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Lois Peters Agnew:

Outward Visible Propriety: Stoic Philosophy and Eighteenth-Century British Rhetorics

(Studies in Rhetoric/Communication)

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In the course of the last few decades, scholars have taken great interest in the transitory state of rhetoric in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The changing perspectives on rhetoric demonstrated in the period's handbooks and treatises are generally explained in relation to modern philosophical, scientific, or aesthetic thought; when a comparison with classical rhetoric is made, the tendency is to emphasize the break with the past. Lois Peters Agnew's *Outward Visible Propriety: Stoic Philosophy and Eighteenth-Century British Rhetorics* offers a reinterpretation of this stage of the history of British rhetoric by stressing the Stoic influences on rhetorical theorists such as Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Thomas Reid, Adam Smith, Lord Kames, George Campbell, Hugh Blair, and Richard Whatley. Agnew's thesis is that ancient Stoic ethics helped these and other authors to develop theories of civic discourse that could respond to modern trends stressing individualism and rationality. Thus, one of Agnew's aims with the book under review is to recapture the influence of Stoic thought, which was so integrated and so obvious to the eighteenth-century reader that there was hardly any need for the author to refer directly to it. Further, Agnew wishes to demonstrate how rhetoricians addressed concepts such as 'common sense', 'propriety', 'taste', and 'sympathy' to bridge the gap between the public and the private that is often thought to characterize the period.

The Introduction (pp. 1-22) outlines the general themes of the book. Agnew takes her point of departure in Jürgen Habermas's description of "a shift from more clearly defined boundaries between 'public' and 'private' to a modern public sphere composed of private individuals brought together in an effort to acquire authority in communicating about public issues" (pp. 3-4). According to Habermas, the formation of the public sphere was aided by salon and coffeehouse debates. Despite these activities, British society was still dominated by rigid class structures that restricted public participation in the community and prevented the rise of democratic public interaction. This tension is reflected, Agnew suggests, in the period's rhetorical treatises, which "simultaneously reflect an expansive vision of rhetoric and a desire to harness rhetoric's power for the purpose of preserving social order" (p. 5). Thus, rhetoricians addressed how individuals could use their powers responsibly, and created rules for appropriate conduct and language. Moreover, Agnew calls attention to concerns at that time about the impact of new printing technologies and about the growing authority of written discourse; she views theories of propriety as answers to these and other concerns.

    Stoic thought does not advance any rhetorical theories, but it offers, as Agnew points out, ethical considerations of man's public responsibilities, which also pertain to rhetoric. She highlights the

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conflict in eighteenth-century Britain between the individual's self interest and the concern for the common good, a conflict that was addressed through the Stoic idea of *sensus communis*. According to this idea, the strong bond that keeps society together is formed by the common values shared by the people, rather than by those espoused by a political system. Therefore, it was important for eighteenth-century theorists to come to terms with the relationship between individual and society, through the examination of style, ethics, and civic virtue.

Previous interpretations of eighteenth-century rhetoric have described its strong interest in psychology, emotions, aesthetics, and taste as an 'inward turn', that is, as representative of a movement away from classical rhetorical theory – with its emphasis on audience – and towards faculty psychology – with emphasis on the individual. Contrary to most other scholars who point to, for example, the links between the period's new belletristic rhetoric and its French predecessors, Agnew stresses the importance of the pervasive classical education of the time, and explains how this classical foundation in many ways functioned as a corrective to the new worldview, represented by modern science and modern political life: "For eighteenth-century theorists, Stoic thought provides a means for restoring harmony to their chaotic world through applying time-tested principles to new social challenges" (p. 16). This 'Stoic moment' in rhetorical history was vibrant but brief. Little by little, modern theories of truth, rooted in subjectivity, became generally acknowledged, and the role of social unity and communal values in discourse diminished.

Agnew's first chapter, "Stoic Ethics and Rhetoric" (pp. 23-54), traces Stoic philosophy back to its antique roots and points to its wide, protean, and often silent influence throughout history. According to Agnew, over the years the coherence of Stoicism has been dependent on "an assembly of supporting ideas" (p. 23). The aim of this section of the book, then, is to recapitulate the various parts of this 'assembly' that would find resonance in eighteenth-century Britain. Due to its emphasis on the individual's search for universal truths, Stoic thought has not been seen as a prominent part of the rhetorical tradition. However, as Agnew argues, it has been influential because of the way in which it stresses man's natural bond to other people and to the universe as a whole: since man's private virtue is based on community values, it is important to be able to create a shared understanding of these values. In this context, a central notion is *sensus communis*, which initially referred to man's capacity to understand the world and make ethical judgments, and subsequently came to refer to the common values that form the basis of any community. The ability of every individual (that is, every *man*, but Agnew's study does not discuss gender issues) to seek truth for himself is the foundation for such 'common sense', but, according to the Stoic view, this capacity for judgment must also be directed outwards: "the process of acquiring knowledge about the world is both an individual an a collective endeavor" (p. 29). Furthermore, as Agnew puts it, "this outward reflection inevitably involves the development of propriety" (p. 30). Each individual must, in other words, pursue virtue in society. Stoics generally, and Roman Stoics in particular, highlighted ideas of civic duty, although the eternal moral laws and Providence were often considered just as important factors as the state and civil laws. Stressing similarities between Stoic and eighteenth-century notions of 'public life', Agnew shows that his is where rhetoric enters into the picture: the principal rhetorical aspect of *sensus communis* is that moral judgments must always be negotiated in relation to concrete problems in community life, and here language naturally plays a vital part, as insights are shared amongst individuals. Sympathy is an important feature in such communication, and, referring to Epictetus as an example, Agnew describes how he promoted a rhetorical style that brought speaker and audience together in heartfelt interaction, thus encouraging not only *logos* and clear arguments but *ethos* as well (p. 37). Finally, Agnew singles out Cicero and Quintilian as the

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two most important transmitters of Stoic ethics in the context of the British rhetorical tradition, especially highlighting Cicero's ideas about "outward, visible propriety" (p. 48).

In Chapter 2, "Eighteenth-Century Common Sense and Sensus Communis" (pp. 55-84), Agnew turns to British rhetorical theorists from the period, such as Cooper, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson, and to the 'common-sense' philosopher Reid, in order to stress the optimism inherent in their various notions of common sense. To eighteenth-century theorists, common sense "becomes both a description of the human ability to make judgments about the world and a shared capacity to de-velop individual and civic virtue through discovering and promoting shared understanding" (p. 55). Agnew points to the idealism in the language theories of Shaftesbury, Reid, and Campbell, and to the ideas of social harmony that lie behind their common-sense philosophy. These she sees as reac-tions against new science and skeptical philosophy (represented by, for example, David Hume), which both reject the notion of common sense. However, there is a conflict between the two ways of understanding 'consensus' in common-sense theories, as either a positive social force or as an oppressive force: the theories, Agnew claims, "failed to reconcile their assertion of universal prin-ciples with the diversity of experiences and social practices that surrounded them. However this failure emerged as part of their focus on challenging what they perceived to be the dangers of philo-sophical skepticism and pessimism" (p. 83).

Also, the typically eighteenth-century concept of taste, Agnew argues, derives from the phil-osophical tradition of Stoicism: "If people are indeed programmed to respond positively to the harmony that they encounter in the world around them, this shared aesthetic response must be part of the common judgment that common sense offers" (p. 85). In Chapter Three, "Taste and Sensus Communis" (pp. 85-107), she demonstrates how eighteenth-century discussions on taste might be better understood in light of Stoic notions of civic virtue and moral beauty. Hugh Blair's belletristic rhetoric has often been seen as an example of how eighteenth-century rhetorical theory focuses on the issues of reception and style, and thus loses track of a central part of the rhetorical training, namely civic discourse. However, to Agnew, such criticism does not take into consideration the close relation between the public and the private in the eighteenth century. In the classical works of Cicero and Quintilian, rhetoric plays an important role in the pursuit of civic virtues and in the building of moral character, and the individual's aesthetic judgment is tied to these concepts (pp. 85-90). As Agnew argues, Blair's theories of taste form part of a conservative ideology regarding the way to conform to the order of the 'polite society', but at the same time, she claims, his theory of taste – supposedly intended for everyone – acquires a deeper significance as an ethical theory in view of an overall endeavor to preserve community (pp. 99-106).

Agnew points to Shaftesbury and Kames as important early figures in the rhetorical discussion of taste, particularly as their discussions consider the connection between common sense and aesthetic judgment. The cultivation of taste and individual virtue was seen as a vital task in a society where "genuine public spiritedness" stood against the "corruption that comes about through false priorities that interfere with sensus communis" (p. 96). Agnew sees Blair's theory of taste as based partly on conservative and moderate beliefs in social stability and the limitations of one's inborn capacities, and partly on Stoic ideals, which, more expansively, call for a rhetorical education for everyone in service of the community. Accordingly, his lectures help us understand the social function of cultivating taste, a rhetorical enterprise "that assumes from the outset that the cultivation of virtue will lead to participation in civic life that simultaneously reflects civic commitment and social restraint" (p. 106).

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In Chapter Four, "Propriety, Sympathy, and Style – Fusing the Individual and Social" (pp. 108-133), Agnew discusses yet a few more Stoic concepts that attain new meaning in the context of eighteenth-century British rhetoric. As demonstrated in the previously discussed chapter, eighteenth-century rhetorical education had an important social function. Agnew discusses how propriety, sympathy, and style were means of binding people together in a community. She calls attention to Shaftesbury's preference for polite conversation, and stresses that the faculty of propriety is grounded in the individual's self-knowledge and internal deliberation, but that it also presupposes interaction in a social context. A large section of the chapter is dedicated to Adam Smith, whose theory of propriety is definitely well covered by Stephen McKenna's study from 2006.[1] However, Smith is an important figure in Agnew's book, and she stresses the affinities with Stoic ideas in Smith's thought, for example the notion that self knowledge, strong character, and self control involve "sensitivity to others' perspectives", that is, a sense of propriety (p. 125). In particular she focuses on the social aspects of Smith's view of language. Style and sympathy, she argues, have a vital function in his rhetorical theory: "For Smith, as for Cicero and the Stoics, an individual demonstrates virtue first through developing an internal sense of civic duty and then through demonstrating and developing that ethical consciousness through responsible language use. Smith's emphasis on propriety brings together the rhetor and audience in forming a relationship that promotes sympathy" (p. 123).

In Chapter Five, "Victorian Language Theories and the Decline of Sensus Communis" (pp. 134-165), Agnew argues that, basically, the transformation of rhetoric after the turn of the century was due to a new conception of language, and that rhetoric, accordingly, was no longer primarily seen as an instrument for public life. David Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* (1828), Agnew claims, is the last British rhetorical treatise based on the Stoic ideal of *sensus communis*. Thomas De Quincey, on the other hand, is presented as a central figure of the reorientation of rhetoric, according to which the strength of the speaker lies in her or his individual creativity and not in the speaker answering the demands of propriety in social discourse: "[F]or De Quincey the search for order that eighteenth-century theorists had enthusiastically adopted from Stoic thought comes to represent not a value that connects humanity to the natural world but a manifestation of industrial society's artificial imposition of a system that destroys individual creativity" (p. 135). According to De Quincy, a greater emphasis must be put on style and rhetorical invention, and the process of writing is an "intellectual play with language that indirectly enables the individual to challenge others to new ways of thinking" (p. 139). Agnew's point, however, is that beside his radicalization of the rhetorical concepts, and his departure from *sensus communis* as the basis for rhetorical invention, De Quincey is concerned with appropriateness of style in a way that still displays some similarities with Ciceronian rhetorical theory.

The turn towards the imaginative vision of the individual, as opposed to nature and common sense, is further accentuated in the influential writings of Thomas Carlyle, a key figure whose part in the transformation of British rhetoric, Agnew claims, has not been acknowledged. Carlyle rejects rhetorical training and theory, and instead stresses the importance of sincerity, subjectivism, and the unconscious, thereby signaling "rhetoric's transformation from a formal and practical discipline rooted in consensus to a prophetic practice" (p. 142). The true orator is a heroic figure in society, in

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[1] Stephen McKenna, *Adam Smith: The Rhetoric of Propriety* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). The book was reviewed by Brian Fehler in *Rhetorical Review* 4:2 (June 2006), see <http://www.nnrh.dk/RR/june06.html>.

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part standing outside society, in part preaching truth within. In a short section on Matthew Arnold, Agnew discusses the concept of disinterestedness and notes that, in rhetorical treatises, it had been discussed both in relation to ethics and in the wider perspective of public communication. However, Arnold widens the gap between aesthetics and rhetoric: in his discussion on the important role of the critic, he focuses on the 'inward turn' of criticism, that is, on the turn towards the beauty and inherent truth of the text, regardless of any practical interest.

In the final section of Chapter Five, "Fin de Siècle Aestheticism and the Death of Sensus Communis" (pp. 153-165), Agnew discusses Walter Pater and his ideal of an intellectual community, which is detached from social life. Also Vernon Lee's aesthetical theory is briefly introduced, with its special attention to the psychology of beauty in art. According to Agnew, in nineteenth-century aestheticism, the stability of the ethos in the Stoic worldview is undermined, a development that is most notably represented by Oscar Wilde's theory of artistic autonomy. As Agnew writes, Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, and Wilde, among others, "rejected the notion of collectively negotiating values, advocating instead a withdrawal into a subjective realm of judgment, 'a refuge for elect souls'" (p. 164).

In the "Conclusion" (pp. 166-170), Agnew again stresses the significance of Stoic thought amongst eighteenth-century rhetoricians. She wants to revise the standard analysis of the history of rhetoric in Britain by challenging the view of a removal of rhetoric from public life, which "assumes distinct boundaries between public and private life that neither the Stoics nor eighteenth-century theorists would have accepted" (p. 167). In more general terms, Agnew hopes to have demonstrated the complex interplay between philosophy and the history of rhetoric. Such a focus on intellectual history might also result, so is her hope, in more nuanced analysis of the development of rhetoric's history in general, in this case of "rhetoric's very gradual transformation in response to the practical demands of modern industrial society" (p. 168).

Outward Visible Propriety: Stoic Philosophy and Eighteenth-Century British Rhetorics should be of special interest to scholars of modern rhetorical theory, the history of rhetoric, and the history of Stoicism. It is written in an exceptionally clear style and engages the reader with its argument, which is well focused (though on the verge of being repetitive). Through an analysis of the influences of Stoic philosophy, the book gives coherence to a set of influential eighteenth-century concepts. The strength of the study is not the novelty of every single part of the analysis – other scholars have called attention to Stoic influences in eighteenth-century British rhetoric – but the overall sweep of the argument, which elucidates Stoicism as part of a wider pattern of thought.

Although Agnew's statement that the "history of British rhetoric cannot be understood without attending to Stoic strains in influential language theories of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (p. 1) is compelling, one might object that it comes out as slightly categorical, implying that rhetoric's history were to be read, first and foremost, as intellectual history and defined by grand theories. In this reader's view, Agnew's study would have been strengthened by a more historicized analysis of some of her theoretical concepts: what was, for example, the historical significance of such concepts as 'public', 'civic', and 'community' during the extensive period of her study?

However, these few points of criticism do not diminish the great value of Agnew's work, which must be considered an important contribution to the study of the history of rhetoric.

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