
Pernille Harsting and Stefan Ekman (editors):

Ten Nordic Studies in the History of Rhetoric

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This refreshing volume is a timely surprise and reveals a network of highly competent research scholars working in Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish contexts on a surprisingly wide range of topics relevant to the history of rhetoric. The latter subject has emerged now into full daylight from the umbrella of ‘English’, ‘Speech’ and ‘Communications’ departments, and is a fully-fledged contributor to world cultural history, exploiting a vantage point of particular relevance in our advertising and media-saturated world. Two recent books make clear what pressure we are all under from [modern] ‘rhetoric’ and how much we can expect to learn about ourselves from well-conducted research into the history of the phenomenon: (1) George A. Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric: an historical and cross-cultural introduction* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1998). (2) Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: the everyday use and abuse of persuasion* (New York: Freeman, 2001).

These two books will, of course, immediately raise questions: what has ‘rhetoric’ to do with ‘advertising’ and can we expect so-called ‘primitive’ peoples to have had a ‘rhetoric’? Herein lies the first problem for the volume being reviewed here: what do the editors and authors take to be encompassed by the term ‘rhetoric’? At first sight the answer is, appropriately, the Graeco-Roman art of rhetoric, that is, the systematic teaching embraced in the manuals on the subject compiled by leading figures in two of the most ‘rhetorical’ societies of all times, the Greeks and the Romans of the classical period. The manuals produced by these figures – Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian being the most notable names among them – will always be a benchmark when it comes to systematic written manuals of persuasion, and it would be difficult to imagine any treatment of the topic nowadays to be entirely free from their influence. What is more, from the time of Aristotle right through to that of Nietzsche (see *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language with the full text of his lectures on rhetoric published for the first time*, ed. and trans. with a critical introduction by Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair and David J. Parent [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989]), an acquaintance with the rhetorical teachings of classical antiquity has been the chief characteristic of any civilized, educated person. Key chapters in the volume that lies before us assume that rhetoric means Graeco-Roman rhetoric.

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This belief is implicit in Ingunn Lunde’s brief but thoughtful paper on “Text and Theory: reflections on the history of rhetoric in pre-Petrine Russia” (pp. 11-25), in which the absence of or antipathy to (Graeco-Roman) rhetorical theory is balanced by a belief that “rhetorical practice” should be concentrated on, rather than the importation of theory. This ‘practice’

needs to be defined, at least in terms of the extent to which it parallels the practice inculcated by Graeco-Roman theory, and it would have helped to have given us some idea of what the rhetorical theory actually consisted of when it finally did arrive in Russia (“Thirty-two rhetorical handbooks survive from 17th century Kiev, all of them written in Latin”, p. 17). The fact that “actual knowledge of Greek [in Russia] was meagre throughout the Middle Ages” (p. 18) must have inhibited the importation of rhetorical theory direct from Byzantine texts and practice.

Christian Høgel’s “Metaphrasis and the rewriting of Saints’ Lives in Byzantium” (pp. 27-38) also concentrates on “the rules of classical rhetoric”, which became a prerequisite for literary achievement in ninth- and tenth-century Constantinople (p. 27). This is a very interesting essay and emphasises the fact that in medieval times ‘rhetoric’ was so often the equivalent of ‘epideictic’ or *elocutio* (see my *Ciceronian Rhetoric in Treatise, Scholion and Commentary* [Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1995], ch. 1). The paper matches interesting work done on rewriting saints’ lives in the west (for example R. M. Thomson, “Two versions of a saint’s life from St. Edmunds Abbey. Changing currents in twelfth-century monastic style”, *Revue Bénédictine* 84 (1974), pp. 383-408), and emphasises the importance of prevailing literary fashions. Some closer detail on the actual nature of the stylistic upgrades imposed by the new literary modes would have been illuminating.

Editor Pernille Harsting’s very nice survey of “The discovery of Late-Classical epideictic theory in the Italian Renaissance” (pp. 39-53) not only introduces us to her own important work on the subject (pp. 51-52) but also furthers the identification within the volume of ‘rhetoric’ with Graeco-Roman theory and practice. In her case, though medieval rhetoric in general concentrated heavily upon epideictic practice and *elocutio* (and in rare cases there were medieval anticipations of the practices Harsting is emphasising – Guibert of Nogent’s twelfth-century ‘monodiae’ [available in at least two modern English translations – *Self and Society in Medieval France: the Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent*, ed. with an introduction by John F. Benton (both Harper Torchbook and Medieval Academy reprints are available – the translation was originally published in the Broadway Translations in 1925 and is by C. C. Swinton Bland – Benton has ‘revised’ it); *A Monk’s Confession: the memoirs of Guibert of Nogent* translated with an introduction by Paul J. Archambault (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996)] perhaps anticipates Perotti’s “monody lamenting the death of his younger brother” – the first “use [of] the genre in the Latin West” [p. 42]), “it was not until the beginning of the 15th century that the Latin West experienced a revival of interest in [Graeco-Roman] epideictic rhetoric”, a circumstance “brought about by scholars from Byzantium, who introduced Western humanists to the living tradition of epideictic practice in Greek literature” (p. 41). Curiously, the rather minimal emphasis upon epideictic theory in the mainly judicial manuals of Latin antiquity, meant that Greek epideictic theory and practice remained largely a closed book in the West, despite the many occasions for its employment had it indeed been available. Harsting asks why late-classical epideictic treatises were so popular in the Latin West and suggests that the Renaissance humanists used “the works of Menander Rhetor and Pseudo-Dionysius Rhetor” as “valuable guides to the understanding of – what they considered to be – classical literary genres” (p. 49). Harsting’s major instance here (Angelo Poliziano, 1454-94) considerably post-dates the earliest translations of Menander Rhetor, however, and one is inclined to think that the already established medieval interest in *elocutio* and epideictic was the deciding factor, helped along by the availability of Greek-speaking intermediaries (Chrysoloras, Bessarion and others) who could provide access to the rich lode of theory embedded in the Greek manuals of late antiquity.

Armund Børdahl's "Omer Talon's Rhetoric in 17th century Denmark-Norway" (pp. 55-75) again focusses on Graeco-Roman rhetoric, but this time in terms of Petrus Ramus' innovative allocation of its argumentative parts to dialectic and the fate of this 'renovation' in seventeenth century Denmark-Norway. He finds that the situation in Denmark is comparable with that asserted for Protestant Germany, and that in all authors studied, an attempt is evident to "counteract the Ramist reform by some sort of return to the 'complete' (five-, four- or three-part) rhetoric against which the reform was originally directed" (p. 71). This is a useful and accessible survey of a well-known topic in its less familiar outskirts.

Päivi Mehtonen's "Theories of obscurity in Quintilian and in the 18th century" (pp. 95-108) makes a complicated topic plain and alerts students of the history of rhetoric to the importance of book eight of Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory*, "one of the longest accounts of linguistic obscurity and its sources to survive in the Latin rhetorical tradition" (p. 98). As such, Mehtonen's chapter fits nicely but innovatively into the topic of the *fortleben* of the Graeco-Roman rhetorical tradition, a tradition that in some respects served to free speaking from "the dangers of tortuous and unintelligible style" (p. 99) – though Mehtonen's chapter ends by pointing out that 'obscurity' is both something to avoid and something that can be harnessed and "taught, learned, and consciously applied" (p. 104). In this latter sense, "Quintilian seems to have more of the makings of a theorist of obscurity than his eminent rhetorical predecessor" (– Cicero; p. 105). The latter is a nice idea and concludes a valuable contribution that might have included a little more on "the philosophical and critical issues of the day" that contextualised rhetoric in the eighteenth-century aesthetics of A. G. Baumgarten (pp. 100-02) and the trivium studies of George Campbell (pp. 102-05).

On the borderline between the classical art of rhetoric and modern communication paradigms is the paper by Merete Onsberg, "Body in action: a comparison between an elocutionary and a modern handbook" (pp. 127-41). Pointing at the outset to "a general lack of interest in *actio* [*pronuntiatio*] among rhetoricians", Onsberg compares "Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia*, published in London in 1806" and "*Know Your Body Language*, a modern Danish example of the popular handbooks on body language, published in 1984" (written by Flemming Mølback and Werner Pelman – pp. 128, 141). The author infers – from what sources is not revealed – and attempts to explain "the intense interest in *actio* in the two different periods" [i.e. the periods in which the two books chosen for comparison were written], but the explanation (p. 136) needs further analysis and contrast with antiquity (where *pronuntiatio* was fundamental – as is indicated by the celebrated remark of Demosthenes, reported in Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory* 11.3.6 [and see Quintilian's own ringing endorsement of the importance of the subject at 11.3.2, not forgetting the statement of the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*: "pronuntiationem multi maxime utilem oratori dixerunt esse et ad persuadendum plurimum valere" – 3.11.19]). Indeed, further analysis of the antique situation, both in term of *actio* theory and the market for it, would have added an important dimension to this paper. While the comparison between the two books in question here is well handled, wider considerations, though now and then raised, cannot be effectively dealt with from the vantage point of two manuals only. A minor point: Jean-Claude Schmitt's *La Raison des Gestes dans l'Occident Médiéval* (Paris: Gaillimard, 1990) and the late Dene Barnett's *The Art of Gesture: the practices and principles of eighteenth-century acting* (Heidelberg: Winter 1987, with Jeanette Massy-Westropp) might help dispel the illusion that no one nowadays cares about *pronuntiatio* and 'gesture'!

The final paper in the book to fall within the orbit of the Graeco-Roman art of rhetoric is Jon Viklund's "Chiasmus as an argumentative figure in C.J.L. Almquist's 'The Ideas of History' (1819)" (pp. 143-56). The focus here is both broad and narrow, but, again, one wonders how far an analysis based upon one figure – classical in usage but modern in name (p. 145) – can support the larger conclusions that "each genre and each period of time has its own particular relationship to classical rhetoric" and "style has a generative function in argumentation" (p. 144). The standpoint, of course, is interesting and valid (cf. Richard M. Weaver's *The Ethics of Rhetoric* [1953, 1985] and the volume under review, p. 144: "I have drawn on an idea current in contemporary rhetorical research"), and readers will want to take Viklund's idea further in their own thinking and research.

Moving beyond the chapters surveyed above, the focus on Graeco-Roman rhetoric blurs and we find that rhetoric can involve us in the realism of eighteenth-century Swedish novels, "A suite of poems on the death of Sophia Carlsson, published in Gothenburg newspapers in 1777" (written by Stefan Ekman) and "Thoreau's Rhetoric of Man and Machine in 'Resistance to Civil Government'" (by Henrik Gustafsson). Mats Malm's chapter on the Swedish novel (pp. 77-93) locates that genre nicely in sociological time (pp. 77-78) and draws useful comparisons with earlier works (John Barclay's Latin novel *Argenis* from 1621 and François Fénelon's *Télémaque* from 1699) only to find that the Swedish example is "unusually lacking in detail and life". The reasons for this make interesting reading and are related to "a puritanical view of language and morals", which, it is argued, "appears to have been rather general in Europe, but rarely so predominant as in Swedish culture" (p. 89). As with many of the other papers in this volume, one has the feeling that a major topic has been raised, but only in an opening sort of way. An appendix allows the reader to compare the two styles of *Argenis* and the Swedish *Adalrik*. A minor quibble: what are the sources for the introduction here of *evidentia* and *perspicuitas*, and why not note that the former appears in the standard text (*Ad Herennium* 4.55.68) as *demonstratio*?

Ekman's contribution on the "suite of poems" (pp. 109-25) is related to the prescriptions in regard to funeral poems found "in the popular rhetorical handbooks" (p. 112 and n. 6 for the texts implied), and in regard to "the classical genre of consolatory letters" (n. 19 might have mentioned the classic work of Peter von Moos: *Consolatio, Studien zur mittellateinischen Trostliteratur über den Tod und zum Problem der christlichen Trauer* [Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften III] 4 vols, Munich, 1971-72), but keeps in the main to the poems themselves. There is no biography of Sophia Carlsson; no comparative standards are announced for assessing the suite of poems; there is little indication of the rhetorical techniques employed and no indication of why the genre failed other than reference to an attack on aspects of the genre in a local newspaper in October 1778. Some comparison with other local literary, musical and artistic groups might have set a larger context (for example, the 'Mastersingers' of Nuremberg).

Gustafsson's contribution (pp. 157-67) employs the term 'rhetoric' in a general sense only, not with regard to a *color* or any other particular from the Graeco-Roman repertoire (despite references to "an effective trope" [p. 161] or "the essay's overarching machine trope" [p.163], or "a dynamic technological trope" [p. 165]). The author asks (p. 164): "How, finally, does Thoreau's schooling in rhetoric relate to his essay?" "How" indeed, and I do not feel that the essay quite answers this very relevant question.

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I suppose, then, that my main criticism in regard to this interesting and useful volume is that no attempt has been made to erect a watertight definition of rhetoric to cover what is in the volume and what is not. As with Kennedy's volume, one has the feeling that the term 'rhetoric', being of clear Graeco-Roman derivation, should be restricted to systematic treatments that show some indebtedness to the classical tradition, and other words should be found for persuasive modes that fall outside these limits: persuasive gesture, dress, behaviour and manners, advertising, literary analysis and criticism, argument, propaganda and similar topics are perhaps better described as 'modes of persuasion/manipulation' rather than rhetoric as such. After all, where there is no case for study of or indebtedness to the classical manuals, what grounds have we for speaking of 'rhetoric'? Admittedly, the term '[mere] rhetoric' has nowadays dwindled in common currency to mean the opposite of 'truth-discourse' but that is surely a vernacular corruption rather than a substantive definition.

A further general problem with the papers in the present volume is their size and scope. While any reader will appreciate the brevity and digestibility of the essays as they now stand, in many cases I for one would have liked a little more substantive detail and/or analysis.

In conclusion, specialists in the history of rhetoric, communication theory and literary analysis, as well as the scholarly and reading public in general should welcome this accessible introduction to various fields of research that relate to the history of rhetoric. Each essay is followed by a well set-out and useful bibliography of key works on the subject chosen for discussion. Those of us who do not read the native languages of the contributors are more than grateful for the decision of the writers and editors to publish in elegant and accessible English, and we can only congratulate all concerned and wish them well with their researches, not without, finally, expressing the hope that we might be able to read more about these and related 'Nordic' projects, perhaps in future volumes of the present promising series.

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