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## Performing Ancient Rhetorics: A Symposium

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**In the introduction to this special issue, Hawhee sets the stage for the scholarly performances featured at the 2005 Pittsburgh symposium on ancient rhetoric by describing the context and foregrounding the lectures/essays contained in this issue. She notes the shift to questions of performing rhetoric and considers that shift in relation to disciplinary identities which, she asserts, function performatively.**

### Introduction

In the spring of 2005, my colleague Don Bialostosky and I invited a group of scholars who had published books on ancient rhetoric within the previous decade to The University of Pittsburgh to discuss new directions the study of ancient rhetoric has taken and may take, and the reasons for and broad implications of those directions. How, for example, can a study of ancient rhetoric sustain and encourage the interdisciplinary commitments of rhetorical studies? How do new conceptions of rhetoric clash with or draw on those circulating in the ancient world? What are the limits of and possibilities for studying and teaching ancient rhetoric? In short, we wanted to investigate ancient rhetoric's importance for contemporary practices, and we wanted to use as a starting point academic works already in print.

We called this gathering "Revisionist Classical Rhetorics," and after assembling a list of primary lecturers and securing a generous grant from Pittsburgh's Dean of Arts and Sciences, we sent invitations to

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local and national listservs. The response was overwhelming. What we originally envisioned as an intimate, regional event quickly grew to include more than 100 registrants from across the nation. The aisles and break sessions were abuzz with conversations about how few opportunities exist to learn about ancient rhetoric beyond graduate school surveys, much less in relation to our work as educators. As a result, many lamented, ancient rhetoric remained static and even stagnant for them, whereas this event served to re-enliven the period when rhetoric as a discipline first began to take shape.

With the symposium format, Bialostosky and I followed ancient historian Oswyn Murray's conception of the ancient *symposion* as a social institution—both a festive occasion and a set of associative practices through which a group of people develops its identity (4–5). In gathering together that weekend around the issue of classical rhetoric—itself a contested pairing of terms—our hope was to figure out how the disciplinary identities of ancient rhetoric are in the process of forming, how they might be reformed, and how they connect to scholarship and teaching that happens in departments of English and Communication.

As so much of the theoretical work on identity in literary and cultural studies suggests, identity is more of a formative, reformatory, and performative process than a fixed, easily knowable label, and this can be said to apply to disciplinary identities as much national, gender, race, or sexual identities. Identities produced at ancient symposia emerged from the occasion itself but perhaps more so from previous symposia, festivals or gatherings, as well as other cultural formations in circulation such as plays, books, and poems. Insofar as the *symposion* served to pass on song and dance traditions, forms of eating and drinking (Murray 5) among other cultural practices, from generation to generation, it was a ritual of performative identity in that it operated through stylized, constitutive repetition.<sup>1</sup>

And in this performative sense our 2005 symposium was surprisingly similar. Susan Jarratt's response (in this issue) rightly invokes earlier events and related publications, such as Victor Vitanza's 1989 conference at UT Arlington and the resulting collection of essays *Writing Histories of Rhetoric*. That particular event is crucial, not only because it took place during what Sharon Crowley calls "the impending institutional legitimation of rhetoric" but also because it featured some of the same "performers": among those scholars attending both events were John Poulakos, Susan Jarratt, and Janet Atwill. As Crowley predicted at the end of the 1980s, the "impending institutional legitimation" would "necessarily redraw the turf lines laid down by some powerful neighbors who now live on the right side of

the academic tracks: Literary studies, the humanistic branch of speech-communication, philosophy, and some of the human sciences—history, sociology, and political science, and maybe even anthropology” (17). Our symposium, which took place 15 years after Vitanza’s gathering, reveals just how prescient Crowley’s remarks were. Susan Jarratt’s response, which “wraps” these performances, suggests that the redrawing of “turf lines” is not only still happening, but is producing a certain anxiety of expertise. If rhetoric’s turf is language, Jarratt’s response asks, why are rhetoricians these days thinking and writing about bodies and architecture?

In addition to Vitanza’s conference, other important occasions, prior and subsequent, formed and informed our event. There were the “Octalogs,” roundtable discussions about historiography staged at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1988 and 1997 and published in *Rhetoric Review*. And then 2003 saw the Inaugural Conference for the Alliance for Rhetoric Societies, which formed a loose collective of all the societies and associations that involve rhetorical studies (RSA, NCTE, NCA, etc.) in order to explore disciplinary aims, assumptions, and directions. Michael Leff and Andrea Lunsford, the ARS organizers, called for scholars to come together in four clusters: tradition, agency, pedagogy, and institutions. At ARS, Jeffrey Walker’s response to Jerzy Axer’s keynote argued that rhetoric’s “tradition” is largely a pedagogical one (Walker, “Traditions”; Leff and Lunsford 59; see also Walker in this issue). The Pittsburgh symposium’s tacit task, then, was to bring together the difficult questions of disciplinary formation through history writing posed by Vitanza’s events with the clusters of tradition and pedagogy discussed with such verve at ARS.

So our symposium, as even the ancient symposia tended to do, indirectly refers to—one may even say “cites” in the performative sense—these previous events, and even more directly responds to histories of ancient rhetoric published in the past decade. That is, our symposium sought to discuss recent histories, many of which sprang directly and indirectly from these earlier conversations about historiography and disciplinary identity, and to connect these histories to broader institutional and disciplinary questions of curriculum, pedagogy, and contemporary practice.

To this end, the symposium organizers asked each lecturer to revisit his or her previous work on ancient rhetoric. In asking scholars to revisit past work, we were not asking them to appraise their own work—such a task would be awkward at best, and should be left to reviewers and fetschrifters. Instead, we asked lecturers to revisit their past work with an eye to the present, and we provided the lecturers

with a set of questions to help guide their remarks. The inventional questions read as follows:

- 1) How would the revised account of classical rhetoric you have advanced change the disciplinary and pedagogical practices of your field?
- 2) Does your argument entail disciplinary reorganization or reconceptualization?
- 3) If so, what grows in importance and what loses importance?
- 4) What comes into sharper focus and what recedes into the background?
- 5) What are the curricular implications of your argument?
- 6) What are the political implications of your argument?
- 7) Does it make a difference not just in what we teach but in how we teach?
- 8) In what ways might it change long-standing classical rhetorical training at the beginning and the advanced levels?

These questions were presented as heuristics, and their emphasis on contemporary pedagogical and institutional practices helped many of us view our previous work anew. And yet as Kenneth Burke has taught us, any “new view” will necessarily suspend—however momentarily—other perspectives. It’s this suspension that Jarratt’s response reflects on, and for the most part, resists.

As Jarratt puts it, “very little discussion of that earlier work occurred in the new space.” Scholars in “the new space,” that is, seemed to skip over the important Vitanzic and octalogic discussions and their hard theoretical questions as they jauntily skip into other disciplines—perhaps, she intimates, without license to do so.

Perhaps one reason there was no explicit reference to those important previous occasions is that the more recently arrived generation of scholars has so internalized these historiographic debates—through graduate seminars and comprehensive exams—that the previous “end points” have become assumed “starting points;” components of an intellectual *habitus*; that is, scholarly habits approximate what ancients figured as a “second nature” (Hawhee 95). In other words, because performative disciplinary identities work by a kind of slow, repetitive accretion, any radically new movements would necessarily be beholden to earlier movements. In the context of gender performativity, Judith Butler writes, “to enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the ‘I’ that might enter is always already inside . . . The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat” (*Gender Trouble* 148). Might the same be said for our disciplinary identities? Our ruptures, that is, are not ruptures at all,

but curious outgrowths, formed by repetition, which always, as Butler and Vitanza teach us, occurs with a difference (Vitanza, "After/Word" 233). And this sort of repetition, Deleuze reminds us, "is the thought of the future" (7).<sup>2</sup>

What's the difference between having purchase on philosophical conceptual ground and archaeological or philological ground? It's exactly the boldness modeled by our nearest progenitor/colleagues—and here I would include Jarratt herself—that inspires such disciplinary crossover. What's more, since we are all working in the context of ancient Greece and Rome, historical periods that preceded such rigid disciplinary boundaries as are now observed, why not take cues from the ancients themselves? As the essays in this special issue suggest, those cues depend on which ancients we follow and in what manner and with what affinities our following occurs. All of the symposium lectures, loosely guided by the organizer's questions, performed new kinds of followings, many of which ask us to suspend existing narratives about rhetoric's history as we experimentally follow new paths, or better, as we follow old paths with different questions, different—and still emerging—definitions of rhetoric.

As Jeffrey Walker's work teaches us, "before the beginnings" rhetoric existed as a broad art where divisions between the poetic and civic did not hold ("Before" and *Rhetoric* 1–7). In his lecture/essay, "What Difference a Definition Makes, Or, William Dean Howells and the Sophist's Shoes," Walker poses the question: what happens to rhetoric, and notably, its pedagogy, when rhetoric is figured as a "readerly" rather than as a "writerly" or "speakerly" art? This question performs a shift from Aristotelian to sophistic definitions of rhetoric, a shift that makes all the difference for the stories rhetoricians tell, the way rhetoricians teach, and to return to Crowley's metaphor, the way we "redraw the turf line" between literary and rhetorical studies.

Debra Hawhee, too, offers a more or less sophistic notion of rhetoric, but moves toward figuring rhetoric as an immanent, performative, mobile art of the body. She extends the historical perspective taken in her book by asking what happens (and what doesn't) when we attempt to re-enliven rhetoric's bodily, material features for students today. Doing so involves linking ancient with contemporary conceptions of rhetoric in order to best model for students what rhetoric can do. She makes some provisional observations based on a semester-long experiment at Pittsburgh.

Atwill's essay shares more implications of her work on Aristotle's *techné* by setting aside persistent disciplinary notions of "art" as a static object to art as a more dynamic "model of knowledge," one that performs—rather than enumerates—its principles of production. Such

a shift in focus, defended most extensively in her book *Rhetoric Reclaimed: Aristotle and the Liberal Arts Tradition*, calls for us to reexamine our own engagements with rhetorical practice, intensifying the need for teachers to be performing rhetoricians.

John Poulakos's Santayanic account of learning rhetoric as a young boy in Greece offers still another way to challenge prevailing divisions, this time between text and performance, and how they form the rhetoric we learn and teach—and more importantly, how rhetoric gets taught. In this way, Poulakos's essay links nicely with Walker's and Atwill's essays, which, though by very different modes of argument, land in roughly the same place: their genealogies show how rhetoric came to be an object to be evaluated rather than a practice to be inhabited.

Like Hawhee, James Fredal is in many ways following paths broken by Walker and Atwill by noticing other divisions that did not hold, or at least not so sharply, between, say, Hippias's jewelry-making and his word-making, or between the capacious space of the Pnyx and rhetorical topoi. Fredal's approach suggests that the artifacts and practices historians marshal as evidence can effectively broaden rhetoric's province. In other words, what we study as historians exists in reciprocal relation with how we define rhetoric.

As Ekaterina Haskins' essay demonstrates, the particular figures we consult to rethink persistent divisions matter as well. Are we to follow the "sanitized" rhetoric set forth by Plato and Aristotle, or does the pedagogue Isocrates better model what Danielle Allen calls "the imperfect ideals of trust production crafted in the rhetorical tradition" (140) and thus provide the best way to re-link virtue, citizenship, and what Haskins calls "performative contingency"?

In the symposium's final performance, Michael Leff's auto-narrative of his protracted attempt to write an alternative history of topical invention ultimately focuses on much broader alterations. Leff's conclusions, which mark important shifts in attitudes toward history, toward rhetoric's interminable staging of theory/practice debates, and toward the institutional positionings and repositionings of rhetoric happening right now, identify important points of stasis.

What happens, asks our chorus of symposiasts, if we follow the alternative paths suggested by our genealogies? The answers, crafted from new histories to respond to the symposium organizer's set of heuristic prompts, tend to congeal into a cluster of related concepts and practices. That is, questions about rhetorical education, training, and institutional conditions bring to the fore notions of habituation, imitation, and performance. They shift our attention, as Haskins, Leff, and Walker demonstrate, to those who theorized the teaching of rhetoric



even as they theorized rhetoric. As Walker, Atwill, and our other symposiasts all suggest, pedagogy by no means needs to be separated from something we call theory—far from it. And pedagogy, together with its more modern twin, disciplinarity, as Leff concludes, leads us into questions of institutionalization.

If the essays emerging from this symposium seem to be in agreement, or to cover over points of disagreement, as Susan Jarratt's agonistic response suggests, that may well be due to larger-than-discipline forces at work, or it may be due to the specificity of the symposium's prompts. As historians of rhetoric continue to work on and work out rhetoric's histories, to consider different artifacts, definitions, and their implications, to examine our disciplinary conditions and allegiances, the points that emerge in this issue will be performed, deformed, conformed, and reformed. So goes the provisional character of performative disciplinarity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Here I mean to invoke Judith Butler's notion of performative identity, which involves necessary citation, stylized repetitions of (always prior) acts. See, e.g., *Gender Trouble*, 140 and 146, and *Bodies that Matter*, pp. 2–4.

<sup>2</sup>For a model corollary treatment of this sort of differential movement, see John Muckelbauer's article on Plato's *Sophist*, pp. 234–235; 237.

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