
Mark Garrett Longaker:

Rhetoric and the Republic: Politics, Civic Discourse, and Education in Early America

Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007

266 pages (bibliography; index)

ISBN: 978-0-8173-1547-4 (hardback)

Price: \$39.95

Mark Garrett Longaker's *Rhetoric and the Republic: Politics, Civic Discourse, and Education in Early America* is a history attentive to a very modern question among American rhetoricians: how do we recover the civic imperative of early republican discourse? Since most rhetorical educators want their students to connect with larger political and social issues, this has, in recent decades, prompted interest in looking for models of civic education in the rhetorical instruction of the American republican period. The book under review investigates the rhetorical practices of the early national era and gives us the clearest picture we have yet of rhetorical education at the time. Longaker demonstrates that, eager as we are to find an idealized model of civic education, "republicanism is not good nor is it necessarily bad" (p. 205); rather, it is a series of rhetorical negotiations that need to be studied further before being transplanted from the eighteenth century to our own. Throughout the book republicanism is presented not merely as a "discursive or economic effect" but rather as a sense of "common identification", one that supplied "a vocabulary for understanding national purpose" (p. 2).

The book contains an Introduction, five chapters, a Conclusion, a bibliography, and a general index. Throughout the book there are tables that provide useful information, such as a list of the various questions posed to composition students at the colonial and republican colleges (p. 131). As reflected in the useful bibliography (pp. 239-362), the scholarship on rhetoric in the republican era, much less on rhetorical education, is not extensive: this makes Longaker's book particularly welcome. Combined, the chapters work to build a solid chronology of rhetorical educational practices in early America; however, most of the chapters can also be read independently.

The Introduction ("Now that We're Civic", pp. xi-xx) alerts the reader to the central thesis of the book, namely that current calls in the field of rhetorical education to embrace a supposedly lost civic mindedness should be received with some caution. Longaker outlines a traditional history of the rise and fall of civic rhetoric in American education. According to the accepted history, early American education in the era shortly before, during, and after the Founding, contributed to a vital public sphere. Only in the nineteenth century did rhetorical education decline in the United States, beset as collegiate rhetoric was by political factionalism and emerging professionalism. By the late nineteenth century, the once vital rhetorical education was relegated largely to a few overworked composition teachers in English departments that valued a mostly apolitical literature. Such is the accepted history that Longaker wishes to challenge. Instead of seeing the rhetorical education of the early republic as a unified effort among rhetoricians, he emphasizes the varied and sometimes combative pedagogies of that period.

Chapter 1 ("One Republic, Many Republicanisms: Early American Political Discourse and Publicity", pp. 1-35) digresses, purposefully, from the book's subject of rhetorical education, in order to examine the roles of republicanism and 'publicity' in the formation of an American national discourse. First, Longaker considers republicanism and acknowledges its role in early

American discourse. Republicanism did not simply contribute to this discourse by providing a common language and set of symbols; instead, Longaker argues, republicanism's common language gave citizens a means of arguing for their own causes. Longaker writes that "[s]ome consensus clearly is necessary to bring people into conversation", adding that republicanism provided the stage upon which citizens came together to argue; it did not provide them with a common script from which to read (p. 3). Second, Longaker deals with the issue of 'publicity', which, here, means the discursive 'articulation' (or the 'making public') of partisan interests. In this chapter, Longaker primarily examines discourses on power, liberty, civic virtue, and corruption, but also considers general attitudes toward economics and the role of government. Longaker believes that too few historians of rhetoric take into account all these factors. "The outcome of any historical moment", he states, "is not determined by an economic, a political-philosophical, or a rhetorical variable"; it is determined by the public articulations of all of these variables (pp. 33-34).

Chapter 2 ("One Republic, Many Paideiai: Political Discourse, Publicity, and Education in Early America", pp. 36-78) continues the argument formed in the Introduction, namely that early rhetorical education in America was not a unified effort. "Just as early American publicity was a site where actors articulated a common political discourse to various economic, political, religious, and cultural concerns", Longaker explains, "so early American education was also a site where individuals sutured republicanism to various and often opposing interests" (p. 39). As a result of extensive archival research, Longaker is able to show that such 'suturing' occurred at places like colonial King's College (later Columbia University). Here the Whig William Livingston and the Tory William Smith employed republican language in a similar manner but for different purposes. Thus, in the controversy regarding how much Anglicans should influence the school, Livingston and his Whig colleagues wished to allow for greater religious toleration and political dissent. Smith and his Anglican colleagues, on the other hand, argued that a strong Anglican influence would encourage a greater moral atmosphere, thus improving the public character of their students. As Longaker demonstrates, republican language could serve interests as diverse as these. While early republicans did take advantage of a common discourse, their goals were therefore often at odds.

Chapter 3 ("Yale, 1701-1817", pp. 79-134) is the first of three chapters dedicated to rhetorical education at particular colleges. In looking at the college as a representative of the larger national curricular debates, Longaker hopes to show that rhetorical education was contested even at the local, institutional level. At Yale, curricular debates often formed along political or religious lines, dividing the college into three influential "hegemonic blocs" (p. 80). The first of these, so Longaker points out, was an "austere Puritan government as articulated to sustenance agriculture"; the second "a bourgeois Puritan genteel leadership as articulated to a tempered New England capitalism and to the Federalist party"; and the third a "bourgeois, religiously plural alliance among dissenters as articulated to free-market capitalism and to the Democratic-Republican Party" (p. 80). Each of these blocs argued for its own set of values, but, in addition, disputes took place within the groups as individuals fought for control. Although the arguments for curricular change at Yale often were framed in religious terms, innovation was sought in order to make Yale's classical and theological education more practical for young men who would, increasingly, enter professions other than the clergy.

Chapter 4 ("King's College/Columbia and the College of Philadelphia/University of Pennsylvania, 1754-1800", pp. 135-176) examines the changes in rhetorical education at two colleges that experienced similar curricular disputes. Philadelphia and New York, by the late eighteenth century, had attained a cosmopolitanism not found at Yale or in Connecticut, where lingering Puritan influence discouraged such development. In these cosmopolitan centers, disputes about the purpose of rhetorical education specifically, and college education generally,

arose among older, established commercial families and emerging capitalists. Both cities saw the establishment of class-based social and political alliances, including the Proprietary Party in Philadelphia and the Anti-Proprietary Party and the Sons of Liberty in New York. According to Longaker, both King's College and the College of Philadelphia "were founded in commercial cities whose political leadership before the Revolution was dominated by loyalist Anglican merchants. These same merchants wanted to acquire a genteel burnish" (p. 138). However, as the cities grew and the Revolution neared, new capitalists wanted their sons to be educated as well. These new capitalists, many of whom were neither Anglican nor loyalist, were not content with a college curriculum that merely offered instruction in gentility. An innovator such as Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia insisted on a more practical education. The disputes over curricular matters at colonial, then republican, colleges ultimately played out in larger public spheres as emergent capitalists consolidated their power in social and political realms.

Chapter 5 ("The College of New Jersey, 1746-1822", pp. 177-205), though ostensibly addressing the College of New Jersey as a whole, primarily discusses its president, the celebrated American rhetorician John Witherspoon. This focus is justified, I believe, because received wisdom portrays Witherspoon as "a laudable ancestor who championed the tradition of an active, educated citizenry" (p. 177). Suggesting that the largely uncritical view of Witherspoon is due to the idealization of the entire era of republican rhetoric, Longaker instead considers Witherspoon as a political product of his times: as a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and as one who engaged actively in the debates between Old and New Side Presbyterianism.

The Conclusion ("We Are All Republicans", pp. 206-217) surveys what happened after the decline of republican discourse. Longaker credits Thomas Jefferson with presenting republicanism as a unifying force, transcending party politics. By removing republican language from the realm of squalid politics, so Longaker claims, the "Jeffersonian emphasis on limited government and free-market tenets like the free pursuit of profit among competing interests had already begun the transition to a new hegemonic political discourse" (p. 207). In Longaker's view, when considering early American discourse, historians of American rhetoric too often focus on the fairly brief period of apolitical republicanism (as it was transforming into liberalism). Such a narrow focus accounts, according to Longaker, for the often uncritical attitude toward the rhetorical education of the period.

In *Rhetoric and the Republic*, Longaker sets for himself the task of revising the way most historians of American rhetoric think of late colonial and early national rhetorical education. He admirably accomplishes this goal, aided by thorough archival research and an engaging writing style, and demonstrates that many pedagogies, many curriculums, and many geographic and economic interests competed for dominance in this period of rhetorical education, which so often has been regarded as more or less monolithic. Longaker does not (and does not intend to) discredit the history of rhetorical education's decline by the end of the nineteenth century. Once having established that history, familiar to scholars of American rhetoric, Longaker shows that the decline was not, after all, preceded by a halcyon era of good rhetorical feelings.

Closer attention to one of Longaker's examples helps clarify his achievement. Interested in political economy, throughout the book, Longaker emphasizes the economic reasons for curricular reform. This approach often casts new light on traditional heroes of early American education, as for example Noah Webster. Widely known for his dictionary, Webster was also active in politics and political life, and he, "like many language reformers of the era, viewed American English as a perfect expression of her citizens' character and also as something needing improvement" (p. 50). In the years of the Revolution, Webster identified closely with the Federalist Party and attempted to establish a 'Federalist English' that would unify American English under one set of national rules, just as Federalist politics wished to unify "the individual

states under one powerful government” (p. 51). According to Longaker, Webster was prompted in his work to combat what he believed to be a wildly democratic impulse in the Revolution, for he had been “shaken by Shay’s Rebellion” and had come to believe, because of that episode, that “[c]itizens needed stronger guidance by an educated elite” (p. 51). Although Webster plainly called his language reforms Federalist English, he nonetheless promoted his cause as apolitical, detached from economic concerns. Nonetheless, Longaker’s analysis clearly demonstrates Webster’s economic and political motivations.

Longaker’s audience will consist of historians of American rhetoric primarily, and historians of the early republic and the United States educational system secondarily. However, historians of modern or European rhetoric may need additional reference works on early U.S. history at hand to fill in gaps regarding the chronology from colony to Revolution to early republic. The organizational structure of the book is well considered, moving from older colleges to newer ones and helping to clarify the history, though some chapters (such as the one on Yale) present a greater depth and variety of primary sources than others (such as that on the College of New Jersey).

Altogether, Longaker’s approach to early republican rhetoric is novel, and his book should stand as a new benchmark. Interestingly, since the study of U.S. rhetorical history is still a fairly young field, Longaker is revising works written by those in his targeted audience (for example Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran).¹ *Rhetoric and the Republic*, though, should be read not as discounting this earlier scholarship but as expanding knowledge of the history of the era generally, particularly since Longaker focuses more closely on rhetorical education.

If I have any significant quibbles with this book, they would be with the theoretical underpinning supported by the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci’s writings on ‘articulation’ are discussed in the Introduction, giving the reader the impression that these will be integral to the book. Nevertheless, Gramsci’s ideas (and Gramscian Marxism) disappear again until they are briefly mentioned at the end of chapter 2. Longaker does, admittedly, discuss the issue of ‘articulation’ throughout the book, but not in Gramscian language. It would have been better, perhaps, simply to indicate in the Introduction that Gramsci inspired Longaker’s ideas on the issue, so that the reader does not, in vain, look for a more thorough discussion of Gramsci’s approach later in the book.

This said, Longaker’s book is clearly an important contribution to our understanding of the rhetorical education of the republican era. Setting aside the notion of a republican rhetorical monolith, he opens up a broad range of issues for future scholars to consider. *Rhetoric and the Republic* will be a standard text for those scholars to consult.

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¹ See Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran: *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

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