McKeon’s “Rhetoric in the Middle Ages” touches on the attempt to define rhetoric and understand it “in terms of its matter and function”(p. 1) which he thinks can account for the spread of rhetoric and its devices to other subjects. This is an important statement for him to make, because much of his article navigates through the different uses and approaches towards rhetoric during the Middle Ages.

Primarily there is a shift from civil discourse to religious discourse during this time, and if I understand it correctly, this results in rhetoric developing ties to theology. Public speeches are replaced by sermons. A large part of his article, I think, attempts to chart the changes and application of rhetoric as it’s used under different contexts.

A large focus of his article is the movement away from Aristotelian rhetoric/logic to Cicero. Honestly, I found this article incredibly dense and at times difficult to read, but from what I can gather one overall idea is that rhetoric intersects with other disciplines by way of its application. The definition and/or historical understanding of rhetoric one subscribes to impacts how rhetoric is applied or used. This accounts for its historical impact on the humanities and in science.

There may be areas not as commonly associated with rhetoric, but rhetoric’s impact must still be accounted for, and this is why McKeon points out that “if rhetoric is defined in terms of a single subject matter…it has no history during the Middle Ages” (p. 32). This would be difficult to do since rhetoric was part of the education curriculum during this time. Ong also addresses that rhetoric is beyond a single subject. Specifically Ong discusses the beginnings of literary criticism as “largely subordinated to rhetoric” (p. 68). So, again, we see during this time rhetoric’s application or connection to different subject areas.

The importance of this is the shift from Aristotle’s rhetoric to Cicero’s and Quintilian’s. It’s just a shift from one way of understanding, thinking about, and applying rhetoric, but also the shift in the cultural and religious. The movement that ends isn’t just Aristotle’s rhetoric, but the application of rhetoric in other areas and its acceptance, or denouncement in arenas it wasn’t part of before. Simple as it may be, the importance of understanding these shifts stems from the same reason any history is studied. To chart and make sense of the different uses and definitions that influence rhetoric allows for a greater understanding of modern rhetoric. It helps to explain how we ended up where we are, if you follow certain scholars, and why we didn’t go in other directions. In this specific example of the shift away from civic discourse to religious discourse we see a lack of value in invention. This, I believe, makes sense if one were to account for the notion of divine will. So, if religion during this time is one driving force in society, then less attention would be given to rhetoric used as a means to invent. There then must come a rethinking of rhetoric, and that might explain the new attention given to someone like Cicero.

I find these articles specifically useful because it helps me to understand where the notion of the interdisciplinary nature of rhetoric comes from, which is not something I previously questioned. I understood, and continue to understand that rhetoric can and do intersect with several other subjects/areas, but to have a better understanding of what may be the roots of these types of applications.