

Archived version from NCDOCKS Institutional Repository <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/>



Book Review: Theory, Text, And Context: Issues In Greek Rhetoric And Oratory

Book Review By: **Norman Clark**

No Abstract Available

Clark, Norman. (1997). "Book Review: Theory, Text, And Context: Issues In Greek Rhetoric And Oratory." *Southern Communication Journal*, 63(1), 82–84. (Fall 1997) (ISSN: 1930-3203) Version Of Record Available At Taylor & Francis.

Introduction

The title of Johnstone's volume, part of the SUNY series in Speech Communication, both excited and worried me. I was excited because of my own interest in Greek rhetoric, but the word "issues" worried me.

When the word "issues" appears in a title, it tells me that the book intends to survey a broad range of topics. But it also implies that these topics may not be sufficiently related to permit a more specific title. Thus, I approached this book with mixed expectations. This book adds to the recent surge in studies on fifth and fourth century Greek rhetoric, and includes essays by "a number of contemporary scholars" (2). This modest phrase is a dramatic understatement, since the contributors were largely responsible for that very surge in publications. The list of authors reads like a who's who of contemporary influential scholars in classical rhetoric: Poulakos, Kennedy, Grimaldi, Schiappa, Leff, Ochs, Fortenbaugh, Kennedy, and Johnstone himself. In one brief volume, readers are struck by the intellectual force of the vanguard of current Greek scholarship.

These scholars set out in their essays, which were originally part of a lecture series at Penn State, to answer a variety of questions that rhetoricians have thought about for years but never fully explored in a systematic way. In doing so, the writers emulate the very objects of their study in two ways: they stretch and fuse ideas (71), and they take the necessarily small initial steps toward transforming our understanding of rhetoric (81).

Johnstone's introduction begins the transformation of our understanding with a strong and clear argument that "classical rhetoric may have been an invention of the fourth century, but it was invented using tools and materials that had been crafted during the preceding two hundred and fifty years" (16). The three most significant "tools" that he summarizes are "(1) the oral tradition . . . and the transition from orality to literacy, (2) the emergence of the polis, and (3) the shift from mythos to a naturalistic cosmology" (4). Johnstone deals with the oral tradition briefly, assuming that most of his readers will be familiar with Havelock and Ong's works. In his discussion of the political activity in Athens, Johnstone rightly pushes the origin of public persuasion back into the Archaic Period. The foundations of the political activity of the Classical Era were laid in the reforms of Solon and Kleisthenes. "The art of rhetoric," he claims, "can only be understood against the background of the political developments of the preceding period" (9). The third tool—"the transition from *mythos* to *logos*"—receives the most extended treatment. In a whirlwind of paragraphs, the development of impersonal nouns, theoretical explanations, the idea of probability, analytic thinking and analytical syntax, and conceptual terminology are linked to the change from a mythopoetic to a rational world-view. Johnstone admits that this introduction is "more synthetic than original" (3) yet his synthesis is valuable for the concise manner in which it stretches our knowledge about the origins of classical rhetoric.

Grimaldi's essay, like the introduction, is not terribly original. As he puts it, the problem he addresses "is not something totally strange to the reader" (19). However, his careful explication of how the Sophists were the "missing link" in Greek rhetorical theory between Corax-Tisias and Plato-Aristotle is a useful addition to the growing literature on the sophists. Instead of comprehensively reviving the Sophists as Poulakos does in his recent book, or co-opting them for post-modern purposes as many recent essays have done, Grimaldi tightly focuses on how the Sophists were responsible for the progression of rhetorical theory between the fifth and fourth centuries. After describing the environment of Athens, in which the Sophists lived and worked, the essay moves into their teaching methods, objectives, and influences on later rhetoricians. While readers will not find much surprising or shocking here, they will find a gold mine in the middle of the chapter, where Grimaldi sums up the contributions to rhetorical theory of six major Sophists and the *Dissoi Logoi*. Scholars, teachers and students of rhetoric alike should appreciate the clarity (and brevity) with which Grimaldi summarizes the relevant works of these intellectuals whose legacy includes writings on a vast range of subjects beyond rhetoric.

The next essay, by Poulakos, deals with two points: comparing and contrasting Aristotle's perception of the Sophists to Plato's. Using a wealth of textual evidence, which is the strength of this piece, Poulakos reveals that Aristotle's perception of the Sophists was "informed by two perspectives, the one historical-rhetorical, the other philosophical-logical" (63). Unlike Plato, Aristotle respects the Sophists for their historical contribution, and is grateful for their initial work in advancing theories of rhetoric, although he does take them to task for some of their

principles. Yet like Plato, he charges them with weak reasoning, inadequate knowledge, and improper language use. As a transformational step in our understanding of rhetoric, this essay is a small one, but one that lands firmly on the ground of solid textual support.

Gorgias' *Helen* has been the object of many studies, yet Schiappa contends that a reexamination of the piece from a "predisciplinary" perspective should provide different insights. The problem with previous examinations is that they impose "fourth-century categories and expectations" (86) on this text. A predisciplinary reading avoids approaching the text as the product of a formal discipline, since rhetoric was not such in the fifth century, and avoids making a dichotomy between philosophical and rhetorical discourse—a differentiation "not evident in the texts of the fifth century that describe sophistic education" (66). Using this terministic screen which he argues is more appropriate than the typical Platonic or Aristotelian one, Schiappa looks at the speech's purpose, discursive practices, and contributions to fifth-century theory. From this different perspective, Gorgias' *Helen* is seen as not entirely epideictic, nor a defense of rhetoric—two arguments often made about this speech. Schiappa argues that this speech is an early *instance* of the genre of encomium, advances "fifth-century BCE 'rationalism'," and offers "a secular account of the workings of *logos*" (67). What I appreciate most about the predisciplinary perspective that Schiappa proposes is that it helps scholars see the transformative potential in early works. When works such as Gorgias' *Helen* are "treated as if the authors were educated in methods and language developed much later," we miss how these authors struggled with the "process of theorizing itself (81), how their initial steps were indeed stretches of the mind.

The next essay, by Leff, is the boldest step taken in this volume. Here Leff uses his analysis of Thucydides' account of the Mytilene debate to reflect on "the nature and limits of agency . . . and the interpretative power of a performative rhetoric" (88). What we find in the Mytilene debate is both a debate about debate, and a perspective on rhetorical agency. Leff's description of the constraints on Diodotus during this debate is also a striking indictment of contemporary political rhetoric. For democracies to work, the public must believe that politicians speaking about the public good are being candid. When cynicism about the motives of speakers becomes prevalent, even those who would speak candidly are forced by the corruption of the medium to practice deception. "In this unhappy circumstance, deception is piled upon deception until the rhetorical medium corrupts its own purposes and destroys the possibility of effective deliberation about contingent issues" (92). Thucydides presents in this story a tragic account of "an erosion of agency that follows from the momentum of events coupled with a network of misguided actions" (96). Leff's reading of Thucydides' account displays how human agency "collapses when agents fail to account for the constraints on their actions," and when "arrogance replaces prudence" (96). Leff notes that the space he has in this volume "does not allow a full consideration of this matter" (88); I sincerely hope he takes the time and space necessary at some future date to explore this thought-provoking, critical thesis.

Now, for a step and stretch in a completely different direction. Looking to redress the lack of attention paid to physical contexts of oratory, Johnstone presents an in-depth analysis of the acoustical features of the public speaking venues of Classical Greece. Most of us have images of a robed Socrates standing at the base of a theater, speaking to 5,000 of his fellow citizens.

We base a great deal of our theories about deliberation in Classical Greece on the presumption that entire cities could hear opposing orators debate public policy. Johnstone argues that, based on his analysis of the acoustical features of the Pnyx (where the Athenian assembly met), a strong delivery was necessary for political efficacy. The acoustical defects of auditoriums such as the Pnyx would have made it unlikely that any but strong and well-trained speakers would have been heard by much of the audience. According to Johnstone, "it is doubtful whether even half of the 5,000 present could regularly understand what the speakers were saying" (126). The essay urges us to rethink our accounts of the deliberative process in Athens. Unfortunately, it does little to address the implications of the results. Johnstone admits that the results "raise more questions than they settle" (127), but he believes this is a positive feature. His effort here, he argues, is to *begin* asking the numerous unraised and unanswered questions about physical contexts. Still, I end this piece wishing for more—perhaps because of the thrill from the uniqueness of this study. One thing I do find troubling: Johnstone cites speech science texts from 1969 and 1978. More recent texts must be available that might offer an updated account of acoustical features.

Moving back to textual analysis, the next essay by Ochs offers some new explanations for the success of Demosthenes' *On the Crown speech*. Looking at "contextual, substantive, and stylistic elements" (134), Ochs argues that Demosthenes was successful for four reasons: the audience could not accept the charge of cowardice, his generic shift changed the audiences' expectations to apologetic ones, his speech was more aesthetically pleasing, and he created an analogy to the *pankration* with his speech. This last thesis is the most intriguing. Relying on Brummett's "homology hypothesis," Ochs explains how Demosthenes' speech evoked in the audience a "formal parallel of the battle between the two antagonists and [the audiences'] real-life experience at an Olympic event known as the *pankration*" (140). I concur with Ochs' conclusion that this hypothesis should be useful for critics of contemporary apologia or crisis rhetoric. Studying how the form of a speech is homologous to the experiences of the audience should yield intriguing results.

Shifting back to general theoretical questions, the next essay by Fortenbaugh is a revision of his view of Aristotelian persuasion. Though the topic has been "refined and developed" and endorsed almost to the "grounds of silence," Fortenbaugh takes the time to point out that Aristotle had two accounts of persuasion. One account was for deliberative settings, the other for judicial. After concluding that for Aristotle goodwill was both an emotion and a character trait, the essay ends by damning itself slightly: "having widened the meaning of *ethos*, [rhetoricians] did not need to complicate their analysis by distinguishing different kinds of goodwill. They could simply speak of *ethos* and the speaker's use of persuasion through character" (168). This essay is carefully argued and well-supported, but seems to have the least transformative potential, and the least stretching of categories, of the essays in this volume.

The concluding essay, which does not really conclude the volume, allows Kennedy to "discuss some things I have noticed" in his recent translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Kennedy muses on the spatial visualization of rhetoric by Aristotle, Aristotle's closet feminism, the problem of dealing with the various words used *for form* in the book, two rival explanations for the confusing usage of the words, Aristotle's failure to address the role of existing personae in rhetorical

situations, and his theory (explicated in detail in an earlier essay) that rhetoric is based in the instinct for self preservation and genetic survival. As a series of topical issues, this essay is analogous to the entire book, yet leaves me wishing for some sort of concluding remarks to wrap the essays together. And that is the strongest criticism I have of the book: it is not a coherent, integrated unit. It is a collection of essays that share a focus on Classical Greece. The essays each have their own value, but together they do not make a synthetic whole. As I noted in the introduction, the book at times incriminates itself. One particularly appropriate quotation from Kennedy's essay sums up my impression of this volume well: "fanciful digressions... with some serious implications" (171). The serious implications are present; I simply wish for more integration. I admit the self-incriminating "issues" in the title shaped my reading of this book. If only books could plead the Fifth.