsequently expected their students to imitate. Many Older Sophists, such as Gorgias, also prepared lists of sample *topos*, or argumentative topics, on papyrus scrolls for students to collect and reference when preparing their speeches.

Because the Sophists recognized the culturally biased contexts for knowledge construction, they also understood its dependence upon language and how language could be manipulated to persuade audiences. Gorgias models this subjective sense of probable truth and the ways in which language can manipulate audiences in his epideictic speech *Encomium of Helen*, where he praises Helen of Troy and pardons her for leaving Sparta with Paris by employing a composition of logical, ethical, and emotional arguments, which respectively resemble what Aristotle later marks as *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*—the three main forms of persuasion. Because of this play with language and rejection of objectivity, the Sophists were criticized for practicing loose ethics. Among their most vocal critics were Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but many argue that Plato is largely responsible for the contemporary perception that a sophist is someone who uses rhetorical ambiguity and trickery in order to support fallacious reasoning and deceive audiences. Although the Sophists contributed to the burgeoning democracy by recognizing subjective truth and allowing disparate viewpoints to be heard in the Athenian assembly and *polis*, Plato suggested that instead of searching for truth and justice, Sophists sought power.

Plato was arguably the most illustrious student of Socrates, considered by many to be the most influential figure in Western philosophy and the father of the Socratic method. This method of inquiry typically involved two rhetors taking turns leading a discussion by asking a series of questions on a given topic (*topos*) in an effort to cause their opponent to contradict themselves by agreeing, rejecting, or making concessions when answering these questions, thereby bolstering or proving the inquirer’s point of view. Plato is a prolific writer of these Socratic dialogues and even employs Socrates as a participant and narrator in his writings. Unlike the Sophists who sought possibilities grounded in cultural relevance, Plato centralized his theory and rhetorical practice on one possible Truth, and thus, sought transcendence beyond the probable. In the Platonic classical world, rhetoric is important in its ability to create harmony by fusing “ethical and aesthetic elements” within the souls of individuals, who were in turn thought to mirror harmony in the state (p. 5).<sup>[3]</sup> Platonic rhetoric can be understood, then, as the means to establish ethical “unity-in-plurality” (p. 5).<sup>[3]</sup> Plato used his famous dialogues as a means to model the production of knowledge and rhetorical education, while diminishing the Sophists’ rhetoric to an unethical and perverse obsession with “convention” as opposed to Truth. In the *Gorgias*, Plato creates a dialogue

between Socrates and caricatures of Sophists in order to make evident his belief that the Truth required in order for an individual to be ethical cannot be discovered through rhetoric, which he saw as concerned with the probable. As Socrates explains to his Sophistic audience, “rhetoric is to be used for this one purpose always, of pointing to what is just, and so in every other activity.”<sup>[4]</sup> When not used in this manner, Plato argues that the rhetorician is involved in trickery, flattery, and power over an audience who does not know the better. The relationship between the divine and order, as well as the one between its converse, human convention and disorder, is played out in *Gorgias*. For Plato, rule by “disorder” is not the way of gods or just men; indeed, he has Socrates proclaim, “wise men tell us, Calicles, that heaven and earth and gods and men are held together by communion and friendship, by orderliness, temperance, and justice; and that is the reason, my friend, why they call the whole of this world by the name of order, not of disorder or dissoluteness.”<sup>[4]</sup> According to Plato, humans, through abiding to the will of the polis which is the embodiment of the best of men [sic], should strive to be god-like and orderly; this means refusing to attend to the probable or the “pleasurable.” In *Phaedrus*, this Platonic dialectic persists as the method for invention, and “good” rhetoric as an act that must deny and transcend the material and the conventional. Accordingly, “[t]he relationship between Socrates and Phaedrus illustrates. . . [the] kind of persuasion that combats the power of convention and seeks to rise above it, rather than to exploit convention to satisfy base desires” (p. 84).<sup>[2]</sup> For rhetorical scholars today, the *Phaedrus* is an important disciplinary referent because of his predication that the advent of print literacy would prompt a turn away from dialectic, thus rendering memory or invention obsolete:

“..you, the father of have been lead by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really posses. For this invention [writing] will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Isocrates, identified as one of the first rhetoricians primarily concerned with education, rejects and accepts aspects of the Sophistic and Platonic treatments of rhetoric. One of the fundamental characteristics of Isocrates is the differentiation between himself as someone grounded in the pragmatic real world of ethical choices, and the Sophistic rhetoric and Platonic dialogic method “as being inapplicable in the real world—the world of particulars” (p. 7).<sup>[6]</sup> Isocrates believes that adopting Sophistic rhetoric would inevitably lead to paralysis and the inability to make good and ethical decisions; furthermore, because the Sophists believe that precedence cannot determine for the orator

how to act or what to say because every situation is different, one cannot “learn” to be an orator in the traditional educational sense. Education for Isocrates provides students with the knowledge to know “fitness for the occasion,” as opposed to relying on chance and the hope that one is “gifted” with eloquence: “For men who have been gifted with eloquence by nature and by fortune, are governed in what they say by chance, and not by any standard of what is best, whereas those who have gained this power by the study of philosophy and by the exercise of reason never speak without weighing their words, and so are less often in error as to a course of action.”<sup>[7]</sup> Education, therefore, ensures against “error,” and more precisely, error in judging how to *act*, which he believes the Sophists do not address. At the same time, he rejects ideals of the correct *way* to discover knowledge, what he identifies as the “impersonal, a-ethical methodology” of Plato’s dialectic. What concerns Isocrates about Plato’s rhetoric is that relying on a transcendent Truth to guide our actions may lend itself to violate what is just, which is determined in our social practices. By adopting a different understanding of rhetoric as grounded in the “world of action” and the real, “Isocratean ethics thus safeguards against the idea that any discourse can be divorced from practice in the real world and from its integral relationship to the speaker from which it issues” (p. 10).<sup>[6]</sup> For Isocrates, Plato relies too much on generalities, such as large sweeping claims to “Truth” for guidance, that he fails to emphasize knowing the specifics of the real contexts that one finds oneself participating in, which accordingly, must be understood in to know how to make such decisions. However, like Plato, Isocrates also binds together the goodness and purity of the rhetor with sound rhetorical ability demonstrated through rhetorical speech. The difference lies in Plato’s primacy of dialectic in this equation, while Isocrates believes that it is the person who is able to think through the probable who is the ideal rhetor. Isocrates argues in the *Antidosis* that “..the power to speak well is taken as the surest index of a sound understanding, and discourse which is true and lawful and just is the outward image of a good and faithful soul.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Although rhetoric historians report that Isocrates’ work at the time eclipsed that of Aristotle, his contemporary, it is Aristotle’s treatise, *Rhetoric* that served as a touchstone for many twentieth century rhetoric historians. Aristotle was Plato’s most famous student and was reportedly the first to teach rhetoric at Plato’s Academy in Athens. Like his mentor, Aristotle distinguishes himself from the Sophists and promoted formal logic, or dialectic, to arrive at true knowledge. However, unlike Plato, Aristotle “emphasized the empirical means by which it was obtained. . . [via the] rigorous questioning of premises and testing of conclusions” and posited rhetoric as functioning in situations where “such rigorous analysis is not possible (because the audience is not qualified) or desirable (due to the lack of exigency of the questions at hand)” (p. 170).<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, for Aristotle, effective rhetoric drew and built upon what the

audience assumed to be true. Like Isocrates, Aristotle believed that rhetors had a responsibility to the polis; consequently, both taught their students to be good citizen-rhetors.

Aristotle defines rhetoric as “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (p. 36).<sup>[8]</sup> In doing so, he classifies rhetoric as an art, which was for him, a reasoned capacity for making something. In his definition, Aristotle further identifies three proofs ( *pisteis* ) through which persuasion is effected: *ethos*, which refers to the character of the speaker; *pathos*, which is concerned with qualities of emotion and feeling inspired in the audience by the speaker; and, *logos*, which Aristotle calls “to show the truth or the apparent truth” in a given case (p. 39).<sup>[8]</sup> Because Aristotle rigidly separates kinds of knowledge in his teachings—the absolute truth of science confirmed through dialectic and the process of coming to agreement on everyday questions of value or preference; his views about rhetoric place it firmly in the latter realm.

Although Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is traditionally viewed as the origin text of the study of rhetoric, it was in Cicero’s *De Invention* that the five “canons” of rhetoric are established in his extrapolation of the five-part process for composing a speech. The first step in that process is invention (*inventio*), where particular strategies are used to generate arguments. The second step is arrangement (*dispositio*), the persuasive ordering of the argument. The third step is style (*elocutio*), selecting the most persuasive words, gestures, and level of ornamentation to fit the occasion. The fourth step is memory (*memoria*), the practice of committing a speech to memory. The final step is delivery (*pronuntiatio*), the actual giving of the speech—much practice was encouraged for this part of the process. Surprisingly, these canons are still one of the major touchstones for contemporary rhetoric scholars.

One of the stories that Cicero tells about how to practice the mental discipline of memory in *De Oratore* has become engrained in subsequent instruction on the topic. As the story goes, the poet Simonides was attending an athletic banquet when he was informed that two messengers on horseback wished to speak with him. While he was absent from the banquet hall, the roof of the building collapsed, crushing the guests to the extent “that those who went to look for the bodies of the dead, in order to bury them, were unable to recognize by any mark, not only their faces, but even their limbs.” However, Simonides, aided by his mental mnemonics of visualizing the seating arrangement at the table, “pointed out the bodies to the friends in the exact order in which they had sat.”<sup>[9]</sup> Consequently, promoting similar mnemonic facility as Simonides, Cicero suggested that a mental image (*imagines*) could be placed in an architectural background (*loci*), such as a hall or other type of building, and this background could be repeatedly used to provide the order and a frame of reference for a complex constellation of constantly changing ideas. This “architectural mnemonic”

has had incredible persistence in its usefulness to scholars and teachers of rhetoric even to the present day (p. 71).<sup>[10]</sup>

In contrast to the work of Protagoras, Isocrates, and Aristotle, who viewed rhetoric as a *techné* that recognizes the dynamic relationships between the subject and knowledge and promotes productive knowledge, Quintilian, frequently thought of as the last rhetorician of the classical period, grounded his rhetorical education program in the humanist liberal arts tradition that valued normative conceptions of subjectivity and knowledge. It is from his exhortations in *Institutes of Oratory* that students emulate Cicero, rather than the Sophists, that Cicero’s canons of rhetoric are themselves canonized. It is his “good man speaking well” that becomes a central touchstone for future definitions and practices of rhetoric; it is Quintilian as well who permanently weds that notion of rhetoric to a developmental understanding of learning, and to a kind of moral earnestness that persists even today.

## Common Threads

One of the central rhetorical concepts that binds classical Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions is the importance of *kairos*, or the most appropriate and opportune time and place for a specific rhetor to engage a specific audience on a specific topic. As Young and Liu explain, *kairos* is “the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved” (p. 224).<sup>[11]</sup> Thus, *kairos* is deeply connected to concepts of audience and decorum. In essence, *kairos* is a dynamic concept that varies depending on the particular rhetorical situation, or the situational context. According to several rhetoric historians Gorgias was made famous for basing his theory of rhetoric on *kairos*. Crowley notes that “Gorgias’s rhetorical theory acknowledged the contingencies of issues and situations. Gorgias chose to rely on his awareness of the particularities of each situation to help him come up with compelling things to say” (p. 39).<sup>[12]</sup> Besides Gorgias’s concern with contingencies and contexts, other scholars have added to our understanding of *kairos*: Hesiod observed that “due measure, and proportion is best in all things”; Isocrates, in *Against the Sophists*, posits that one of the criteria of good oratory is the “fitness for the occasion”; Plato-as-Socrates, in the *Phaedrus*, touts the skill of knowing the favorable occasion “for speaking and for keeping silence”; and, Cicero constituted *kairos* as “propriety or fitness.” Finally, Bizzell and Herzberg acknowledge the Sophistic doctrine of *kairos*, “the idea that the elements of a single situation, its cultural and political contexts, rather than the transcendent unchanging laws, will produce both the best solutions to problems and the best verbal means of presenting them persuasively” (p. 24).<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, the concept of *kairos* includes mutability, situatedness/appropriateness (time, place, speaker, audience, community), and opportunism.

## Classical Rhetoric, Contemporary Writing Instruction

While one contemporary avenue of Classical rhetorical study has been built on the reading and interpreting of primary texts, some scholars in Rhetoric and Composition Studies have frequently turned to classical rhetoric as a methodology to address issues related to writing instruction. Often dubbed Neo-Aristotelians or Neoclassicists, these scholars have found the rhetorics of ancient Greece and Rome useful for theorizing contemporary rhetorical education. In the prologue to *The Rhetorical Tradition and Modern Writing*, for example, James Murphy states, “knowledge of the rhetorical past can help us solve the problems of writing in modern America” (p. v).<sup>[13]</sup> Challenging what they see as the “abandonment” of attention to the rhetor in favor of the reader that dominates writing and literary studies, these scholars have argued that connections between alphabetic writing and civic participation necessitate a strong rhetorical focus within writing courses and the educational system. Murphy exemplifies this view when he argues that “We must look carefully at a proved, pragmatic, programmatic approach to the totality of the human experience involved in literacy,” an approach that underpinned the classical rhetorical education (p. 10).<sup>[13]</sup> One limitation to relying on classical rhetoric as a methodology to address contemporary issues is the danger of viewing classical rhetoric as a unified and ideal model for rhetorical education. According to Susan Miller, “the logic of this ‘rhetorical’ history of composition imposes unity and transferability on supposedly halcyon ancient days of instruction in public speaking that was designed for a discrete ruling elite” (p. 39).<sup>[14]</sup> Furthermore, the classical models of oratorical performance are understood to be analogously amenable to the teaching of writing, even when they were tied to the unique situation of oral speech. Nevertheless, the return to classical rhetoric has been understood as a way to invigorate writing pedagogies that have become too centered on skills-based writing instruction.

## RHETORIC IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

The time period roughly encompassing 1776 through 1900 marks a number of transitions in the disciplinary history of rhetoric. First, it marks the emergence and solidification of Euro-American rhetoric theories and theorists as a foundation for rhetorical study. According to the traditional narrative, rhetoric crossed the Atlantic from its home in Europe and settled into the university system in the United States, where it became central to the creation of an American mythos of democratic participation (p. 65).<sup>[15]</sup> This time period also marks major demographic and epistemological shifts in the American

university system, which had tremendous influences on rhetoric’s status as a discipline. In the nineteenth century American universities, rhetoric became “an orphaned, departmentless subject,” with the canons diminished and divided up amongst communication studies, and the newly formed discipline devoted to the study of the vernacular: English Literature, and its “offshoot,” freshman composition (p. 85).<sup>[12]</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, the focus in rhetoric textbooks is almost exclusively on written discourse, which was adapted into rhetorical theories on one hand, and rhetorical education on the other. Shifting the domain of rhetoric to written discourse and into the academy was a way of controlling who and how people participated in public discourse during a time of rapid social change brought on by developments like increasing industrialization, more widely available public education, and the formation of land-grant institutions, black colleges, and women’s colleges (p. 34).<sup>[14]</sup>

During this time period, special attention was given to writing instruction in two primary ways. First, late eighteenth century rhetorical theorists such as Hugh Blair and George Campbell emphasized dictum, eloquence, style, and arrangement. Campbell, in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) astutely advocates for an “epistemological rhetoric” interconnected with religion, morality, and human nature.<sup>[16]</sup> Campbell’s treatise was called the “first modern rhetoric” and “the first real advance in theory since Aristotle” (p. 901).<sup>[2]</sup> Unlike Aristotle, Campbell sees effective persuasion in appeals to experience, moral, and scientific reason. Moreover, he replaces the rhetorical canon with “stages of persuasion” (p. 899).<sup>[2]</sup> Invention is replaced with the “scientific proof” and induction based on sensory observation from the material world, which is distinct from the spiritual (p. 20).<sup>[17]</sup> In order to connect these two worlds—which represent his attempt to reconcile the Christian religion and Enlightenment science—Campbell argues that the human mind is structured in such a way that its “faculties” are composed by a familiarity with each. Communication, therefore, is a linguistic process through which we try to “reproduce the original [spiritual, material] experience in its entirety,” with knowledge always unreachable and existent outside of language (p. 21).<sup>[17]</sup> The role of rhetoric, then, is to become more adept at altering and conveying knowledge to an audience most effectively by being able to closely “reproduce” these original experiences (p. 21).<sup>[17]</sup> Campbell identifies the “principle of correct usage,” which is based on what is reputable, national, and present (p. 23).<sup>[17]</sup> In this way, he attempts to provide guidelines for making what he saw as “real” choices of language and style. Analogous to Campbell, Hugh Blair is concerned with style and usage, and also claims a desire to “preserve classical goals.” Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, published in 1783, spurns the advent of belletrism as the foundation for a “humanist” approach to writing instruction, with its emphasis on style and delivery; taste and criticism. In Blair’s rhetorical system, rhetoric is not

inventional; rather its role is only to eloquently present already predetermined facts and knowledge: “Knowledge and science must furnish the materials that form the body and substance of any valuable composition. Rhetoric serves to add the polish. . . .”<sup>[18]</sup> Blair’s rhetorical pedagogy relies on literal imitations of models. Blair reserves the legitimacy of models to only those who represent “purity” and “taste”: upper class, British writers. A Blairian pedagogy thusly uses models of “tasteful” texts to study in order to “imbue” the reader (and subsequent writer) with the correct styles of taste. While Blair appears to give “writing and discourse” the “highest attention,” he establishes a humanist legacy that places reading and completed texts at the educational center. Blair’s emphasis on taste as a “faculty” of discrimination was adamantly adopted as a means to secure cultural elitism (p. 38).<sup>[12]</sup>

By contrast, Alexander Bain focused on pragmatism and the development of the formalist rhetorical modes. Like Campbell, Bain emphasized style and psychology in adapting rhetoric to the written word. Bain defined the scope of rhetoric as “the means whereby language, spoken or written, may be rendered effective” (p. 1146).<sup>[19]</sup> In his 1866 *Composition and Rhetoric: A Manual*, Bain relied heavily on both Aristotle and Campbell in his use of physiological psychology to understand persuasion, invention, and rhetorical effectiveness. Bain, in the history of rhetorical pedagogy is most frequently associated with his reduction of the composing process to the unit of the paragraph, thus serving as the precursor to current traditionalism in composition studies. In a perversion of arrangement, form in Bain’s rhetorical theory is predetermined, static, and devoid of purpose. This is perpetuated in his coining of the [infamous] “modes of discourse,” which he lists as description, narration, exposition, and persuasion (p. 1143).<sup>[2]</sup> Rhetorical purpose, invention, and arrangement, are all bound up and dissipated in the modes as the writer is asked to choose the mode to convey the purpose, with the purpose itself and the types of arguments one can make limited by the given modes. Students were (and still are) asked to compose in these modes for the sake of demonstrating their mastery of the form, rather than as a means for invention and purposes. These easily identifiable “surface features” of writing become further reduced in subsequent theories and even more extracted from rhetoric as a form of productive civic action.

As the study of rhetoric shifted and narrowed to become composition as a course within departments of English, it also contributed to the rise of the middle class in the United States. Now, not only were educators concerned that students learn to model and admire great moral literary writers, they were also interested in providing students with a “pragmatic” education, one that taught students to be proficient in the work force; for some, this also meant being prepared to be civic participants. To speak to those newer concerns, Henry Day’s *Art of Discourse: A System of Rhetoric Adapted for Use in Colleges and Academies, and Also for Private Study* (1872), introduced

what he identified as “informative discourse,” rhetoric for everyday functionality. One of Day’s most profound additions to rhetorical study, he grouped the “genres” of this discourse into “explanatory essays”: narration, description, analysis, exemplification, and compare/contrast. Day’s rhetorical theory was at his time one of the most “sophisticated” multimodel vision of writing.

Overall, the long nineteenth century is important to rhetoric studies because of its primary concern with rhetoric as writing, and the degree to which the rhetoricians of this century demonstrated the way that rhetoric is connected to social and political control. The attention to written discourse and the “surface details” of writing mystified the vernacular, which was necessary to justify the need to create a department devoted to the study of it: English. Increased access to education was construed as a threat to those who used to be the sole participants in the educational system. Thus, in the nineteenth century, we see the proliferation of exams as gate-keeping devices, as well as an accepted model of writing that is based on grammar and form (p. 65).<sup>[12]</sup> However, it is through the exclusionary practices and control over difference through the written word that alternative sites of rhetorical writing and education emerges. Thus historians of rhetoric frequently turn to practitioners of the nineteenth century because of the proliferation of textual evidence of both dominant and resistant oratorical and written rhetorical performance.

## THE “NEW RHETORIC” OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The move from associating rhetoric with embodied action in the polis to the controlled written word is a trend that continues in many twentieth century treatments of rhetoric. Attention to rhetoric increased dramatically, especially during the mid-twentieth century, when scholars often associated with the New Rhetoric movement made new attempts to describe and mark the characteristics of argumentative language and discourse. Influential rhetoricians marking this shift generally proceed from the idea that there are many kinds or modes of discourse or language that can be classified, one of which is argumentative or persuasive. Drawing primarily from nineteenth century rhetoric and—in particular—Alexander Bain, James Kinneavy, in *A Theory of Discourse*, argues that discourse can be classified into four types including literary, expressive, referential or informative, and persuasive. Kinneavy further suggests that the ends or aims of a discourse determine its form and particularities. In this understanding of rhetoric, the purpose of a communicative statement becomes particularly important, leading theorists like Lloyd Bitzer to assert that rhetorical discourse is the kind of discourse that arises in response to situational need or exigence. The “modes” of Kinneavy and “rhetorical

situation” of Bitzer continue to influence the way writing and rhetoric are taught within the academy.

Twentieth century rhetorical theorists influenced by the turn to language and discourse often draw from Aristotle’s focus on the role of logic or *logos* in suasive communication, and attempt to further describe and, arguably, prescribe a method for persuasion. Stephen Toulmin, for instance, in *The Uses of Argument* and Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* create extensive schema for understanding the operation of logic in persuasion and argumentation. Whereas Aristotle and the usual trajectory of classical rhetoricians focus on the oral, embodied rhetorical performance, scholars of the New Rhetoric follow the nineteenth century movement toward writing by applying the classificatory schemes of persuasion to written and print texts. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca mark this move explicitly in their Introduction to *The New Rhetoric*. There, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write that with their “concern being to analyze argumentation, we cannot be limited to the examination of spoken discourse. Indeed, in view of the importance of and the role played by the modern printing press, our analyses will primarily be concerned with printed texts” (p. 6).<sup>[20]</sup> Interestingly, although many rhetoricians working with these ideas move away from embodied performance, the theorists retain the same notions of audience and address that were traditionally associated with orality and speech-making. This movement away from speech and toward print may be related to the fact that many literary theorists and critics began looking toward rhetoric and rhetorical theory as a means for better understanding written literary texts—and for understanding human behavior based on them.

While the trend of describing rhetoric as a kind of discourse (often persuasive) is still pervasive, some scholars, by contrast, see rhetoric more as a feature of discourse. John Bender and David Wellbery offer an explicit definition for this in the idea of “rhetoricity” in which “[r]hetoric is no longer the title of a doctrine and a practice, nor a form of cultural memory; it becomes instead something like the condition of our existence” (p. 25).<sup>[21]</sup> Working from the concept of rhetoricity as a condition of existence and of discourse means that from a standpoint in the present, rhetoricians are obliged to look backward and reread texts and recreate re-understand narratives as rhetorical, as positioned. This means looking for and articulating the constraints, ideologies, and positionalities within and against which different texts and artifacts have been produced. Bender and Wellbery explain it this way: “if all language is rhetorical, if even objectivity is the product of a certain strategy, then discourses are no longer to be measured in terms of their adequacy to an objective standard. . . but rather to be analyzed in terms of their strategic placement within a clash of competing forces themselves constituted in and through the very rhetorical dissimulations they employ” (p. 27).<sup>[21]</sup>

Other theorists have marked a similar shift differently. Kenneth Burke, for instance, in *A Rhetoric of Motives*,

reads poetry, “showing how a rhetorical motive is often present where it is not usually recognized, or thought to belong,” which leads him to subsequently argue that rhetoric need not be reduced to realms of language and thought that are intentional and conscious (p. xiii).<sup>[22]</sup> By doing so, Burke not only expands and complicates the idea of the persuasive or rhetorical mode or “kind” of discourse that might be associated with Toulmin and Kinneavy, but also significantly expands the domain of rhetoric beyond “mere persuasion” by pointing to the rhetorical nature of mystification, class relationships, courtship, politics, thought, hierarchy, and bureaucracy. Refiguring rhetoric particularly in terms of identification and address, Burke simultaneously draws from and extends beyond the classical Greek tradition of persuasion: “For rhetoric as such is not rooted in any past condition of human society. It is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (p. 43).<sup>[22]</sup> It is important to note that within Burke’s understanding, which might be appropriately labeled a philosophy of language, rhetoric is still associated with language and discourse, even as Burke seems to open the door to the broad application of rhetoric concepts to any “symbolic” communication.

The turn toward language coming from late-twentieth century sociolinguistics has been influential for rhetoricians as well. Geneva Smitherman’s work on rhetoric and African American Language Vernacular in *Talkin’ and Testifyin’: The Language of Black America* and *Black Language and Culture: Sounds of Soul*, has been substantially influential in changing the way that rhetoric scholars now understand the links between specific culture, rhetoric and semantic choices in spoken language. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., draws from scholars such as Smitherman in his *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, where he uses sociolinguistic knowledge about the black vernacular tradition to read literature written by African-Americans. Gates draws on Bakhtin in key points of the book, and uses rhetoric to describe what’s at work in semantic substitutions and vacating. He also draws from the language of stylistic *topoi*, tropes, and figures used within slave narratives. Gates describes his movement as one “from hermeneutics to rhetoric and semantics, only to return to hermeneutics once again” (p. 44).<sup>[23]</sup>

## REVISION: RHETORIC AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Many contemporary rhetors have called for the reconstruction of new theories and histories of rhetoric by including the stories of those who have been historically and systematically left out of the study of rhetoric. Although still limited, Bizzell and Herzberg’s second edition of *The Rhetorical Tradition* (2001) recognizes the



importance of including such stories in studying the history of rhetoric. They explain:

As white women and women and men of color have increasingly participated in public forums, they have begun to theorize the differences race and gender make in language use. This work parallels other contemporary theory that investigates the epistemic nature of rhetoric, since women's rhetorics and they rhetorics of color typically find language use is constitutive of gender and racial identities (p. 5).<sup>[2]</sup>

Consequently, in the last two decades, the sites, methodologies, purposes, and media of rhetoric studies have once again shifted. Perhaps most importantly, rhetoric has reconsidered its purported origin stories. In response to the preponderance of rhetorical studies grounded in an Aristotelian and/or Platonic classical model, rhetoricians practicing revisionist historiography have often recentered rhetoric on a Sophistic model of rhetorical practice and pedagogy. The recovery of Sophistic rhetoric thusly coincides with a concern with what has been termed “the postmodern condition,” as the Sophists valued multiple rhetorical approaches based on context and postmodernity is characterized by contingency and incredulity towards grand narratives and absolute Truth. Alongside the turn to the Sophists, revisionists have also attempted to recover the place of women in the rhetorical tradition. Most notably, feminist revisionist historiographers have focused on the role of Aspasia, the Sophistic rhetoric teacher of Socrates, who was historically disparaged through Platonic dialogues. Recovering women as present and active practitioners of rhetoric has been a major focus for rhetoric historians over the past two decades. In spite of this valuable work, revisionist historiography has led many scholars to question the definition of “evidence” in rhetoric studies when primary texts are not available (as in the Aspasia debates). The question of evidence has become an especially vibrant conversation in rhetoric studies as the field begins to look toward understudied places, cultures, and languages as significant sites of rhetorical education.

With its continued interest in education, expanding sites outside of rhetorical education practice has shifted the models and theories of rhetorical pedagogy, especially given the history of institutionalized rhetorical education as a method of exclusion. Examples of this expansion include Nan Johnson's *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866–1910*, which examines the parlor tradition of rhetorical performances by middle class white women, and Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*, which examines “how early generations of African American women incorporated literacy into their lives and how they used literacy systematically as a variable tool” of social change (p. 5).<sup>[24]</sup> Other notable reconceptualizations of the purposes and methods of

rhetorical practice include Malea Powell's “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing,” and Ellen Cushman's “Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change.” In response to a Eurocentric omission and/or treatment in rhetoric and composition of Native American writing and rhetorical practice, which “suffers from the burdens of a colonial mindset and a general lack of understanding about the diversity of American Indian cultures and histories on this continent,” Powell examines how Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and Charles Alexander Eastman, two Nineteenth century native American public intellectuals, use writing as a response to colonization (pp. 396–397).<sup>[25]</sup> Similarly opening up the purpose and role of the academic intellectual to complexity, Ellen Cushman's “Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change” moves beyond the walls of the academy and into local community sites in order to rethink how rhetoric and composition should do social action and activism.

The work of revisioning rhetoric, though, still requires scholars to understand conventional histories of rhetoric. As Winifred Horner explains in her introduction to John Frederick Reynolds' *Rhetorical Memory and Delivery: Classical Concepts for Contemporary Composition and Communication*, “we need to know the history of rhetoric in order to not repeat the errors of the past or to offer as theory work that has already been done” (p. xi).<sup>[26]</sup>

In the conventional story of rhetoric—even the one we've told here—we have, as James Berlin so aptly characterized it, “two *great* moments in the history of rhetoric”—Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries and the United States in the last hundred years (p. xii).<sup>[17]</sup> In the “Preface” to *The Rhetorical Tradition*, Bizzell and Herzberg acknowledge “that the singular title [Tradition] could appear to convey a monolithic view of human language-using potential. But upon reflection, we decided that all the writers we include really were working within a common Western tradition, even if reacting against it” (p. v). The addition of “minor” figures such as Gorgias and Vico are significant, yet “[t]he old canonical ‘major’ names. . . still loom large” (p. v).<sup>[2]</sup> These great figures that are written as the mark from which others align or oppose, are reinscribed as the protagonists in a rhetorical history in which all rhetorical study springs forth from their seeds of wisdom; this history is written as enduring and transcendental. Regardless of the feminists and other revisionist historiographers, the protagonists and the sites of rhetorical production in the story remain the same, stabilized as the origin from which rhetoric studies proceeds. Unfortunately, this monolithic version of rhetoric diminishes our abilities to see connections and relations between people, ideas, and practices. In the desire to construct methodologies that permit rhetoric to be opened up to different ways of telling the story of the field, scholars have turned to postcolonial and cultural studies to inform their scholarship.

## CONCLUSION

This debunking of the Eurocentric narrative has had several consequences for how rhetoric is understood, defined, and studied. Rhetoric is increasingly understood as enabled and constrained by culture and identity; as produced by the interaction between and across multiple cultures and cultural encounters; and, as present in the traditions of non-European and non-Greco-Roman cultures. Further, scholars of rhetoric are no longer trying to construct a single, authoritative narrative about the history of rhetoric, or a single definition of the term “rhetoric” itself. Instead, the contemporary turn is towards investigating intellectual frameworks bifurcated by conventional notions of rhetoric, like the split between rhetoric/poetics or between epistemology/ontology, recuperating nonalphabetic knowledge systems, destabilizing hegemonic structures of knowledge production and consumption, and investigating the usefulness of rhetorical frameworks for understanding our relationships to digital technologies.

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