

On Heroes and Villains in Classical Rhetoric:

Why we study the past to understand the future

Dan T. Molden

As I was walking down the street a billboard caught my eye
The advertisements written there would make you laugh and cry
the signs were torn and scattered from the storm the night before
and as I read the things they said why this is what I saw:
Smoke Coca-Cola cigarettes . . .

-*The Billboard Song.* Homer and Jethro

The sound pierced his head as it had a thousand times before. That high pitched whine calling him to life. Instinctively, he thrust his hand toward the black and red blob over his head. The alarm clock shut off and Dan's day was off to its usual roaring start. He stumbled into the shower and closed his eyes under the stream of hot water. . .

Dan-yul closed his eyes and focused all of his concentration. This had to work. That vid-report on pre-restoration classical rhetoric was due in two class days and it had taken him three weeks to work out an appropriate message and translation into "Inglesh" with Mikhal, the only person he knew who could still read and write. They had to be careful. It was unacceptable to be to direct. . . The Protectorate wouldn't approve of direct, traceable contact with the past. It had to be cryptic and extremely temporary. "Ohkay," he sighed looking at the battered boxes in the corner of his room, "we hope this works. . ."

Dan shut off the shower and groped for a towel. The crispness of the air

in the bathroom brought him to full consciousness as he dried off. He turned to look into the mirror and noticed it had an odd pattern of condensation on it. He reached out with his towel to wipe off the mirror when his eyes began to focus on the markings. He shook his head violently and looked again. Yes! The markings were clearly letters. As he read them, the letters turned into words and, eventually, a poem. He ran to his living room and grabbed a sheet of paper and copied the words:

If he reigned, where were they to go?
And how are we supposed to know?
When did it find its greatest home,
was it in Greece or was it Rome?

He read the poem out loud to himself several times. "Hmm," he thought, "this is not going to be an ordinary day. . ."

Dan-yul sat in the dull light of his study cubicle waiting. What would the answer be? What did the pre-reformationist whose computer he had managed to find know about the pre-reformation classical conception of rhetoric? Would he figure out the message and, more importantly, would he write about his reaction to the poem on the computer?

In the attempt to come to grips with the rhetorical tradition, many critics, theorists, and/or historians have seemingly opted for the creation of traceable patterns in rhetoric. For some, Plato is the end all, be all of rhetorical and philosophical thinking. For others, the originator of the mainstream of rhetorical thought is Aristotle, Cicero, or even one of the Sophists. This pattern is discussed by Blair in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*:

Even in historical studies not explicitly dedicated to this goal,

influence is a ubiquitous theme. Tracing influence sometimes is even equated with the study of history. This equation, in fact, appears to have become such a dictate of historical writing that historians have resorted to a number of questionable argumentative strategies to claim patterns of influence (p.405.)

One might ask, as Blair does, if the purpose of searching into the past of rhetoric is to inform the present discourse about it, why do people constantly try to find out what the earlier thinker *meant* as opposed to what they mean now? There seem to be several possible answers: Rhetorical historians do not attempt to create lines of theory; It is interesting to ask what the ancient theorists meant in their own times; The proper question to ask is the one of what the ancient rhetoricians meant in their own context; It is more valid to ask what the ancients meant at the time of their writings; and/or What their writings mean to us now ought to be influenced by what they meant then.

Initially, is it possible that rhetorical historians are not attempting to look at traceable patterns throughout the history of rhetoric. Blair certainly seems to feel that they are. She argues that "a concentration upon the continuity of 'the rhetorical tradition' is perhaps still the most pervasive theme in histories of rhetorical theory (p.405.)"

In some sense, this is what I call the creation of heroes and villains in the rhetorical world. Heroes are those rhetoricians who got it right. Their thoughts are reflected in the best of the current rhetorical thinking and they frequently posited answers to questions they didn't even know existed long before the questions were asked. Villains sidetracked the process of history. Instead of allowing the heroes work to continue to evolve, they pushed rhetorical thinking

into unhelpful and distracting directions thus confusing and delaying the development of current rhetorical thinking.

Is it interesting to wonder what the classical rhetorical thinkers meant to their own time? Certainly. People do seem to have an uncontrollable urge to know--to connect with the writer of a text. They want to know who could have crafted these or those words and what conditions might have made them think the way they did. I, myself, often like to defend "history's losers" like Gorgias. This is, in part, because I like to find heroes for my own (not particularly congruent with Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero's) thinking. Besides, I like to work with people who haven't already been defined by so many others. I don't have to deal with the thousands of Platos running around the academic world if I stick to a relatively villainized individual.

This desire to create the historical context for classical works is reasonable, indeed uncontrollable. However, there is something to keep in mind--there is always a baseline condition created by the contemporary reader. What I mean by this is that it seems that when we ask as interpreters what changes in the situation could make seemingly (to us) unreasonable claims reasonable we assume a *ceteris paribus* condition--all other things being equal. So we make modifications to our reality to create a past reality not on its own terms, but on our terms. A new past created out of our present to be consistent with the document.

This creation of a past resembles the idea of counter-factual reasoning. We move to the nearest possible world in which the conditions we assume are true. Unfortunately, ancient Rome and Greece are not the nearest possible world in which we can imagine patriarchy, slavery, and Plato. Countless and thus unimaginable

differences existed between that time and our own. To presume that we can create an exact duplicate of the time is unreasonable. A good example of this is the concept of areté. According to Kitto,

When we meet [areté] in Plato we translate it "Virtue" and miss all the flavor of it. "Virtue," at least in modern English, is almost entirely a moral word; areté on the other hand is used indifferently in all the categories and means simply "excellence" (p. 172.)

Areté, which was a defining characteristic for the Greeks much like *mos majorum* was for the Romans means simply "excellence" to us. This is incomprehensible. Initially, what is "simply excellence." What Kitto is trying to say is that it is a concept of excellence which crossed to all categories: physical, mental, extraordinary, and mundane. Yet, all of this is wrong. In a very real sense it is wrong. It is in English for one. For another, you are supposed to feel it. "Areté" is not about comprehending, but rather it is about doing. In another sense, Kitto's definition is acceptably right. It would be a tautology, but nonetheless worth noting that the classics cannot mean to us what they cannot mean to us and they do mean to us what they mean to us. There is no alternative to listing synonyms to the ancient concepts (even in their original language) because we cannot recreate that past. We struggle over *kennen* (knowing) and never quite get to *verstehen* (understanding.)

Is it the proper question to ask what the ancients meant in their own time? This is a difficult question for me, I must admit, since it begins (and seemingly must begin) with the concept of the "proper." However, I will attempt to explain. Perhaps it is the proper orientation to ask what they ancients meant in their own

time because they are a reflection of that time and a response to the exigencies created there. Without those exigencies and settings, the classics may be misread or, at the extreme, not understood.

First, it would seem unreasonable to assume such an understanding of the past is possible, much less proper. It would require an extraordinary and quite probably impossible effort on our part to forget all that we know and recall that which we never knew.

It is not the mere suspension of disbelief that is called for in this endeavor. In the theater and on the screen, we are asked to not only suspend disbelief, but also to create a new reality with the cast and crew of the production. With texts, we are left with no stage or scenery--only the action of the words to determine the world. A play or a book may both provide either lush or sparse surroundings, but the play exists in the here and now. All the context we need to understand the play is supposed to be provided or within the audience. A play is an extremely temporal moment. A book is less temporal. It cannot assume that the readers of some other decade will understand the nuance. The play has a director (who must read and thus suffer the same problems as the reader of classical rhetoric) who must create conditions for the audiences understanding. In a sense, we (the reader) must create a world (as director) with which to view the text (as audience/critic.)

Since we cannot, as discussed earlier, create the exact world in which the text was created, we cannot presume that our fabricated world is the correct one for the text if we are using a strict standard for historical accuracy. While this creation may give us a valuable and insightful reading of the text, it would seem dubious to assume that it is the true meaning of it. Blair explains:

Influence and systems may appear to be neutral models of temporality, dispositional devices used by historians of rhetoric to lend organizational coherence to their chronicles. In fact, they constitute competitive rhetorics of history with serious entailments for how we understand rhetoric's theoretical past and how we accommodate and situate future inquiry in rhetorical theory (p. 405.)

Alright, but what if this historical reading of the text is better than contemporary readings? Again, this is a difficult question for me because it relies on some objective measuring instrument for the relative "goodness" of an interpretation. When comparing a truly awful "historical" reading of a text and a brilliant "post-modern" critique of it (in my own opinion of course) am I supposed to simply accept that the "historical" criticism is better on the basis that some critic deigned to call their work "historical?" I guess the main point here is that I felt the need (and I hope it seemed natural and even necessary) for me to add "in my own opinion" to the claims about the awfulness and brilliance of a criticism. Better and worse seem to be situational things and, since I could not produce the two criticisms and argue for their relative merit, I made a shorthand notation which indicated that there is no absolute standard to which you (the reader) and I are both privy.

Despite the problems in determining what the past was and, as a result, what the classical author meant in the past, is it possible that what they were in their time should influence what they are now? This statement, it would seem hinges on the "should." If the should is one of moral force, then the statement is meaningless. The moral force of "should" would make this answer the same

as the statement that historical interpretations are better than other readings of classical works. What I mean is this, if history ought to determine our current interpretation then history becomes the objective measuring stick by which better and worse interpretations are evaluated. Because of the difficulty in determining the "true" history, however, the measuring stick has no markings on it.

If the should means that we might want to consider the past, then it is also meaningless. The past does influence the present. The writing did react to the exigence of the situation. Further, our ability to make sense out of the text relies, in part, on our ability to relate it to the most obvious parts of the past. This does not mean, however, that the past is directly discernable in the document. The past influenced the document, no doubt, but to argue that we can recreate the past out of the document is foolish.

What, then, are we left with? The desire to create heroes and villains in classical rhetoric seems to be deeply motivated by a need to connect with the author. As readers, we seem to want to find a common soul--or at least an understandable soul--in the works we encounter. I am reminded of two sayings, one about George Bush and the other about zen philosophy: "When you get there, there's no there there" ; and "No matter where you go, there you are." In the search for ties to classical texts, we find that there is no there there. The past is not fixed and unmoving--it is created by us. As a result, when we get there, there we are. We find ourselves in the past because we went there to find something so we naturally found ourselves there.

In a sense, the answer I propose is not that we try to find the "true" context for a text. That search is meaningless and empty. Rather, I suggest that

we consider that any context in which the text has meaning may be one in which interesting things may be discovered about the state of existing theory. We are busy rhetoricizing or rhetorically creating the meaning of the world, and we should bear in mind that world has a past that was rhetorically created then and is being rhetorically created now.

Dan-yul checked the machine, a "komputr" or something like that, to see if any new files had appeared. There was a new document which he quickly copied on the machine hooked up to the komputr and took it to Mikhal. After receiving the vid-translation, he frowned. The file had little to do with what he had wanted. This "Dan" fellow seemed to ramble about how he couldn't figure out what he thought about classical rhetoric instead of giving the definitive answer. "Ohwel," he thought, "I guess I just have to figure out what it means to me."

Bibliography

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