RWS 6310  
Rhetorical History I

Question #1

A common topic of discussion in ancient rhetoric is the untrustworthiness of those that practice eloquence. Plato’s works discuss the reasons why those that practice eloquence and rhetoric can’t be trusted. This notion that those that practice eloquence when attempting to persuade an audience are not to be trusted is also subtly addressed by Aristotle, Cicero, and in the non-western rhetoric of the Egyptians. It can’t be definitively known that if Plato among other philosophers is solely responsible for this view of eloquence, but for this paper his dialogue *Gorgias* will serve as the starting point of the negative view of eloquence and rhetoric. It must also be noted that each work may not use the term rhetoric as opposed to eloquence. For that reason it is understood in this paper that the terms are interchangeable due to the nature in which each author uses them. Eloquence and rhetoric are concerned with persuading an audience. However, eloquence may be understood as the specific practice of using flattery, and/or flowery language to persuade an audience. Rhetoric is commonly defined as the art of persuasion, courtesy of Aristotle, however there is no general consensus on the definition of rhetoric. Therefore, when an author uses the term rhetoric in regards to the practice of attempting to persuade it results in the interchangeable use of the terms eloquence and rhetoric.

In *Gorgias* Plato also addresses the place in which much of the persuasion a rhetorician practices occurs. With much of the persuasion focused on the courts, and public policy Plato draws attention to the fact that a rhetorician “isn’t concerned to educate the people assembled in lawcourts and so on about right and wrong; all he wants to do is persuade them. I mean, I shouldn’t think it’s possible for him to get so many people to understand such important matters in such a short time (p. 17).” This critique of the use of rhetoric in the courts suggests that there is not sufficient time to attempt to get an audience to comprehend a speech. This further supports Plato’s claim that rhetoric is not concerned with education, and therefore can’t be trusted. If it’s sole purpose is to persuade, then it will likely ignore anything that may result in knowledge, because knowledge isn’t a priority in persuading. That knowledge serves a long-term purpose, while eloquence (rhetoric) seeks to achieve the short-term goal of persuading audiences in a given situation is one of Plato’s reasons for distrusting eloquence. Without the pursuit of knowledge as a primary goal and purpose of eloquence/rhetoric the orator/rhetorician need not be an expert on any given subject he/she addresses in a speech. This, for Plato and other philosophers, is extremely troublesome. Not only do they disagree with the fundamental practices of orators and their uses of eloquence, but they also see the lack of expertise, knowledge, and as a reason to distrust those that practice eloquence.  
 Plato’s distrust of eloquence goes beyond the Sophists teaching persuasion as opposed to knowledge. The Sophists, and those that practice rhetoric and eloquence do not focus their teachings on morality and virtue. Rhetoric doesn’t teach morality or virtue. Plato addresses this in *Gorgias*,“What a real man should do is leave matters in God’s hands, believe his womenfolk when they tell him that no one can escape his fated end, and then consider how best to live however many years he still has left to live (p. 113).” The use of rhetoric/Eloquence does not lead to those things, which only increases the level of distrust Plato has towards those that teach and practice rhetoric.

Aristotle in *On Rhetoric* defines the use of eloquence/rhetoric as a means of persuasion. Specifically he defined rhetoric as the ability to “see available the means of persuasion (1355b).” However, in his writing Aristotle does not discuss rhetoric with the same disdain and distrust that is commonly associated with Plato. Aristotle in his work does pay attention to the ways in which an orator can establish credibility and trust with an audience. It is clear that while Aristotle does not view rhetoric as negatively as Plato, but this does not excuse him from addressing the issue of how the public can trust those practicing eloquence when their goal is persuasion. Therefore, Aristotle doesn’t necessarily distrust rhetoric/eloquence, but he does address how one can have good character, or credibility/ethos. For Aristotle this trust comes from the speech itself, and not the person speaking. It is the way in which the speech is spoken that helps the speaker gain the trust of the audience. According to Aristotle when “the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence” (p.38), it can make the speaker trustworthy. For Aristotle eloquence under certain circumstances can be deemed untrustworthy. However, Aristotle does not display the same distrust of eloquence that Plato did in his works, but he clearly understands that there exists a need for orators to establish their credibility with an audience. Trusting those that speak only to persuade may be difficult for an audience, therefore Aristotle brings to our attention that an audience is more likely to believe “fair-minded people” quicker and easier “on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt” (p.38). Any preconceived notions of the person, or their practicing of eloquence can be overcome if their speeches reveal their good character and trustworthiness. Unlike Plato, Aristotle believes that trust can be gained, or earned, from the speech itself.

In non-western rhetoric issues of morality and trustworthiness influence the practice of rhetoric/eloquence. An example of this is the concept of MAAT. Carol Lipson’s “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric: It All Comes Down to Maat,” researches the ways in which the concept of MAAT influenced the writing of the ancient Egyptians. The concept of MAAT commonly refers to “truth, justice, or order, ” but Lipson translates MAAT as “what is right” (81). This understanding of MAAT refers to the “premise that humans must not disturb the balance state of creation, but instead must respect and live in accord with the cosmic harmony and natural order” (81) as introduced by Lipson. Lipson claims that MAAT influences the writing done in ancient Egypt, as it must always be in accordance with the key concepts of practicing MAAT. Therefore, all of the writings could not upset the natural order, MAAT, and reflect deliberate choices made by the authors to appeal to MAAT. The arrangement, and the entire MAAT system not only reflect the concepts and values of MAAT, but of their culture. The group worked to please their leader. This understanding of MAAT refers to the “premise that humans must not disturb the balance state of creation, but instead must respect and live in accord with the cosmic harmony and natural order (81).” MAAT, and its use of eloquence influence the writing done in ancient Egypt. It must always be in accordance with the concepts of practicing MAAT. Therefore, all of the writings could not upset the natural order, MAAT, and reflect deliberate choices made by the authors to appeal to MAAT. Eloquence was not viewed unfavorably so long as it served the greater purpose of abiding by MAAT. However, if eloquence were used in a way that strays from the concept of MAAT, then it would be viewed negatively. Eloquence would have been untrustworthy if it went against societal norms. In this sense eloquence under MAAT was used to maintain hierarchy. In this sense eloquence was celebrated if it remained in service to MAAT, and condemned or treated with distrust when it went against MAAT.

Interestingly each author, whether condemning, questioning, or embracing certain elements of eloquence and/or rhetoric, use elements of eloquence and/or rhetoric to convey or persuade their audience. Each directs their attention toward a specific audience by using specific language, and forms or process such as dialectic to communicate with their audience. Plato despised writing, but wrote a dialogue to condemn the practices of Sophists and their teachings. Aristotle’s view of rhetoric was more favorable than Plato’s, but his attention to how to build credibility from the speech itself suggest that rhetoric found itself still criticized for how it could be used to deceive. The weariness and/or outright distrust of eloquence, ironically, did not stop any of the authors, and ancient Egyptians writing within MAAT from practicing eloquence.

**References**

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