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RHETORIC IN ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article proposes to study the first two stages in the evolution of rhetoric. It will trace the history and development of rhetoric from ancient Greece to Rome. Rhetorical devices are literary devices that combine with style to form an important aspect of rhetoric. The codification of the rhetorical devices was a long process toward acquiring the present nomenclature. This article will outline the history of English rhetoric, with respect to the rhetorical devices, and trace and limit itself to its inception in the classical traditions of Greek and Latin. The focus will also be on the rhetorical devices as systematised by the Sophist, Gorgias, to the augmentation by Roman rhetoricians.

Key words: rhetoric, Sophistic, Hellenic, rhetorical devices, Gorgias, Plato, Aristotle

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Introduction

Modern scholarship of English rhetoric is founded on the principles and theories of ancient literary critics and rhetoricians of Greece and Rome. Public speaking existed in Greece since Homer's time, but the judicial pleadings under the tutelage of Corax and Tisias, of Sicily, saw the advent of the professional teaching of rhetoric by the Sophists in Athens. This may be taken as the beginning of a systematic study of rhetoric. The sophism of Gorgias and Protagoras; to Plato's dialogues in *Gorgias*; and Aristotle's response in *Rhetoric*, together, mark the first phase in the journey of rhetoric in the Hellenic age of Greece. The Roman rhetoricians, Cicero and Quintilian developed the art (*techne*) considerably which culminated in the second Sophistic. The period between the decline of the Roman Empire to the rise of Christianity in Europe saw a major decline of rhetoric and what emerged of it in the Middle Ages was an appropriated form of Roman rhetoric. St Augustine of Hippo preached a 'Christian rhetoric,' suited for the needs of the Church, and his contemporary Martianus Capella, also a rhetorician,

presented a Ciceronian form of rhetoric in *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, and in the translations of Boethius. The art of rhetoric between the Middle Ages, until the fourteenth century did not witness any progress and remained limited to preaching, letter writing, and poetry. It is only with the Renaissance movement, during the fourteenth century in Europe, that a radical transformation of social and intellectual values was witnessed and led to the revival of classical rhetoric in a big way. Renaissance rhetoricians like George of Trebizond and the Italian humanist Petrarch, re-established Greek and Roman models of rhetoric. The late Renaissance period also witnessed participation of women writers like Margaret Cavendish of England where rhetoric had flourished at the same time.

Seventeenth century Europe witnessed a period of transition where established traditions were questioned, social and intellectual issues were raised, and scientific temperament was on the rise. The Italian rhetorician Giovanni Battista Vico professed the rhetoric of imagination and viewed rhetoric as essential to all arts. In England there was

a major shift from the oral to the written word during the eighteenth century. There was a rise in education and English was slowly replacing the Latin that had hitherto been the language of scholarship, especially of the ecclesiastical order. There were, thus, more takers for rhetoric in England than ever before. Rhetoricians of the Scottish school like, George Campbell, Adam Smith, and Hugh Blair developed a new model of rhetoric focusing on eloquence and argument which also influenced American rhetoric. British rhetorician Richard Whatley presented a more traditional form of rhetoric that emphasized on the practical aspect of argument.

The two World Wars presented the world with the need for a new form of rhetoric, one that could discover a new language to explain the moral dilemma that could not be answered by the strides of scientific advancement. The new rhetoric was an admixture of the classical rhetoric moulded for the present times. Scholars from all disciplines acknowledged the presence of rhetoric in their area of study, including science. This rhetoric, which emerged in the twentieth century, was founded on the basis of arguments and the audience, pioneered by Chiam Perelman, a Belgian philosopher and his colleague, Olbrechts Tyteca. American rhetoricians Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, and Wayne C. Booth have developed rhetorical theories in the present times. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian linguist, has contributed to the rhetorical nature of language and culture that resulted in the 'polyphonic' discourse. The intellectual movement of the last century saw the emergence of a renewed interest in persuasive discourse in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. In recent times, feminist writers, such as Sonja K. Foss, have called for the documentation of women's voice in rhetoric which they feel has remained male centric.

The present article limits itself to a study of the origin and creation of the rhetorical figures in the first and the second Sophistic only. These two periods bear witness to the obscure beginnings of rhetoric from Homer to the itinerant Greek Sophists; from the suspicions of Plato to the refutations of Aristotle; from Cicero's eloquence, Quintillian's oratory, to Longinus' sublimity. It further traces the

decline and eventual revival of rhetoric during the fall of the Greece to the Romans, also called the second Sophistic.

Rhetoric in Greece

The beginnings of rhetoric can be traced from ancient Greece to the rest of the English-speaking world. The history of classical rhetoric covers almost two thousand years, from its inception in the fifth century BCE to the first quarter of the twentieth century—the rhetoric being practiced thereafter is referred to as the new rhetoric or stylistics. Like the doctrines of the other disciplines of grammar, poetics, and rhetoric, the formulation of the rhetorical devices was arrived at unconsciously; grammarians and rhetoricians dressed them with names for others to follow. In its initial stages, Western rhetoric existed in an unobtrusive form around Homer's time during the eighth century BCE. The skills for expressing themselves through speech, debate and discussion, in effect, arose out of a natural ability for disputation that manifested in the rhetorical art. Rhetoric, thus, is derived from the Greek *techne rhetorike*, the art of speech and persuasion.

First Sophistic

The Sophists are regarded as the formulators of the systematic study of rhetoric. The term Sophist is derived from the Greek word *sophos*, meaning wise or skilled; *sophia* means wisdom, and the title *Sophistes* corresponds with the present day meaning of professor or wise men (Duke n. pag.). These were professional men who, for a fee, hired themselves out as speechwriters (*logographos*), teachers of public speaking and professional orators. The city of Syracuse on the island of Sicily is regarded as the birthplace of rhetoric. Corax, a rhetorician, offered training to the people of Syracuse to argue their land cases after the death of a tyrant named Hieron: "His systematic approach to teaching oratory was quickly adopted by others, and was carried to Athens and other Greek city-states by professional teachers and practitioners of rhetoric known as Sophists" (Herrick 33). Corax thus not only helped establish a certain system of rhetoric which gave the ordinary people a means of pleading their claims in court but also propelled "Syracuse toward

democratic reform” (Sutton 87). Many authors consider his pupil Tisias, as the teacher of the Attic orator, Isocrates.

Gorgias visited Athens as an ambassador and to him is attributed the distinction, “for piloting rhetoric beyond its judicial function into the sphere of philosophy” (Bradford 3). At this point of time in history the Hellenic city-states, the *polis*, were undergoing major reforms that guided them from aristocracy to democracy. Successful participation in the democratic set-up demanded prowess in debate and discussions, which could be attained only through rhetorical training. The Sophists charged a heavy sum for their services, but taught anyone who could pay. Athens, thus, was the place for the quick witted, eloquent sophists whose advertisement of training men in oratorical skills proved irresistible to the young men of Athens who sought success in public life. The ignominy attached with the Sophists can be traced to the system of education prevalent in the Greek polis at that time. Education was a privilege of the Athenian aristocracy and was not accessible to all citizens. The skills of the Sophists were seen as a threat to this exclusive privilege that made the Greeks suspicious and uncomfortable of them. From its very inception till date, rhetoric has been condemned as “a tool for deception.” Commenting on the history of rhetoric, James A. Herrick observes, “Ever since Plato’s *Gorgias* first appeared, rhetoric has had to struggle to redeem its tarnished image. Rhetoric bashing continues in an almost unbroken tradition from Plato’s day to the present” (2). Corbett reiterates Herrick’s point of view that “all the derogatory things that men have said about this art down the ages have their roots in Plato’s strictures” (597). The term rhetoric clearly raised many questions even as it amassed diverse connotations over the centuries.

Even though the early use of rhetorical devices can be found in the works of Homer and Virgil, Gorgias of Leontini, a Sophist, is considered as the first person to introduce ornamentation in prose writing and he is said to have studied rhetoric under the “shadowy figure” of Empedocles (Herrick 42). Just as Bhāmaha was credited with the formulation of the *alaṃkāras*, similarly, Gorgias was the first to systematise the Western rhetorical devices. Gorgias,

Hippias of Elis, and Protagoras of Abdera are important Sophists, but Gorgias is best remembered for his hypnotic style, “for developing stylistic devices that were later augmented and adapted by many subsequent orators and rhetorical theorists” (Herrick 44). In modern times Gorgias is famous because of Plato’s dialogue, which bears his name, *Gorgias*, but in rhetorical history he is famous for bedazzling Athenians with his brilliance in oratory and copious use of rhetorical devices. In order to achieve the accurate balance in style, he is known to have made use of the composition or arrangement of words in phrases or clauses (periods); correct syntax (collocation); patterns of sentences (parallelism, antithesis); isocolon, parison, homoeoteleuton, analogy, metaphor and hypallage. He made popular the use of these rhetorical devices and, despite the hesitation of the Greeks, these became part of their vocabulary and also of the later rhetoricians.

While the above-mentioned Sophists came from outside of Athens and were primarily settlers there, Isocrates, one of the ten Attic orators, was a native of Athens and probably a student of Socrates. He worked as a *logographer*, a professional speechwriter, initially; though, he did not achieve much fame as an orator but he is considered as one of the most influential of Greek thinkers along with Aristotle. Isocrates focused on the development of education and writing, he is credited with being one of the first persons to found a school on rhetorical studies in Athens and his concepts pertaining to the ideal orator greatly influenced Cicero and Quintilian. Isocrates stressed on the orator having a high moral character and being well trained in the liberal arts. Commenting on his role in developing rhetoric, Corbett writes, “One of his major contributions to rhetoric was his development of an artistic prose style. He took the rather artificial style of Gorgias, tempered it, refined it, and made it an elegant vehicle for both written and spoken discourse” (597). Isocrates also developed the progymnasium (rhetorical exercises) and debating techniques.

The success of the Sophists in Greece, it is believed, owes largely to the system of governance of the time. Andrew R. Cline of the Missouri State University writes that for the Greeks, the term polis

had an entirely different meaning from what we have today. The concept of community at that time involved participation of all the citizens in the civic affairs. The reforms initiated by Solon and Cleisthenes took a period of almost hundred years to be assimilated in the system, it required active participation, especially verbal participation: "At each point in the process, some body of citizens was charged with the duty of making decisions. And those decisions were made through deliberation and voting—both speech acts. For the Greeks, to speak was to govern" (n. pag.). The Sophists taught the art of rhetoric for well over a century and it proved to be a highly successful art, but, they were from outside of the Hellenistic world and were always viewed with suspicion, partly also because the Sophists believed in interpreting the world through language, not always conforming to the 'truth' of things. Nevertheless, the Sophists cannot be ignored as they were responsible for bringing the art of rhetoric to Athens and developing it into a systematic study. Scholars of rhetoric lay emphasis on the Sophists' ability to memorize passages and to create speeches out of the ordinary material, turning them into masterpieces. As they trained in groups, the major focus of the *rhetores* was to develop arguments through a process of questioning, composing, analysing, and practicing the art. The Sophists taught this through the use of *dissoi logoi* (contradictory arguments) and *kairos* (an opportune moment or a situation) (Herrick 39). The Sophists, thus, created an environment of wonder and concern with their specialised training, causing alarm amongst the more traditional members of Greek society.

The major rhetorical devices traced to the Sophists are: 'over-bold metaphors,' allegoria, hypallage, catachresis, parisosis (parallelism), apostrophe, antithesis, chiasmus, and aporia.

Plato and Aristotle

Fifth century Athens was, thus, a melting pot of different cultures, where divergent views about the polis, life and faith were intermingled. From these diverse viewpoints flowered different schools of thought, developed by philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle—men whose words shaped the philosophy of the Western world. The

power to persuade through eloquent persuasion and argument, thus, became the preferred mode of speech.

The Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 BCE) is said to have used the term rhetoric (Greek: *rhetorike*) as found in the *Gorgias*, which has prompted scholars to conclude that he coined the term. Plato was one of the foremost critics of the Sophists, a fact well illustrated in his dialogues, *Sophists*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*. Apart from the reasons enumerated above in the study, Plato was critical of the Sophist's concept of justice, which, in his view, was inadequate and highly manipulative. In addition to this, he came from an aristocratic family and the Sophist's offer of advanced education to those who could pay, posed a threat to the aristocratic set up. In an article reviewing the history of rhetoric, Bitzer criticizes Plato's stand on the Sophists: "Confronted with the related problems of being, movement, and order, the Homeric-Sophistic tradition had focused on the nature of movement and tried to develop a philosophy of process" (67). Some scholars of rhetoric are, however, of the opinion that in rejecting and depreciating rhetoric, as in the *Gorgias*, Plato himself emerged as a 'master rhetorician.'

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was Plato's student at the Academy and while still a student there began teaching a systematic course in rhetoric, in his school, the Lyceum. Herrick believes that Aristotle felt the art deserved a better status and most of his, "theory of rhetoric is a response to Plato's criticisms and to sophistic treatises on rhetoric which he found inadequate" (78). For Aristotle both rhetoric and dialectic stemmed from common beliefs and addressed a wide range of issues, in associating rhetoric with dialectic he sought to distance it from sophistry. Peter Dixon holds the opinion that in seeking to offer a "new and refined definition" of rhetoric, Aristotle was "anxious to clear the name of rhetoric" (15). He also aimed at presenting it as a systematic art that focused not just on words but on matter as well. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* laid the foundation of rhetorical theory; all later rhetoricians built their views around its precepts. The importance given to style by Aristotle remained and continues to remain an important aspect of the rhetorical

framework. In conclusion, it may be mentioned that scholars of rhetoric view the Aristotelian model of rhetoric as one of the most methodical and complete systems that continues to exist in a modified form till present times.

Definitions of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece

The following definitions of rhetoric emerged in the pre-Roman stage of rhetoric, from its evolution as a specific discipline till Aristotle. Aristotle defines it as: "an art consisting not only in moving the passions of the judge, but chiefly in proofs; and that this art is profitable" (Hobbes 79). He also defined it as, "Rhetoric is that faculty by which we understand what will serve our turn, concerning any subject to win belief in the hearer" (Hobbes 80). These reveal the initial import of the word as understood during the time of the Sophists to Aristotle's time when it was better understood and established as a specific discipline. Gorgias believed that, "the sounds of words, when manipulated with skill, could captivate audiences" (Grube qtd. in Herrick 43).

For Isocrates rhetoric may be termed as, "the power to persuade each other" (Herrick 48). Plato sums up rhetoric as, "simply a knack for creating persuasive speeches lacking any foundation in justice" (66). Thus, these definitions reveal the full spectrum of the understanding of different Greek scholars.

Rhetoric in Rome

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43BC) was a Roman orator and theorist of rhetoric. His extensive treatises helped develop the teaching of rhetoric in Rome, the effect of which carried forward for centuries to come. Rhetoricians and historians are of the opinion that Cicero's fame remains unsurpassed in history, a fact that speaks of his acumen as an orator. He remains unparalleled for the brilliance and performance of his speeches: "Cicero embodied an age in which to be educated meant to command the skills of eloquence" (Herrick 101). His *Rhetorica ad Herennium* is a complete text on *memory* and *delivery*, and it remained a favourite with the students of rhetoric as a fundamental text till the Tudor Age.

Cicero's chief contribution to rhetoric is in its augmentation. He viewed that a good orator should be conversant with a number of subjects in order to build his argument. Peter Dixon speaks of the synthesis of the subject matter or material of speech (*res*) and the words (*verba*) in Cicero's rhetorical theory. For Cicero, the combination of *res* and *verba* meant, "wisdom combined with eloquence" (Dixon 17). His chief rhetorical works are the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, *De Inventione*, the *De Oratore*, the *Brutus*, and the *Orator*. The *De Inventione* is Cicero's first book on rhetoric though Cicero himself labelled the book as "inchoate and rough" (Herrick 102), it presents the five canons of oratory which is considered by scholars as a major contribution to the art of rhetoric. The five canons that Cicero mentions are: Invention, Arrangement, Expression, Memory, and Delivery (*inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *pronunciatio*). Cicero also emphasised on the centrality of the audience and advocated the use of arguments, appeals and rhetorical devices suited for everyone. He broadened the scope of rhetoric as a liberal art. He maintained that in order to be a successful orator a person should be well versed with various subjects, as it would help in the development of arguments. This thesis found favour for Cicero amongst the later rhetoricians of Europe and England.

Another famous Roman rhetorician and successful teacher was Quintilian (35-100 CE). He held the belief that educated men made the best rhetoricians. As a judicial advocate in the law courts, Quintilian earned himself the reputation of a rhetorician. The chair of rhetoric that was instituted by Vespasian at Rome, established his credentials and supremacy as a rhetorician. After retirement Quintilian wrote the *Institutio Oratoria* (the *Institutes of Oratory*), which consists of twelve books, dealing with the training of the orator. Quintilian stressed on the fact that "in addition to being intellectually fortified for his office the orator must be trained to be a man of strong moral character" (Corbett 602). In creating the perfect orator, Quintilian advises the parents to choose a nurse of good character, with a good command of Latin; the parents should be highly educated, and even the friends should be carefully chosen. (Herrick

113). The issues of education, morality, and character were of prime importance to the classicists; a fact witnessed earlier in Isocrates, who stressed on *ethos* (the character of a speaker), a quality which distinguished him from the Sophists.

Longinus (213-273 CE) was a Roman rhetorician significant for his contribution to the rhetorical canon. The classical treatise *On the Sublime* is generally attributed to him, which has been translated into English by W. Rhys Roberts. The aim of this work Roberts states is, "to indicate broadly the essentials of a noble and impressive style" (Corbett 603). Brian Vickers views the work as an "outstanding union of rhetoric and literary criticism" (Herrick 117). Though the Greeks trained the Romans in rhetoric, the Roman theorists used the art to shape the Latin language significantly. He gives an elaborate description of the rhetorical figures in the text and stresses on their role in producing sublimity. Longinus explains the role of the rhetorical figures and the sublime as: "that by a natural law the Sublime, besides receiving an acquisition of strength from figures, in its turn lends support in a remarkable manner to them" (Havell 301). The mistrust associated with the use of the figures prompts him to suggest, "Hence it follows that a figure is then most effectual when it appears in disguise . . . It is the very brilliance of the orator's figure which blinds us to the fact that it *is* a figure" (301). The rhetorical figures described by Longinus in his text are: apostrophe (*adjuration*), which he ascribes to Demosthenes; rhetorical question and hypophora (figures of question and interrogation), which he assigns to Herodotus; asyndeton, for which he specially names Homer as the source. The other rhetorical devices listed by him are: anaphora, polysyndeton, hyperbaton (transposition of words), juxtaposition, amplification, climax, antithesis; and the figures of comparison, metonymy, metaphor and simile.

Second Sophistic

Second sophistic is a phrase used for the time period around the fall of the Greek empire to the Romans and the period thereafter (50-100 CE). Literally, it refers to the revival of the rhetorical tradition and work done by the writers of classical

Greece. G. M. A. Grube says that the Second Sophistic "can best be described as the triumph of display oratory, mainly in the Greek part of the empire, especially in the province of Asia" (as qtd. in Herrick 120). The ancient Mediterranean civilizations relied heavily on orality and the 'oral culture' was significantly predominant, thus, eloquence and memory were essential qualities required of the individual. The medium of teaching for all the students of the Roman Republic remained Greek and they closely followed the Greek theories in rhetoric as well. Rhetoric remained a major subject of study in the Greco-Roman period. As with the Greeks, so too with the Romans, rhetoric was vital for success in politics and played a significant role in Roman society; an education in the rhetorical art, therefore, was necessary.

The Second Sophistic saw a considerable reduction in the role and influences of rhetoric. The main reason for this was the curb on free speech by the Emperor, as rhetoric could possibly flourish only in a democracy. The Greek rhetoricians, of the Second Sophistic, in Rome were intent on preserving the Hellenic Heritage and they assumed the role of educators. The significance of rhetoric as the art of public discourse waned and evolved as the art of rhetoric. During the Middle Ages, rhetoric gained an unfavourable reputation. Some scholars are of the opinion that the downfall occurred due to its misuse by the second-century Sophists who are charged with corrupting the art and converting it into an exercise in letter writing and preparing sermons. Rhetoric did not "retrogress" but neither did it progress in any noteworthy manner in the Middle Ages. Scholars of rhetoric do not speak of any major contribution to the art of rhetoric in this period. The names of some rhetoricians of this phase given by the scholars are: Dionysius, associated with the text *On the Arrangement of Words*, Hermogenes and Aphthonius both of whom published texts under the title *Progymnasmata*. The names of Dio Cocceianus or Chrysostomos ('golden tongued') and Aelius Aristides are also prominently mentioned in this period.

Definition of Rhetoric in Rome

Cicero considers rhetoric as, “the civilizing force that makes human social life possible” (Herrick 102). He sees it as basic to the culture and civilisation of society. Quintilian defines rhetoric as, “the science of speaking well, the education of the Roman gentleman, both useful and a virtue” (Booth 6). For Quintilian it is a practical science, a mark of refinement and also an additional value. Longinus posits his theory of rhetoric around the power of language, which he identifies with the terms ‘sublime’, or ‘sublimity.’ He regards the concept as, “the Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language” (Havell 272). He does not believe in ornate display of words but a subtle style to achieve good language. The Roman rhetoricians thus regarded rhetoric as a refining and civilizing force.

Conclusion

As observed above, the history of rhetoric was witness to the influences of various rhetoricians and thought systems in the first and second Sophistic. The different styles of rhetoric underwent variations as per the demands of the age from the ‘ornate’ to the ‘sublime.’ Rhetoric of the Hellenic period metamorphosed, from an exercise in public discourse, into the art of rhetoric. Subsequent periods in history lead to major changes and the eventual standardisation of rhetoric and rhetorical devices. The present day civilisation demands a fast rhetorical style due to limitations of time and general haste. In the present millennia we are witness to, and users of the language of the Internet, a language of shortcuts and abbreviations, and the language of emoticons. This may not necessarily be an omission of stylistic language and effective dissemination of thought but may be a further stage in the evolution of rhetoric and particularly of rhetorical devices, which remain integral to communication, whether persuasive or otherwise, and whether oral, written, or hyper.

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