Ancient Rhetoric and Oratory
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Ancient Rhetoric and Oratory

Thomas Habinek
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Oratory is formal public speechmaking. It is the characteristic political act of ancient city-states and of later political entities that draw their inspiration from them. Rhetoric is the study of available means of persuasion. It came into being as a distinct intellectual and social enterprise because of the prevalence of oratory in classical antiquity. Rhetoric analyzed successful instances of oratorical persuasion and derived from them principles that could be applied in new situations. Ancient legends concerning the origin of rhetoric date its commencement to the moment when tyranny ceased and collective deliberation began. Modern philology belittles such accounts, noting a gap of a century or so between the expulsion of the tyrants at Athens and the attestation of the word rhetoric in Greek. But ancient legend contains a truth deeper than philology: creation of and reflection on special speech go hand in hand; and oratory and rhetoric together constitute the special speech of the ancient state.

The ancient partnership of rhetoric and oratory is the topic of this book. Why did rhetoric and oratory matter to ancient societies? What do they offer to student, scholar, and citizen today? The subject is a vast one and can legitimately be approached from a number of perspectives. The perspective adopted here is primarily sociological. Our concern is to understand how rhetoric and oratory operated within the civic life of ancient Greece and Rome and, by implication, how they might come to operate in a revived civic culture today. This study will introduce the reader to important texts and writers in the history of rhetoric, to the most famous and influential orators, to the controversies sparked by the popularity of rhetoric, to key aspects and effects of rhetorical education, and to representative moments in the
afterlife of classical rhetoric from late antiquity through the present. But the focus will be less on rhetoric as a system of verbal production and more on rhetoric and oratory as social practices; less on the history of a discipline or literary genre, and more on the political and social implications of rhetoric’s ascendency, decline, and revival. Comprehensiveness is out of the question. Instead, the inspiration for this book is the ancient genre of protreptic (Greek) or exhortation (Latin), which aimed to give the reader just enough information about a subject to whet the appetite for more. As the root *trep-* in Greek suggests, this protreptic aims to “turn” the reader in the direction of studying classical rhetoric.

Many who write on rhetoric – going back at least to Aristotle – apologize for their subject matter, presenting it as, in effect, “philosophy light,” embarrassed that it complicates pure reason with emotions, interests, and, seemingly worst of all, embodied performance. They warn the reader not to take too seriously the negative connotations of the modern adjective “rhetorical,” even as they reinforce that negativity. There are even contemporary political theorists who work valiantly to develop and defend what they consider to be non-rhetorical modes of discourse, styles of communication stripped of contingency, emotion, personal or group allegiance.

This book takes a different stance. It makes no apology for rhetoric and suggests you make none either. Rhetoric (and here, as often throughout this book, I use the single term “rhetoric” as shorthand for “rhetorical training and analysis together with oratorical performance”), whatever its challenges and limitations, is the discourse of citizens and subjects, in all their glorious specificity, struggling to recompose the world. It may be competitive or collaborative, celebratory or belittling, and, in time, written as well as spoken. It is alternately exclusive and inclusive, deceitful and illuminating. It often reinforces hierarchies, and just as often disrupts them. But it is always social, always interested in engaging the range of human faculties and the diversity of human experience, and always of the moment. Its disciplined yet unpredictable nature well suits the ancient view that the essence of political life is the willingness to govern and be governed in turn. Nietzsche put it well when he said of participation in rhetoric that “one must be accustomed to tolerating the most unusual opinions and points of view and even to taking a certain pleasure in their counterplay; one must be just as willing to listen as to speak; and as a listener one must be able more or less to appreciate
the art being applied.” ¹ Art, argument, conviction, power, but also play, pleasure, tolerance, and exchange: these and more describe the experience of ancient rhetoric – and await its modern student as well.

I am happy to express my gratitude to Professor Carolyn Dewald and to Ross Faith of the USC Debate Team, both of whom read and commented on an earlier version of this book. Professor Dewald in particular saved me from a number of errors. In addition, I am grateful to Al Bertrand of Blackwell Publishing for his encouragement and advice throughout the composition of this book and to students who have enrolled in my courses on various aspects of ancient rhetoric and oratory, both at Berkeley and at the University of Southern California.
Chronological Chart

800 BC  Legendary date for founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus, 753 BC
Composition of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, approx. 750 BC
Composition of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, approx. 730 BC

700 BC  Emergence of Greek and Italian city-states, 700–500 BC

600 BC  Expulsion of tyrants from Athens and establishment of democracy, 510–508 BC
Expulsion of kings from Rome and establishment of republic, 509 BC

500 BC  Death of Hieron, tyrant of Syracuse, and “invention” of rhetoric by Korax, 466 BC
Sophists active throughout Greek world, especially in Athens, approx. 460–380 BC
Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, 431–404 BC
Pericles’ Funeral Oration, 430 BC
Career of Alcibiades, approx 430–403 BC
Gorgias first visits Athens, 427 BC
Lysias begins career as logographos, 403 BC

400 BC  Socrates’ trial and *Apology*, 399 BC
Plato, *Gorgias*, approx. 380 BC
Plato, *Phaedrus*, approx. 375 BC
Isocrates, *To Nicocles*, approx. 372 BC
Isocrates, *Nicocles*, approx. 368 BC
Demosthenes, *For the Megalopolitans*, 352 BC
Isocrates, *Panathenaicus*, 342–339 BC
Demosthenes, *On the Chersonese*, 341 BC
Battle of Chaeronea leads to Macedonian domination of Greek city-states, 338 BC
*Rhetoric for Alexander*, 335 BC? (highly uncertain)
Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, earlier than 322 BC
Death of Alexander the Great, beginning of Hellenistic period, 323 BC
Censorship of Appius Claudius the Blind (at Rome), 312 BC

300 BC
Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage, 264–146 BC

200 BC
Consulship of Cato the Elder, 195 BC
Hermagoras, *On Invention*, approx. 150 BC
Establishment of Roman rule over Greek city-states of Balkan peninsula and Asia Minor, 148–146 BC
Death of C. Sempronius Gracchus, 121 BC

100 BC
Social Wars between Rome and former Italian allies, 90–89 BC
*Rhetoric for Herennius*, approx. 86–82 BC
Cicero, *On Invention*, approx. 84 BC
Cicero, *Against Verres*, 70 BC
Consulship of Cicero, Catilinarian Orations, speech
*In Defense of Murena*, 63 BC
Cicero, *In Defense of Caelius*, 56 BC
Cicero, *On the Orator*, 55 BC
Cicero, *Orator* and *Brutus*, 46 BC
Assassination of Julius Caesar, 44 BC
Proscription and death of Cicero, 43 BC
Caesar Octavian renamed Augustus, beginning of Roman principate, 27 BC

1 AD
Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae*, 39–40 AD
Neronian Period, including Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* and Petronius’ *Satyricon*, 54–68 AD
Gospel of John, 90–100 AD
Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, approx. 92–96 AD
Plutarch, *Parallel Lives* (including Demosthenes, Cicero, Pericles, Alcibiades), 96–120 AD
100 AD  Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 100 AD
Tacitus, *Dialogue on the Orators*, later than 96 AD, perhaps 101–102 AD
Aelius Aristides, *To Rome*, 155 AD
Hermogenes, *On Types, On Issues, Method of Forcefulness*, late second century AD

300 AD  Libanius becomes professor of rhetoric at Antioch, 354
Sopater, *Division of Questions* (themes for declamations), second half of fourth century

1400  Poggio Bracciolini discovers manuscript of Quintilian, 1416
Life of Desiderius Erasmus, 1469–1536

1500  Baldassare Castiglione publishes *Book of the Courtier*, 1528
Life of Petrus Ramus, 1515–72

1600  Establishment of British Royal Society, 1661

1700  French Revolution, 1789

1800  Friedrich Nietzsche, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, prepared 1872–3

Various writings on “neo-sophism,” 1990s to present
All human communities differentiate between specialized and everyday modes of communication. The distinction orders the chaos implicit in human language, with its twin possibilities of deceiving listeners and imagining a social context at odds with the present one. Special speech, often developed as part of ritual, organizes the linguistic diversity of the community and articulates its shared beliefs and aspirations. Ancient legend encodes an awareness of the interconnection between community and special speech in the story of Zeus’ defeat of the last and most serious threat to his realm, the monster Typhoeus, who is represented as a whirlwind of cacophonous noise. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, an early Greek poem celebrating the foundations of the cosmic and social order, Typhoeus stands in sharp contrast to the Muses, who sing and dance harmoniously, befriend kings, and initiate poets into the mysteries of song.

Rhetoric and oratory enter the picture as human communities organize themselves into recognizable states. They continue the ordering function of special speech; only now the order and the speech have taken on very particular forms. The social order has become one in which communities develop a governing apparatus and a sense of purpose independent of the authority and aspirations of individuals, no matter how powerful. The community self-consciously represents itself as having a history, that is to say a life story that transcends the limits of any one human life. Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, the emergence of the state is also associated with a claim to authority over a clearly defined geographical territory, an expectation of citizens’ willingness to fight in defense of the interests of the larger group, and a delineation of privileges and rights at least in part on the basis of an