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# Editing the Rhetorical Tradition

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Patricia Bizzell

The rhetorical tradition is always being edited. I know because I have edited it myself—that's a sort of pun, in which the words "the rhetorical tradition" refer both to a book and to the cultural phenomenon the book represents. Bruce Herzberg and I (2001) have co-edited an anthology entitled *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. That project also involved editing the tradition itself, because, at least since the days of Isidore of Seville, it is through inclusions and exclusions in anthologies such as ours that the rhetorical tradition is established, grows, and changes. Anthologies seem always to have played a large role in the definition of the rhetorical tradition because the accessibility of texts has so often been an issue in the study of rhetoric, whether transmission problems have been caused by the dissipation of classical learning at the end of the Roman period or are caused by the vagaries of print publication today. Then and now, the changing shape of the tradition may be discerned from the tables of contents of anthologies, a circumstance that has become especially evident to me now that we have had the opportunity to edit our volume twice. The tables of contents of the first edition, appearing in 1990, and the second, in 2001, show both some enduring similarities and some interesting differences.

It is important to remember that what we inherit as the "rhetorical tradition," for blessing or curse, comprises at least three modalities: texts deemed worthy of rhetorical study, methods of analyzing those texts, and methods of teaching rhetoric according to precepts and principles derived from those texts. Such a description of our cultural legacy would seem to put texts at the center of the tradition, and indeed, anthologies focus our attention on the rhetorical tradition as a set of texts. Tables of contents organized chronologically suggest a neat progression of supposedly major works marching through the centuries, but why those particular works? In

the study of rhetoric as in the study of imaginative literature, scholars now realize that these supposedly inevitable textual monuments to an unbroken and progressively more sophisticated discipline are in fact quarried from among the masses of material each era produces by traditions, that is, methodological and pedagogical traditions, in how to study rhetoric. Although the tradition appears to be text-based, how we wish to analyze verbal productions and how we prefer to teach the art of producing them govern our choices of rhetorical texts to preserve, elevate, or delete. And modern histories of rhetoric have shown that the preferences governing these choices arise out of complex cultural factors relating to gender, race, social class, national identity, and more.

Once upon a time, these choices were dominated by the preferences of socially privileged men who saw Western culture as the best in the world, and that culture itself as springing primarily from Greek and Roman roots. As Walter Ong (1981) has explained in *Fighting for Life*, these men believed that education in rhetoric must be for men only and that boys must be introduced to it via agonistic competition. From these assumptions sprang buttresses for what we might call the “traditional tradition” in the study of rhetoric, a progression of texts written by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine, Erasmus, Bacon, Blair, and so on. This kind of study of rhetoric required extensive education, first, in Latin and Greek, often inculcated with the aid of corporal punishment, as Ong describes, and it persisted well into the twentieth century (though, one trusts, with much less flogging—that went out with co-education, as Ong explains). For example, until 1936, Greek was a graduation requirement at the Jesuit college where I teach, the College of the Holy Cross, and Latin was not dropped as a graduation requirement there until 1959 (the college was still all male, but the rationale for dropping the requirement appears to have centered upon the need to make room in the curriculum for pre-professional studies). Here is a sample final exam question that will give a good idea of the esoteric knowledge this kind of rhetorical education entailed:

With the subject: Who is a better model for a lawyer today, Demosthenes or Cicero, Burke or Macaulay, Webster or Phillips? Take one couple; state your audience and proposition and prove it, a. by an epichirema [*sic*]; b. by a dilemma; c. by induction; d. by analogy; e. by a collection. Only one page for each proof and spend about ten or twelve minutes answering each. The style should be oratorical. (Donnelly 1934, 198)

This exam was closed-book and to be written in Latin. In the textbook from which this example is taken, Father Donnelly, who taught classics at Holy Cross for many years, laments that intercollegiate competitions in which students produced poetry, plays, and oratory composed in Greek and Latin are dying out because, increasingly, teachers cannot be found whose own command of the languages is sufficient to enable them to act as judges.

Yet even in the mid 1980s, when Herzberg and I began to do the research that resulted in the first edition of our anthology, the “traditional tradition” still dominated scholarship in the history of rhetoric to a degree that surprised us, familiar as we were with the already far advanced canon revision that was going on in the study of imaginative literature. That state of affairs, however, had changed dramatically a decade later, as we prepared the second edition of our book. In what follows, I will offer the perspective of an editor of the rhetorical tradition, with the benefit not only of Herzberg’s and my survey of scholarship in the field but also of the suggestions of two dozen rhetoric scholars commissioned by our publisher to review the first edition and propose changes (their names, and our thanks, can be found in the Preface to the second edition). I will here abandon my metaphor of architectural “monuments” being erected, refurbished, or demolished, and adopt instead the image of a stock market report, because I need a metaphor reflecting the volatility of the tradition as it appears in our time.

Editing our anthology twice, with a decade in between, has enabled me to appreciate how the texts of the “traditional tradition” remain the blue chip stocks of rhetorical study. Aristotle particularly seems to be the site of a very stable industry, in spite of or perhaps because of the many trenchant critiques of his approach to rhetoric that have emerged in the last decade. Cicero, too, attracts persistent interest, and we responded to reviewers’ requests to increase the coverage of his work in our second edition. No reviewer wanted less of the traditional texts; and we also increased coverage of Erasmus and Blair and added men who could be considered as figuring in this tradition, including Longinus, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Hume, Herbert Spencer, and Wayne Booth. The persistent interest in the “traditional tradition” may be traced in part to the broad awareness of the influence of the rhetorical in all intellectual work that has pervaded the academy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Theoretical interest in these writers remains strong. But more unexpectedly, perhaps, some interest in applying “traditional” pedagogical precepts persists as well; for example,

everyone in the field of composition studies can remember the bombshell effect of the 1965 publication of Edward P. J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, which induced many people to incorporate elements of classical pedagogy in contemporary classrooms. This important textbook went into multiple editions; Corbett was assisted in completing the fourth (1999) by his former student, Robert J. Connors, who added a chapter on the progymnasmata, a type of pedagogical exercise than which one can hardly get more "traditionally traditional."

Supplementing—or in some cases supplanting?—the traditional tradition, however, there have emerged in recent years what we might call, oxymoronically, "new traditions" in rhetorical study. These fall into at least two categories. The first category I would describe as texts and authors already known to traditional historians of rhetoric but considered to be minor figures. Therefore, they received little attention until recent revaluations moved them more into the mainstream of the acknowledged rhetorical tradition. The best examples of this category are the Sophists; indeed, interest in them continues to burgeon, and we increased our coverage of the Sophists in our second edition. Perhaps this interest arises in part from their chronological and cultural proximity to the traditional ancient Greek "blue chips," but I think it must also be attributed in part to the Sophists' focus on the human element in knowledge-making, which has loomed increasingly large to intellectual historians and theorists in many disciplines engulfed in the present rhetorical turn. Other figures who might be included in this category are Vico, Sheridan, Coleridge (whom we did not, after all, include), Nietzsche, Bakhtin, Derrida, Foucault, and Habermas (also not included).<sup>1</sup>

Investment in these figures remains risky. A scholar has the advantage of the fact that if these rhetoricians are minor figures in the rhetorical tradition, often they are major figures in some other area of study, so there is quite a bit of material on them already, much basic scholarship has already been done, and one can build on it in construing them as relevant to rhetoric. On the other hand, their reputations can fluctuate quickly. In addition to the Sophists, Bakhtin is extremely hot—a real growth stock! Evidently the "dialogic" coordinates well with current interests in the social construction of knowledge and with current issues in composition pedagogy. Vico seems to have been unaccountably neglected in recent years, perhaps because his system is so idiosyncratic, and Richard Weaver, too, in my opinion, is due for a revival, his social and political conservatism notwithstanding. There might be some investment opportunities there for

those who like to get in on the ground floor. Both of these theorists present interesting angles on rhetoric as epistemic. Overrated figures or those for whom the bloom seems to have died, based on the dwindling volume of recent scholarship on their rhetorical work, include Derrida, Foucault, and Habermas—the dot-com stocks of the rhetorical tradition.

In part, the value of these high-risk investments has been impacted by changes in the demographics of the academy: often, as I argued earlier, the texts taken to be central to the rhetorical tradition achieve their eminence because they can be made to serve the cultural preferences of those in power. The induction of women into the ranks of advanced scholarship in rhetoric has influenced fortunes here; I'm thinking, for example, of Susan Jarratt's (1991) extremely influential book *Rereading the Sophists*, and of Kay Halasek's (1999) recent *A Pedagogy of Possibility: Bakhtinian Perspectives on Composition Studies*, which has foregrounded this theorist's work for a group of scholars who had previously given him scant attention.

At the same time, I think it is no coincidence that as white women and men and women of color increase their numbers in the ranks of scholars of rhetoric, a second category of "new tradition," as I noted above, has emerged: thinkers practically unknown to traditional historians of rhetoric, sometimes because we did not have the methodological and pedagogical approaches necessary to construe their texts as rhetoric and sometimes because their work itself was hidden from scholarly view, fragmented, or lost. These figures alter the traditional tradition even more radically than the formerly minor figures do, because they require not merely the readjustment of existing scholarly priorities, but a whole new set of priorities.

In this second, more radical category, we find rhetoricians who are people of color or white women. I think of these figures as exploring what I call "rhetorics of heterogeneity." Unlike the figures in the traditional tradition, these rhetoricians have not been able to assume that everyone who heard or read or studied or taught their rhetorical texts would be of the same race, gender, and social class as themselves. They have dealt in culturally mixed contexts and contrived complex, syncretic ethical personae for themselves. Frederick Douglass, for example, whom we included in the second edition, combined African and European American visual cues in his platform presence, dressing his hair to emphasize its African texture while clothing himself in upper-class "white" garments; lacing his speeches with European and American "high culture" literary references and also sometimes singing African American spirituals; inviting audiences to gaze on his physical beauty and virility, which lead many observers to describe

him in images invoking the African lion. Douglass's written work on rhetoric must also be viewed as syncretic, for he combines his commentary on how to speak effectively with autobiographical reminiscences, rather than sorting out his insights into abstract generalizations for a theoretical treatise.

Falling into this second, more radical category of "new traditions" is the single largest group of additions to the second edition of our anthology, namely, women. New to the second edition are Aspasia, Madeleine de Scudéry, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Mary Astell, Maria Stewart, Phoebe Palmer, Frances Willard, Virginia Woolf, and Gloria Anzaldúa, and we would have added Adrienne Rich if we had been given permission to reprint her work. These women joined newly expanded and/or renovated selections from Christine de Pisan, Margaret Fell, Sarah Grimké, and Héléne Cixous.

What needed to happen so that these women's works could be considered rhetoric? Scholars with some different cultural assumptions and interests than those of privileged white men had to gain access to the textual record of human civilization, looking it over for texts that could be adapted to these different scholars' agendas. And then, sometimes, a genre not previously considered rhetorical had to be construed as such. For example, Jane Donawerth (1998) and Ruth Perry (1986), respectively, have helped us see how private conversation has been theorized rhetorically by Madeleine de Scudéry and Mary Astell. Similarly, I suggest in my headnote on Christine de Pisan that she discussed behind-the-scenes diplomatic work in a rhetorical context.

Another way to find texts for this second category of new tradition has been to acknowledge the rhetorical force of an argument for the right to speak at all; versions of this argument can be found in Margaret Fell and Sarah Grimké, and construing it as rhetorical theory enabled us to include these women in the first edition of our anthology. In the second edition, the argument emerges as virtually a trope of women's rhetoric, found also in Sor Juana, Maria Stewart, Phoebe Palmer, Frances Willard, and Virginia Woolf. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1989a) calls attention to the rhetorical issues here with respect to nineteenth-century American women in the first two chapters of volume one of her ground-breaking study, *Man Cannot Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric*.

Volume two of Campbell's (1989b) study, subtitled *Key Texts of the Early Feminists*, is an anthology of nineteenth-century women activists' speeches, and it points to a third way in which new texts are found for this second, more radical category of new traditions, namely by recovery work that reprints texts long neglected. Sometimes, the focus of such study be-

comes what is not there, not preserved, and why it is not: Aspasia being the most notable case in point, as treated by Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong (1995) in their essay in Andrea Lunsford's landmark collection *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, and by Cheryl Glenn (1997, 36–44) in her book *Rhetoric Retold*. This ancient Greek woman is reputed by contemporaries to have instructed Socrates in rhetoric and to have invented the so-called Socratic method, yet no texts authored by her have survived; and later writers, upset by her rhetorical and political influence in the Athens of Pericles, discredited her by assailing her chastity, thereby establishing a precedent for how the dominant culture would treat women who tried to claim public rhetorical space from then on, as Renaissance women scholars of rhetoric found to their peril (the case of Isotta Nogarola comes to mind).

When I presented a version of this paper at the 2002 conference of the Rhetoric Society of America, an audience member commented that her students were offended by the ways white women and men and women of color had been included in the second edition of Herzberg's and my anthology. She said her students noticed that the texts included from these authors did not resemble the texts included by such traditional tradition authors as Aristotle and Cicero, and she said the students felt that the kinds of texts that were included demoted the white women and men and women of color into mere "performers" of rhetoric, not theorizers about it. I thought this comment was extremely illuminating of the difficulties involved in editing the tradition. Let me explain.

In all instances, I think I can say that writers selected for our anthology showed metacritical awareness of how language can be used to do things in the world, actions such as managing social interactions humanely, bringing people to true religion, or persuading them to make important political change. We selected writers who showed awareness of the implications of their language use for public discourse and civic virtue. We included no texts in which the authors merely demonstrated rhetoric, but only texts in which they talked about language use in these metacritical ways. In other words, we chose writers who were all, in some sense, theorists of rhetoric. For example, we did include a speech by Maria Stewart, but only because it is an address devoted to describing and defending her rhetorical practice, not merely an example of that practice. Stewart begins by asserting her spiritual authority, compares herself to learned and eloquent Biblical and historical women, and attributes the opposition driving her from the speaker's platform in Boston to the negative self-esteem her fellow African Americans have internalized under white racism.

Nevertheless, my questioner's students did not perceive the metacritical dimensions of these texts. Apparently, they were willing to consider as rhetorical theory only texts that looked like philosophy, that is, texts that discussed rhetoric in terms of abstract principles. It is extremely revealing that my questioner mentioned Cicero's works as examples of the kind of texts that met these students' expectations. In fact, the texts traditionally regarded as the principal places in which Cicero expounds his rhetorical theory are not abstract treatises; they are highly dramatized dialogues, in respectful imitation of Plato, in which a numerous cast of characters sit around drinking under the shady trees on a country estate and conversing quite discursively about rhetoric, philosophy, and public life. But because we have the benefit of generations of scholarship and pedagogy assisting us to read these texts as rhetorical theory, we do not notice their syncretic nature. The heterodox genre issue arises only in the case of the authors newly added to the tradition, whose work does not (yet?) have the authority of Cicero's.

I think the rhetorics of heterogeneity that can be found in this second category of new traditions comprise the most dynamic growth area of rhetorical study today, of all the investment opportunities that I have mentioned here, and there is much work yet to do. For example, scholars working in this area need to produce what we might call, with a nod to literary critic Judith Fetterley (1981), "resisting readings" of works in the traditional tradition, such as Nancy Tuana and William Cowling's (1994) work on Plato. Further historical excavation of figures who merit study is also needed, such as that done by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell on nineteenth-century American women, which I mentioned above. Study of the conditions in which marginalized groups' rhetorical activities emerged has already proved tremendously fruitful, as in Carol Mattingly's (1998) work on the Woman's Christian Temperance Union as a training ground for female public speakers, but much more remains to be done. And new historiographic work needs to be done to help us theorize the methodologies and pedagogies we are developing, as exemplified in the concluding chapter of Jacqueline Jones Royster's (2000, 251–85) book *Traces of a Stream*. Work being done on rhetorics of heterogeneity is now even beginning to influence more mainstream scholarship. For example, Richard Enos (2002) has recently attested to the influence of Cheryl Glenn's feminist historiography on his own traditional scholarship on the Greek "blue chip" writers.

It should be clear from what I have said so far that I consider "the rhetorical tradition" as a cultural phenomenon to be comprised of various

strands, whether or not one adds the politically correct plural “s” to the word “tradition.” The “blue chip stocks” of the older tradition are still studied; the fortunes of “high-risk,” formerly minor figures wax and wane; and completely new areas of research in rhetoric, our “growth stocks,” continue to emerge. Furthermore, I do not favor a battleground metaphor for this diversified rhetorical landscape. I do not see the persistent interest in the traditional tradition as merely an artifact of conservative graduate programs or the vested interests of senior scholars; I do not see the turn to formerly minor figures as simply a means of finding under-cultivated fields for research that may yet be tilled with conventional tools; nor do I see the upsurge of interest in rhetorics of heterogeneity as a political uprising against the powers that be. Rather, I think in all cases our foci of study are largely determined by the rhetorical exigencies of our time and place. We must understand the traditional tradition because it forms the intellectual horizon of all our work; my own status as an inheritor of Aristotle can be seen in the very taxonomizing approach I take in this essay. We need to reconsider formerly minor figures because they often worried over theoretical problems that the traditional tradition abandoned without solving but that return to haunt us today—I’m thinking, for example, of the anthropological analysis of moral values propounded by the ancient Sophists. Moreover, we must hear from rhetoricians who have struggled with culturally complex venues in which they were marginalized, if we are to live and work and function as responsible citizens in the American multicultural democracy. And as our needs and interests change, the rhetorical tradition will continue to change as well—that much I have learned as one of its editors.

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### *Notes*

1. While I could give reasons for our decisions regarding Coleridge and Habermas, I prefer not to do so in the brief space of a note to an essay that has a rather different purpose. It could be said in any case that the editorial decisions of an anthologist are either self-evident or indefensible, depending upon whether the reader subscribes to the editor’s same general disciplinary assumptions or not.

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