
Stephen J. McKenna

Adam Smith: The Rhetoric of Propriety

(Rhetoric in the Modern Era)

Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2005

ix + 184 pages (bibliography; index)

ISBN: 0-7914-6582-9

Price: \$22.95

In this volume, as its title suggests, Stephen J. McKenna gives attention to two topics that have not received adequate attention from historians of rhetoric. The first of these topics is Adam Smith (1723-1790), that giant of Enlightenment thought, who is better known as a moral philosopher and economist than as a rhetorician. The second topic is the concept of rhetorical propriety – defined here as “that stylistic virtue that wins audience sympathy by communicating correctly, clearly, and appropriately” (p. 1) – a concept that has received inadequate attention in twentieth-century rhetorical thought but which McKenna restores to a more central position.

The book, like others in the SUNY Rhetoric in the Modern Era Series, is brief and provides a starting point for non-specialists who may wish to learn more about important figures in the history of rhetoric. McKenna divides his study into six chapters, the first two of which offer a general survey of Smith’s thought and give an introduction to his use of the concept of propriety. The third chapter considers other eighteenth-century works on the topic of propriety; chapters four and five examine the concept of propriety in Smith’s major writings; and the last chapter discusses the public, practical nature of Smith’s rhetorical understanding of propriety.

According to chapter one (pp. 1-24), Smith’s stature as a rhetorician has been underestimated because he did not publish or circulate his lectures on rhetoric; in fact, the lectures were not rediscovered until the middle of the twentieth century. In addition, Smith’s other works, principally *The Wealth of Nations*, overshadowed his earlier work on rhetoric. Although it ought to be a central issue for rhetorical theory and practice, according to McKenna, the concept of propriety has been insufficiently discussed in modern scholarship, on the one hand, because “the concept may seem so obvious and intuitive, so rooted in the very nature of human experience as to be pre-theoretical”, and, on the other, because propriety has been seen by Marxists and critics such as Roland Barthes as “groundable only on ideological or foundational premises” (p. 3). Furthermore, the chapter provides biographical information on Smith’s life and education in Scotland and abroad, and considers his place in the Scottish Enlightenment, the intellectual movement to which his works contributed.

The second chapter (pp. 25-51) continues the book’s dual investigation of Smith and propriety, in particular by examining Smith’s attitudes to the classical tradition of rhetoric and by evaluating the function of propriety in the ancient texts. McKenna reveals that although Smith sometimes seemed dismissive of classical rhetoric, he had, in fact, closely read many classical works, which helped shape his own rhetorical views (p. 25). The chapter traces the attitudes toward propriety expressed in classical works with which Smith would have been familiar, starting with the epics of Homer, the drama of Aeschylus, and the odes of Pindar. McKenna identifies six characteristics of oral propriety in these early Greek works, ranging from the expression of the “natural order” (pp. 28-29) to the restraints of what later has been termed ‘the rhetorical situation’. After having considered the function of propriety in Greek and

Roman rhetoric (the Sophists, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, among others), McKenna demonstrates that the concept remained important after the classical period, emerging in the Renaissance in two distinct forms. Thus, Thomas Wilson and George Puttenham equated it with *decorum* and described it as a mere technical matter, whereas other Renaissance rhetoricians “pushed to its extreme conclusion the Ciceronian idea that ethical propriety is derived from discursive propriety” (p. 51).¹

Chapter three (pp. 53-72) continues the historical examination of propriety by analyzing the theories that emerged among Smith’s closer contemporaries. The plain style of rhetoric, advocated in the seventeenth century by Francis Bacon and the members of the Royal Society, continued to be championed in the eighteenth century. For the supporters of the plain style, then, rhetoric’s primary task was to clearly and simply communicate the truths discovered through science. Though aiming for a neutral transparency, as McKenna points out, “plainness is inescapably a style nonetheless”, a style Smith could describe as a kind of professional propriety (p. 55). By the eighteenth century the plain style had become standard not only for scientific discourse but also for the new treatises on judgments of taste. Characterizing the interest in taste that emerged in this period as a “near obsession” (p. 57), McKenna recognizes that the rhetorical virtue of clarity was advocated both by empiricists such as John Locke and by students of aesthetics, including the French belletrists, Lord Kames, and Joseph Addison. McKenna believes that this interest in taste resulted from more than a simple desire for ‘gentrification’ on the part of the rising middle classes. He recognizes, rather, that the theorists and explicators of aesthetics – Smith among them – wished to investigate the usefulness of discursive propriety for instilling and developing moral character.

The fourth and longest chapter (pp. 73-110) examines the role of rhetorical propriety in Smith’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (delivered 1762-1763). Smith never published the text of the lectures, which he delivered at the University of Glasgow, and his personal copies were probably burned with the rest of his papers at his death. In 1958 a set of lecture notes, copied down by a student, was discovered; McKenna joins other scholars in accepting their accuracy. According to the notes, Smith presented thirty lectures on rhetoric, though the notes for the first lecture are missing. McKenna believes that the lectures demonstrate the rhetorical nature of all Smith’s intellectual pursuits, including his investigations into moral philosophy, economics, and the ‘science of man’. Scholars such as J. C. Bryce and Vincent Bevilacqua, McKenna suggests, have tended to view Smith’s rhetoric lectures as derivative of his major early treatise, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Instead, McKenna wishes to develop a view touched upon by Barbara Warnick,² namely that rhetorical propriety is fundamental for sympathy, defined in the following chapter as “a rhetorical consensus between moral agents, one of whom is the principal or dative of sentiment, the other of whom is a spectator” (p. 116). Since sympathy, for Smith, is central to all human communication, McKenna suggests that rhetorical propriety plays an important role not only in Smith’s rhetoric lectures but in all his other works as well. For only through the “rhetorical consensus” (p. 116) of a sympathetic interaction can humans work to make their messages appropriate for one another. By way of a close reading of the extant notes for the twenty-nine lectures, McKenna attempts to refute the criticism of Sharon Crowley and Thomas Miller that Smith’s rhetoric diminishes the importance

¹ McKenna here agrees with Victoria Kahn’s analysis in *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 31.

² Barbara Warnick, *The Sixth Canon: Belletristic Rhetorical Theory and Its French Antecedents* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

of rhetorical invention by focusing on style.³ Though McKenna admits that Smith does not “enumerate anything like the classical heuristic theories of the *topoi* or *stasis*” (p. 95), he recognizes in Smith’s work a kind of “descriptive invention” that follows two paths: a direct method, which is “essentially enumerative and fits the commonplace definition of description”, and an “indirect method”, which “is treated in terms more traditionally associated with the discovery of arguments”, such as cause and effect and testimony (pp. 95-96). McKenna suggests that the indirect method of discovery is one of Smith’s primary contributions to the theory of rhetoric.

The fifth chapter (pp. 111-132) considers rhetorical propriety in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), the work that originally established Smith’s intellectual reputation and, as McKenna suggests, demonstrates “[t]he centrality of Smith’s concept of rhetorical propriety to his ethical theory” (p. 111). Arguing that propriety is necessary to a correct understanding of ‘sympathy’, – since humans adapt discourse according to sympathetic consensus – McKenna dismisses the idea that sympathy is addressed in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as a natural and seemingly absolute concept. Instead, he contends that people involved in an interaction of sympathy respond to specific rhetorical situations by communicating their own wishes and desires as well as adapting their own desires to the communications expressed by the other persons involved. According to McKenna, this accession to the communicative needs of others was important to Smith and presents a morally formative role for rhetoric. Thus, Smith did not see communication as simply the means of achieving personal ends, for by “seeking sympathy through propriety [humans] actively transcend self-interest” (p. 119). The role of propriety and sympathy in achieving transcendence of self-interest also reveals the moral and rhetorical nature of judgments of taste and value. Given Smith’s understanding of sympathy, the human ability to “see just how our interests are interrelated with the interests of others” emerges “through an element of rhetorical practice itself: the need to adapt discourse appropriately to an audience” (p. 132). It is the recognition of this need that McKenna considers to be Smith’s most important contribution to rhetorical theory.

The sixth and final chapter (pp. 133-147) considers rhetorical propriety as a means for understanding Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) and his ethical theory in general, as well as for evaluating Smith’s usefulness for modern rhetorical theory and pedagogy. McKenna argues, first, that the promotion of self-interest that Smith seems to express in *Wealth of Nations* is actually a mutual process between two or more interlocutors and should be understood as evidence of the importance Smith places on persuasion in the commercial sphere. Though his economic vision is one of free-markets and capitalism, it is not one in which an Invisible Hand of the free market works anonymously and unimpeded; on the contrary, to Smith, the commercial sphere is one in which persuasion is constantly taking place. In a second line of argument, McKenna deals with the criticism of, e.g., Thomas Miller (cf. note 3) who has faulted Smith’s civil-liberal rhetoric for focusing on propriety rather than on vigorous public debate (p. 72). Countering this, McKenna claims that Adam Smith’s “reidentification of civic virtue and political reason in terms of appropriate communication does more to politicize the social sphere [...] than to isolate or contain it” (p. 137). Finally, McKenna argues that Smith’s concept of rhetorical propriety is useful for rhetorical theory and practice today in that it requires participants in a debate to consider their audience’s position and values in order to articulate an informed response. Rhetorical propriety obliges those engaged in argument to “acknowledge our shared humanity and shared world”, which would, it is hoped, result in greater understanding and settled disputes (p.145).

³ Sharon Crowley, *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990). Thomas P. Miller, *The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

Adam Smith: The Rhetoric of Propriety is a valuable addition to the existing scholarship on eighteenth-century rhetorical theory and practice. McKenna succeeds admirably in showing that Smith's approach to understanding all of human nature was essentially rhetorical insofar as discourse in all professions and public life depends on social consensus. McKenna's account complicates and even disputes the conclusions drawn by scholars who have blamed rhetorics of propriety, such as Smith's, for contributing to the demise of vigorous public debate in the Enlightenment, when science was on the rise.

By looking at Smith's work as a whole, McKenna demonstrates that, at least for Smith, the 'science of man' can be understood rhetorically, since human beings are social beings who must consider other people's feelings and tastes and adapt their interactions accordingly. In regarding the 'science of man' as a rhetorical enterprise, Smith did his part to expand, not limit, the domain of rhetoric. Thus, the book provides valuable insights into the transition from civic humanism to civil liberalism that occurred in the Enlightenment, and into Adam Smith's contribution to that transition. McKenna's findings deserve to be investigated in relation to other figures as well, for example, Hugh Blair, for it may be that civil liberalism – commercial, assimilationist, and belletristic though it was – played a more broadly political role than scholars have thus far supposed. In addition to his important reconsideration of eighteenth-century liberal rhetoric, McKenna's attention throughout the book to rhetorical propriety is instructive. His suggestion that propriety, for Smith, at least, might serve as a kind of invention lends novelty not only to the evaluation of Smith, but to that of the rhetorical canons generally.

I believe, however, that McKenna may, on the one hand, underestimate the criticism of Smith's attitudes to rhetorical invention and, on the other, overestimate the usefulness of Smith's rhetoric. First, while McKenna points out that critics do not sufficiently allow for the inventional capacities of rhetorical propriety, he does not adequately acknowledge that these capacities are subject to the dictates of style and fashion to the extent that they are almost constantly in danger of being subsumed (see especially the discussion of ethical invention, pp. 122-123).

Moreover, in the last chapter McKenna provides three examples of current debates – regarding abortion, individual rights, and political correctness – that he thinks might be illuminated by consideration of Smith's concept of rhetorical propriety. These examples suggest, however, that, after all, questions of propriety belong to rhetorical criticism, rather than invention. Likewise, McKenna's final remarks in chapter six – “we would do well to follow Smith's example by making criticism of conventional excellences in discourse a central part of education” (p. 147) – seem to emphasize the receptive, rather than productive, capacity of rhetoric. Unfortunately, especially with the generalist reader in mind, a couple of works seem to be missing from the Bibliography (e.g., Allan Gibbard, Gloria Vivenza).⁴

With *Adam Smith: The Rhetoric of Propriety*, Stephen J. McKenna has restored Smith's reputation as a rhetorician and highlighted the importance of propriety not just for Smith, but for the rhetorical tradition generally. While modern critics such as Crowley and Miller too often see the rhetorics of propriety as evidence of an a-rhetorical turn to belletrism, McKenna's competent writing style and clear analyses will reward those curious to learn more about the rhetorical attitudes of this important intellectual figure and to pursue a fuller understanding of the concept of rhetorical propriety.

⁴ Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Gloria Vivenza, *Adam Smith and the Classics: The Classical Heritage in Adam Smith's Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Brian Fehler
Department of English and Languages
Tarleton State University
Box T-0300
Stephenville, TX 76402
USA
Fehler@tarleton.edu

Brian Fehler earned his Ph.D. at Texas Christian University and now serves as Assistant Professor of English at Tarleton State University. His dissertation, *Marketplace of Eloquence: Nineteenth-Century Calvinism and the Rhetoric of Oratorical Culture* (2005), examines the rhetorical strategies employed by the Calvinist clergy in nineteenth-century New England.