

SECOND EDITION

The History and Theory of Rhetoric

An Introduction

James A. Herrick

Hope College

Allyn and Bacon

Boston ■ London ■ Toronto ■ Sydney ■ Tokyo ■ Singapore

Series Editor: *Karon Bowers*
Vice President, Editor in Chief: *Karen Hanson*
Editorial Assistant: *Jennifer Becker*
Executive Marketing Manager: *Jackie Aaron*
Editorial Production Service: *Chestnut Hill Enterprises, Inc.*
Manufacturing Buyer: *Megan Cochran*
Cover Administrator: *Jennifer Hart*
Electronic Composition: *Omegatype Typography, Inc.*



Copyright © 2001, 1997 by Allyn & Bacon
A Pearson Education Company
160 Gould Street
Needham Heights, MA 02494

All rights reserved. No part of the material protected by this copyright notice may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright holder.

Internet: www.abacon.com

Between the time Website information is gathered and published, some sites may have closed. Also, the transcription of URLs can result in typographical errors. The publisher would appreciate notification where these occur so that they may be corrected in subsequent editions.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Herrick, James A.

The history of rhetoric : an introduction / James A. Herrick. — 2nd ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-205-31455-4

1. Rhetoric—History. 2. Rhetoric. I. Title.

PN183 .H47 2000

808'.009—dc21

00-026660

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 04 03 02 01 00

The Origins and Early History of Rhetoric

Rhetoric did not originate at a single moment in history. Rather, it was an evolving, developing consciousness about the relationship between thought and expression.

—Richard Leo Enos

It is typical of histories to identify origins, and this chapter will make this history typical in that way. However, the “history” of rhetoric cannot have a beginning point any more than can the history of dance have such an unambiguous genesis. When human beings recognized in movement the capacity, not just for mobility, but also for expression, dance began. When people found in symbols the capacity, not merely for communicating meaning, but also, through some planning, for accomplishing their goals, rhetoric began. Thus, though rhetoric’s precise origin as the planned use of symbols to achieve goals cannot be known, its systematic presentation within a particular cultural tradition can be located historically.]

The history of rhetoric in the Western tradition begins, as do several other histories or arts or disciplines, with that ancient cluster of highly inventive societies, the Greek city-states of the eighth through the third centuries B.C. But knowing when in Greek history to date the origins of rhetoric, or of those ideas about discourse that became the Greek study of rhetoric, is difficult. Richard Leo Enos points out that theories about the power of language were already present in the writings of Homer in the ninth century B.C. In Homeric writing Enos finds three functions of language: the “heuristic, eristic, and protreptic.”¹

Briefly, the heuristic function of discourse is that of discovery, whether of facts, insights, or even of “self-awareness.” The heuristic function of discourse is essential to “the inventive processes,” that is the ability to discover the means of expressing our thoughts and sentiments effectively to others.² Second, the eristic function of discourse draws our attention to “the inherent power of the language itself.”³ Eristic expresses discourse’s power to express, to captivate, to argue, even to injure. Third, the protreptic function of discourse expresses “the capacity [of words] to ‘turn’ or direct human thought....”⁴ That is, language affords human agents the possibility for persuading

others to think as they think, to act as they wish them to act. It conversely affords us the ability to dissuade other people from certain thought or actions. These three functions of language—the heuristic, the eristic, and the protreptic—were recognized centuries before they became the foundation for a systematic study of rhetoric.

The Rise of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece

The systematic study of oratory (or rhetoric) probably originated in the city of Syracuse on the island of Sicily around 467 B.C. A tyrant named Hieron had died, and disputes arose over which families were due land that the tyrant had seized. A rhetorician named Corax offered training in judicial pleading to citizens arguing their claims in court. Corax also apparently played a role in directing Syracuse toward democratic reforms.⁵ His systematic approach to teaching oratory was quickly adopted by others, and was carried to Athens and other Greek city-states by professional teachers and practitioners of rhetoric known as Sophists. Many Sophists were attracted to the flourishing city of Athens where they taught rhetoric to anyone able to pay their high fees. "In the second half of the fifth century," writes Michael Billig, "Athens offered excellent opportunities for employment to those equipped with quick wits, good speaking voices and a love of disputation." As a result, "provincials like Protagoras of Abdera, Hippias of Elis, Gorgias of Leontini and Prodicus of Iulis poured into Athens from all parts of Greece to seek their fame and fortune."⁶

But why did the Sophists find such a ready market for their rhetorical services at this particular time? Rhetoric's popularity had much to do with dramatic changes affecting several Greek city-states, particularly the major city of Athens, in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. As historian of rhetoric John Poulakos writes, "when the Sophists appeared on the horizon of the Hellenic city-states, they found themselves in the midst of an enormous cultural change: from aristocracy to democracy." The statesman Solon (638–559 B.C.) had implemented major political reforms in Athens, and leaders such as Cleisthenes, Ephialtes, and especially Pericles (495–429 B.C.) fostered later democratic changes. Poulakos notes that these changes in the Greek political system "created the need for a new kind of education, an education consistent with the new politics of limited democracy."⁷ The middle class grew in power as "family name, class origin, or property size" no longer dictated who could be involved in the courts and legislative assemblies.⁸ Whereas old established families with great wealth could still afford "to buy the training necessary for leadership in the Assembly, Council and courts," the new system "guaranteed a broader distribution of power across different backgrounds, occupations, and economic statuses than ever before."⁹

As a larger number of men entered the political arena, the key factor in personal success and public influence was no longer class but skill in persuasive speaking. Democratic reforms "completed a process of democratization...allowing for, even requiring, Athenian males to develop the ability to listen, understand, and speak about deliberative and judicial affairs of the city."¹⁰

The "city" was known to the Greeks as the *polis*, the independent city-state that, more than anything else, defined what it meant to be Greek. H. D. F. Kitto writes that the Greeks had an "addiction to the independent polis—it was the polis, to the Greek mind, which marked the difference between the Greek and the barbarian: it was the polis which enabled him to live the full, intelligent and responsible life which he wished to live."¹¹ With democratic reforms, the political life of the *polis* came to be managed by oratory and debate. Tyrants may have ruled other nations by "torture and the lash: the Greeks took their decisions by persuading and debate."¹² Under such circumstances, the need for rhetorical training was apparent to everyone. Apparent, perhaps, but not available to everyone. The effect of Athenian democratic reforms on women will be considered later in this chapter.

The Sophists, then, offered Greek citizens—that is, free men—education in the arts of verbal discourse, especially training in inventing arguments and presenting them in a persuasive manner to a large audience. Newly enfranchised citizens created a market for something not previously available in Greece, education in the effective use of reason.¹³ Jacqueline de Romilly writes that the Sophists introduced a "great novelty" into Athenian life by offering education to any who could afford it. Formal education in Athens was rather simple, and limited in its availability to a small portion of the populace. "There was nothing that even remotely resembled what we call further education in Athens" prior to the Sophists, she writes.¹⁴ And, success in Greece required mastery of the arts of public oratory.

Sophists "proudly advertised [their] ability to teach a young man 'the proper care of his personal affairs, so that he may best manage his own household, and also of the State's affairs, so as to become a real power in the city, both as a speaker and man of action.'"¹⁵ Such "advertising" proved irresistible to many young Athenian men, and the Sophists grew in both wealth and influence. The new kind of education offered by the Sophists did not train one in a particular craft like masonry. Rather, rhetorical education offered its students mastery of the skills of language necessary to participating in political life and succeeding in financial ventures. The Sophists' education in rhetoric, then, opened a new doorway to success for many Greek citizens.

In Greece, rhetoric took hold as a major aspect of culture and education, a position it maintained for much of subsequent Western history.¹⁶ The ability to speak persuasively had long been valued by the Greeks, but was viewed as a natural talent, or even as a gift from the gods. Nevertheless, training in rhetoric became the very foundation of Greek education, and eventually came to be viewed as the principal sign of an educated and influential person. "The influence of the spoken word in fifth- or fourth-century Athens was extremely strong," writes H. D. Rankin, "and can hardly be overemphasized."¹⁷ Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong suggest that this was true in part because the Greeks assumed that "human deliberation and action are responsible for human destinies and can be shaped by thought and speech."¹⁸ This assumption marks a profound change in thought, for it indicates that the Greek public gradually rejected the idea that human destiny was shaped by the gods, and accepted in its place a new notion: Human destiny is shaped by human rationality and persuasive speech.

The centrality of rhetoric to a democratic political system was also recognized. Richard Enos adds that "ancient Greeks considered rhetoric to be a discipline, accepted it as part of their education and, particularly in those cities that were governed by democracies, saw it as practical for the workings of their communities."¹⁹ It was during the fourth century B.C. that the Greeks came to call the theory and practice of public oratory by the name *rhetoric* (*rhetorike*). Ironically, this art of rhetoric, so important to Greek civic life and education, was brought to Athens and other cities by foreign teachers known as Sophists. The activities, beliefs, and reputations of these intriguing rhetoricians deserve a closer look.

The Sophists

Rhetoric as a systematic study, then, was developed by a group of orators, educators, and advocates called Sophists, a name derived from the Greek word *sophos*, meaning wise or skilled.²⁰ Central to their course of study was rhetoric, the art (Greek: *technē*) of *logos*, which means both "words" and "arguments." The title *Sophistes* (pl. *Sophistae*) carried with it something of the modern meaning of professor—an authority, an expert, a teacher. On occasion, a Sophist might hire himself out as a professional speechwriter, or *logographos*. Others were teachers who ran schools in which public speaking was taught. A third group were professional orators who gave speeches for a fee, whether for entertainment or in a court or legislature. Of course, any particular Sophist might provide all three services—speechwriting, teaching, professional speaker. Sophists earned a reputation for "extravagant displays of language" and for astonishing audiences with their "brilliant styles...colorful appearances and flamboyant personalities."²¹

Many of the Sophists became both wealthy and famous in Greece, while at the same time they were despised by some advocates of traditional Greek social values for reasons we will consider shortly. But first we will explore how and what the Sophists taught their students. The Sophists developed a distinctive style of teaching that proved highly successful. At the same time, the Sophists were controversial from the moment they appeared in Greece. Nevertheless, recent scholarship presents the Sophists as important intellectual figures who have received a somewhat unre-servedly negative press.²² The Sophists were active in Athens and other Greek city-states from about the middle of the fifth century B.C. until the end of the fourth century. Though there never were many Sophists active at any given time, they exercised influence on the development of rhetoric and even the course of Western culture vastly out of proportion with their numbers.²³ Important Sophists include Gorgias, Protagoras, Polus, Hippias, and Theodorus.

What the Sophists Taught

The Sophists were, as we have noted, teachers of the art of verbal persuasion—rhetoric.²⁴ However, Sophists claimed to teach more than just speech-making. Some pro-

fessed to instruct their students in arete, a Greek term with various meanings including virtue, personal excellence, and even the ability to manage one's personal affairs in an intelligent manner so as to succeed in public life. *Arete* also suggested all of the qualities taken to be marks of "a natural leader."²⁵ Many Greeks doubted that the Sophists could actually teach *arete*, for virtue and personal excellence were considered gifts of birth or consequences of proper upbringing. Such qualities certainly were not to be purchased from a professional teacher, and especially not from a foreign teacher. Sophistry, then, was more than the study of persuasive speaking, as important as this was. Because the Sophists taught effective public speaking, shrewd management of one's resources, and even some aspects of leadership, it is not surprising that many young men in ancient Greece saw a sophistic education as the key to personal success.

But it was principally the study and mastery of persuasive discourse (or rhetoric) that brought the Sophists both fame and controversy. Sophists claimed that their courses of instruction would, provided enough money changed hands, teach the student to gain mastery over other people through speech. In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, the famous Sophist after whom the dialogue is named asserts that his art is the study of "the greatest good and the source, not only of personal freedom for individuals, but also of mastery over others in one's country." Specifically, Gorgias defines rhetoric as "the ability to persuade with words judges in the courts, senators in the Senate, assemblymen in the Assembly, and men in any other meeting which convenes for the public interest" (452). Poulakos underlines the practical nature of sophistic education by writing that it "concerned itself with rhetorical empowerment for specific, especially political and legal, purposes."²⁶ By what means, then, did the Sophists teach such a powerful art?

Sophists employed the method of dialectic (Greek: dialektike) in their teaching, or inventing arguments for and against a proposition. This approach taught students to argue either side of a case, and the Sophist Protagoras boasted he would teach his students to "make the worse case appear the better." In the dialectical method, speeches and arguments started from statements termed endoxa, or premises that were widely believed or taken to be highly probable. For example, an argument might develop from a premise such as, "It is better to possess much virtue than much money." One student would develop an argument or series of arguments based on this widely accepted claim. Another student would then challenge the arguments on the basis of other widely accepted notions, and by exploring the opposite points from those advanced. Thus, in dialectic, argument met counterargument in a series of exchanges that, it was believed, would yield a better view of the truth.

Because of their developed ability to argue either side of a case, the Sophists' students were powerful contestants in the popular debating contests of their day, and also were highly successful advocates in court. The dialectical method was employed in part because the Sophists' accepted the notion of dissoi logoi, or contradictory arguments. That is, Sophists believed that strong arguments could be produced for or against any claim. We will explore this idea of *dissoi logoi* in more detail shortly when we consider the famous Sophist, Protagoras.

Closely related to the idea of *dissoi logoi* is the Greek notion of *kairos*, a term connoting various meanings such as an opportune moment or a situation. Under the doctrine of *kairos*, the truth depended on a careful consideration of all factors surrounding an event, including factors such as time, opportunity, and circumstances. Such factors often were debatable, and could be ascertained only by allowing the clash of arguments to occur. The search for truth about a crime, for example, involved considering opposite points of view. Arguments were advanced about the time or place the crime occurred and the circumstances prompting the act. Truth was discovered, or perhaps created, in the decision finally reached by a jury hearing the clash of antithetical claims and arguments.²⁷ Thus, the sophistic practice of rhetoric acknowledged the roles played both by *dissoi logoi* and by *kairos* in establishing the facts of a case or the truth of a claim.

In addition to the dialectical method, Sophists also compelled their students to memorize speeches, either famous ones or model speeches composed by the teacher. Students would also compose their own speeches based on these models. This method was known as *epideixis*, a word describing a speech prepared for a formal occasion. Because of their highly trained ability to memorize speeches, Sophists sometimes performed tremendous feats of memory that left their audiences awestruck. The Sophists' teaching methods helped students to analyze cases, to think on their feet, to ask probing questions, to speak eloquently, and to pose counterarguments to an opponent's case.

But many Athenians doubted these high-flown claims, doubted that the Sophists really understood justice, doubted that they could teach virtue or truth. Those who were unimpressed with incredible feats of verbal and mental agility saw the Sophists as merely opportunistic charlatans ready to prey on the unsuspecting and willing to introduce into the public mind a debased understanding of truth. Plutarch wrote of the sophists as men with "political shrewdness and practical sagacity." Plato called them simply "masters of the art of making clever speeches," and Xenophon reduced them to the level of "masters of fraud." Rankin writes that the Sophists "released their pupils from the inner need to conform with the traditional rules of the city-state so that they were freer in themselves to be active in their pursuit of success without remorse or conscience."²⁸ This freedom to pursue one's own goals ruthlessly, unrestrained by conventional mores, while exciting to the Sophists' pupils, caused alarm among some of the more traditional members of Athenian society. As we shall see, it was one of several reasons the Sophists provoked controversy for more than a century and a half.

Why the Sophists Were Controversial

Many traditional Greeks greeted the Sophists and their art of rhetoric with great suspicion. The Sophists' ability to persuade with clever arguments and stylistic techniques, and their willingness to teach others to do the same, led many Greeks to see the Sophists as a dangerous element in their society. Plato, who lived in Athens in the generation following the arrival of the first Sophists, encouraged such suspicion with

his dialogues *Gorgias*, *Sophist*, and *Protagoras*.²⁹ Deceptive argumentation was we
 long and widely associated with the Sophists. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), a student of think
 Plato who was born around the time of the early Sophist Gorgias's death (d. 380
 B.C.), commented on their empty arguments in *On Sophistical Refutations*. More
 than four centuries after Aristotle, Sophists from Greece were still plying their trade
 in Rome, and similar suspicions attended them.³⁰

Sophists were so controversial in Athens and other city-states that their schools
 of rhetoric were regarded "as a public nuisance and worse."³¹ A powerful debate re-
 garding the Sophists and what they taught is imagined by Plato in his dialogue *Gor-
 gias*, which still stands as a fascinating discussion of the benefits and liabilities
 pursuing politics and justice with regard for persuasively spoken words and carefully
 crafted arguments. As we will see in the next chapter, Plato condemned rhetoric as "a
 knack of flattering with words," a criticism the art has never lived down. On the
 other hand, we should note that Western culture has come closer to following the arg-
 umentative model set out by Sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias in the actual con-
 duct of its affairs than that suggested by Plato of seeking truth by means of
 philosophical inquiry.

What factors in their lives and teaching contributed to the popular feeling that the
 Sophists were "overpaid parasites"?³² First, though it does not strike modern readers
 as a problem, the Sophists taught for pay. Some of the more famous Sophists, such as
 Hippias, Protagoras, and Gorgias, charged enormous fees for their services and
 became extremely wealthy. Being paid for teaching, and especially for teaching a stu-
 dent simply to speak persuasively, angered some Athenians. Extracting pay for instruc-
 tion in something other than a trade like stonemasonry or shipbuilding was simply not
 done, and the practice seemed to encourage less than noble ideas about both educa-
 tion and work. Andrew Ford notes that the Athenian bias against teaching for pay
 stemmed from "an aristocratic feeling that...the professional teacher," that is, one ac-
 cepting payment for teaching, "offered his services on the basis of who could pay and
 therefore would not base his associations on higher considerations such as character
 and personal loyalty."³³ In other words, aristocratic families sought to maintain exclu-
 sive access to higher education for their own children, and the Sophists threatened this
 system. Nevertheless, the fees charged by famous Sophists for a course in rhetoric re-
 mained out of the reach of most ordinary working Athenians.

Second, many of the Sophists were foreigners who had relocated to Athens, and
 some were itinerants who traveled from city to city looking for work as teachers,
 lawyers, entertainers, and speechwriters. People have perhaps always been suspici-
 cious of the rootless individual, the wanderer, and the foreigner. Sophistry was con-
 sidered a foreign import to Athens, and all but a few of the leading Sophists were
 from outside of Athens. Athenians in particular were suspicious of foreigners claim-
 ing to possess knowledge or skills superior to those of the Athenians themselves.

The fact that they were from outside of the Hellenistic world and their habit of
 travel created a third concern about the Sophists for many Greeks. The Sophists had,
 as the saying goes, been around, and in their travels they noted that people believe

rather different things in different places. Their cultural relativism contributed directly to another reason many in Greece were suspicious of these professional pleaders and teachers of rhetoric. The Sophists, not surprisingly, developed a view of truth as relative to places and cultures. As Susan Jarratt notes, the Sophists "were skeptical about a divine source of knowledge or value...."³⁴ They knew what the Athenians believed, but also what the Spartans, Corinthians, and North Africans believed. More importantly, they knew that the beliefs in different places were, in some rather important respects, different. The further one got from Athens, the more different were the customs, beliefs, and practices of a culture. In some regions of the known world, for instance, it was the custom to burn the dead, or even to eat them, whereas in other locations such acts would have been capital crimes. Marriage customs, judicial procedures, and social relationships all varied dramatically from one locale to another.

A fourth source of controversy had to do with the Sophists' view of truth. According to Sophists like Gorgias and Protagoras, truth was not to be found in transcendent sources such as the gods or a Platonic realm of universal forms. Rather, Sophists believed that truth emerged from a clash of arguments. Plato was among the writers who repudiated such a view of truth, who argued that it was highly dangerous. In fact, the Sophists' philosophy was even more radical than their moral relativism would suggest. John Poulakos affirms that the Sophists believed "the world could always be recreated linguistically." That is, reality itself is a linguistic construction rather than an objective fact.³⁵ If truth and reality depend on who can speak the most persuasively, what becomes of justice, virtue, and social order? Some philosophers condemned the Sophists for dealing in illusions and opinion rather than in knowledge and truth. Truth became a completely subjective notion, with the individual capable of creating a private view of morality and even of existence. James Murphy and Richard Katula write that "knowledge was subjective and everything is precisely what the individual believes it to be." This meant that "each of us, not necessarily human beings in the collective, decides what something means to us."³⁶ Such a radical view of truth was a threat to conservative Athenians.

Finally, the Sophists were controversial because they built a view of justice on the notion of social agreement or *nomos*. Sophists advocated *nomos* as the source of law in opposition to other sources such as *thesmos*, or law derived from the authority of kings, *physis*, or natural law; and Platonic *logos*, a transcendent source of absolute truth.³⁷ The Sophists' belief in *nomos* was closely related to their rejection of transcendent truth and objective reality as discussed above. Public law and public morality are matters of social agreements and local practice, and are not derived from absolute authorities like God or a king. This view of truth, some thought, undermined the moral foundations of Greek society. For all of these reasons, then, many Athenians regarded the Sophists with considerable suspicion.

It should be noted that some historians attribute the Sophists' negative image to their enemies' portrayals of them. Some ancient sources suggest that at least some of the Sophists were respectable public figures and expert politicians and diplomats. Janet Sutton has written that "Many of the ancients... paint a brilliant picture of Pro-

tagoras, Lysias, Antiphon, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus as ambassadors and statesmen, as superb stylists of poetic expression and orators of civic discourse, and as practical educators and intimates of political leaders."³⁸ Thus, any portrayal of the Sophists must be shaped, as they would have approved, by contradictory claims.

Three Influential Sophists

Regardless of the controversy raised by the Sophists in ancient Greece, the art of rhetoric caught on and was an enormous success in the Greek speaking world of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. In fact, rhetoric came to provide the very foundation of Greek education, while the revolution in thought effected by the Sophists still influences Western ideas about education and politics. The lives of individual Sophists illuminate their thought and teaching in ways that a general survey cannot. Thus, in this section we will take a closer look at three of the most influential Sophists of ancient Greece.

Gorgias

One of the greatest early teachers and practitioners of the art of rhetoric was Gorgias of Leontini, who is reputed to have lived from 485 to 380 B.C., more than one hundred years.³⁹ Gorgias was originally sent to Athens as an ambassador from Leontini, and had a tremendously successful career as a diplomat, teacher, sceptical philosopher, and speaker. He is famous, among other things, for his three-part formulation of skeptical philosophy:

- (1. Nothing exists. 2. If anything did exist, we could not know it. 3. If we could know that something existed, we would not be able to communicate it to anyone else.)

Gorgias was also known for his theory of rhetoric, which gained him both followers and critics in Athens. Richard Leo Enos calls Gorgias "one of the most innovative theorists in Greek rhetoric."⁴⁰ Gorgias was active at about the same time as the most famous of all of the early Sophists, Protagoras (485–411 B.C.). Gorgias was a teacher of rhetoric, a defender of the practice, and himself a professional persuader. He boasted of being able to persuade virtually anyone of virtually anything. His powers of persuasion were, indeed, legendary. For instance, he is reputed to have persuaded the Athenians to build a gold statue in his honor at Delphi, an honor unheard of for a foreigner, though some sources suggest that he paid for this statue. If the latter is the case, it illustrates the great wealth Gorgias accumulated as a Sophist. Gorgias was well aware of the great, almost magical power persuasive words can exercise over the human mind.⁴¹ He also adhered to a philosophy of language and knowledge that suggested that the only "reality" we have access to "lies in the human psyche, and its malleability and susceptibility" to linguistic manipulation.⁴²

But, what was Gorgias' opinion about the source of the power of *logos*? Bruce Gronbeck holds that for Gorgias, persuasion (*peitho*) was "an art of deception, which works through the medium of language to massage the psyche."⁴³ Brian Vickers writes that Gorgias' "advocacy of rhetoric was based...on its ability to make men its slaves by persuasion, not force" (*Philebus* 58 a-b). But, how was this deception or enslavement accomplished? George Kennedy suggests that Gorgias considered a rhetor to be "a *psychagogos*, like a poet, a leader of souls through a kind of incantation."⁴⁴ If this was Gorgias' view, then rhetoric worked magic on auditors, who were captured by the orator's spell-casting abilities. Jacqueline de Romilly, in her book, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, confirms this view when she connects Gorgias with early practitioners of magical incantations reputed to bring healing, such as Empedocles and Pythagoras.⁴⁵ Gorgias would also have been familiar with healing practices of the day through association with his brother, who was a doctor. The "healings" that attracted Gorgias' interest included gaining control over powerful emotions. De Romilly, in fact, refers to Gorgias as "a theoretician of the magic spell of words."⁴⁶ In other words, rhetoric was for Gorgias a sort of verbal or, more to the point, poetic magic capable of exerting what one of his great critics, Plato, called an "almost supernatural" influence on audiences.⁴⁷ Jane Tompkins has noted in this regard that "the equation of language with power, characteristic of Greek at least from the time of Gorgias the rhetorician, explains the enormous energies devoted to the study of rhetoric in the ancient world."⁴⁸

Gorgias' interest in the persuasive power of language drew his attention in particular to the sounds of words. He believed that the "sounds of words, when manipulated with skill, could captivate audiences."⁴⁹ Perhaps we find here another expression of Gorgias' rejection of an objective that words merely represent. If words do not represent reality, then their importance is as a means of shaping thought and action. Gorgias' experiments with sound led to his developing a florid, rhyming style that strikes modern readers as overdone. But, remember, what he is after is a magical incantation to virtually hypnotize his audience, not a tight, logical proof appealing to reason. A brief example, taken from VanHook's translation into English of part of Gorgias' famous *Encomium on Helen*, reflects something of the effect Gorgias sought to achieve with sounds:

All poetry I ordain and proclaim to composition in meter, the listeners of which are affected by passionate trepidation and compassionate perturbation and likewise tearful lamentation.... Inspired incantations are provocative of charm and revocative of harm.⁵⁰

This speech, a model for use in teaching argument, is also evidence of Gorgias' belief that the skilled rhetorician can prove any proposition. In this speech he argues the unlikely thesis that Helen can not be blamed for deserting Menelaus and following Paris to Troy. As George Kennedy summarizes, Gorgias enumerated four possible reasons for Helen's action: "it was the will of the gods; she was taken by force; she was seduced by words; or she was overcome by love."⁵¹

This style was an adaptation of poetic devices, poetry itself being seen as a means of working magic.⁵² Gorgias is best remembered in the history of rhetoric for developing stylistic devices that were later augmented and developed by many subsequent orators and rhetorical theorists. This attention to the inherent power of words to capture and move the human spirit is at the center of Gorgias' interest in and practice of rhetoric. Jacqueline de Romilly notes that in the *Encomium on Helen*, Gorgias argues that Helen "could not have resisted the power of *logos*," or persuasive words. Later in the speech, he emphasizes this point by calling rhetoric a type of witchcraft or magic.⁵³ As poetry was considered in Greek lore to be of divine origin, the relationship between beautiful words and supernatural power was a more natural one for Gorgias than it is for modern readers.⁵⁴ Gorgias believed that words worked their magic most powerfully by arousing human emotions such as fear, pity, and longing.⁵⁵ Classical scholar G. M. A. Grube notes that Gorgias was especially fond of such rhetorical devices as "over-bold metaphors, *allegoria* or to say one thing and mean another, *hypallage* or the use of one word for another, *catachresis* or to use words by analogy, repetition of words, resumption of an argument, *pariosis* or the use of balanced clauses, *apostrophe* or addressing some person or divinity, and antithesis."⁵⁶

Style and linguistic ornament have remained important aspects of rhetoric throughout its history. Shakespeare is probably the greatest master of the rhetorical figures in the English language. Contemporary orators such as John F. Kennedy also have revealed their knowledge of some of the ancient rhetorical figures. Kennedy, for example, employed *chiasmus* in his famous statement, "Ask not what your country can do for you, rather ask what you can do for your country." *Chi* is the Greek letter X, and *chiasmus* takes its name from the reversing of elements in adjacent clauses, forming an X in the sentence:

Ask not what your **country** can do for **you**,
rather ask what **you** can do for your **country**.

The device can be memorable and effective when well used, as Kennedy's inaugural speech proves.

Gorgias himself was perhaps most interested in the device known as *antithesis*, one that is still quite commonly used. *Antithesis* is, as the name implies, the opposing of ideas in a sentence or paragraph. Thus, a deliberative speaker might claim: "My opponent proposes a war that would bring us dishonor, while I advocate a peace that will bring us honor." Here the notions of war and peace are opposed, as are the concepts of dishonor and honor. Gorgias employed this device widely in his own speaking.

But, Gorgias' interest in antithesis extended beyond his concern for style. Like some of the other Sophists, he held that "two antithetical statements can be made on each subject," and that truth emerged from a clash of fundamentally opposed positions.⁵⁷ The idea that truth is a product of the clash of views was, as we have seen, closely related to the concept of *kairos*, the belief that truth is relative to circumstances.⁵⁸

Protagoras

Whereas Gorgias was a great practitioner of rhetoric and a famous stylist, Protagoras was more important to developing the philosophy underlying rhetorical practices. Protagoras was from Abdera in the north of Greece, and probably arrived in Athens around 450 B.C., more than twenty years before Gorgias. Protagoras was active in Athens for nearly forty years, until his death or banishment around 410.

Protagoras is alleged to have been "the first person to charge for lectures," and is considered by some to be the first of the Greek Sophists.⁵⁹ His most famous maxim is that "man is the measure [metron] of all things; of things that are not, that they are not; of things that are, that they are."⁶⁰ But what he meant by this claim, in true sophistic fashion, has been the subject of much debate. He at least seems to have had in mind that people make determinations about what is or is not true, and that there is no ultimate or absolute appeal that can be made to finally settle such questions. Thus, the claim embodies both the concept of relative truth, and of its pursuit through kairos. Perhaps consistent with this relativistic view of truth, Protagoras affirmed that the existence of a god or gods was virtually unknowable given the difficulty of the subject and the shortness of human life.

Protagoras was born in Abdera of Thrace, and, in the fashion of the itinerant, he taught in Sicily, Athens, and several other Greek cities. His reputation as a scholar and teacher was widespread, and recent scholarship attributes to him a number of significant intellectual accomplishments. He is said to have made "important contributions to rhetoric, epistemology, the critical study of religion, the study of social origins, dialectic, and literary criticism."⁶¹ But he is also thought to be the first person to systematize eristic argument, or what amounted to argumentative tricks that ignore true meaning (dianoia) in order to ensure rhetorical victory.

Protagoras was best known for teaching a highly practical approach to reasoning on political as well as personal questions. He advertised that he could train one, for a fee, of course, to successfully manage an estate, become a good citizen, and be prepared for political service. He apparently was convinced that contradictory arguments can always be advanced on issues of public and private significance, and that resolution of important issues depended on the clash of pro and con cases. Every logos (or argument) can be met with an antilogos or counterargument. Thus, his view of the nature of rhetorical inquiry is similar to that of Gorgias, and brings to mind the Sophists' interest in dissoi logoi, or contradictory claims. Protagoras is also credited with a method of questioning taken up by Socrates; presumably it was derived from his practice of generating contradictory propositions (dissoi logoi) on any subject.⁶²

Protagoras taught by a method known as antilogike, requiring students to advance arguments for and against a variety of claims.⁶³ For him, an argument could be said to have prevailed only when "it has been tested by and had withstood the attacks of the opposing side(s)." Even understanding a claim requires a consideration, not just of the claim itself, but of its opposite.⁶⁴ As Poulakos writes, "clearly, Protagoras' notion of dissoi logoi provides a worldview with rhetoric at its center." Of value to the student was the fact that "this worldview demands of the human subject a multi-

orbits into
humanistic
point of view

ple awareness, an awareness at once cognizant of its own position and of those positions opposing it."⁶⁵

As we have noted, Sophists were considered less than upright citizens by many Greeks. Nevertheless, some of them had connections with very powerful people in Athens. Protagoras, for instance, was close to Pericles himself, the most powerful man in Athens.⁶⁶ But they also had earned the disdain of a writer who was to shape conceptions of them for much of Western history—the great philosopher, Plato. The persistent bad connotations that Sophistry in particular, and rhetoric in general, has maintained in Western culture can be traced directly to Plato's famous attack on the Sophists. That famous attack, and Plato's own views of rhetoric, will be considered in Chapter 3.

Isocrates

Another important figure often associated with the Sophists in Athens is Isocrates (436–338 B.C.), born fifty years after Gorgias and Protagoras, and fifty years before Aristotle. He was only ten years older than Plato, and was thus a contemporary and in some respects a rival of this great philosopher. Both men studied philosophy under Socrates, and both claimed him as their model.⁶⁷ It is likely that as a young man Isocrates also studied rhetoric under Gorgias, a figure in whom Plato found little to respect.

Born into a wealthy family, Isocrates worked for a time as a *logographos* or professional speechwriter. Around 390 B.C. he founded a school in Athens, the first of the rhetorical schools, and eventually became the most respected teacher of rhetoric in the city. He also became quite wealthy. Andrew Ford writes, "For nearly half a century Isocrates was the most famous, influential, and successful teacher of politically ambitious young men in Greece. He also became one of the wealthiest teachers of his day." Ford helps us to understand just how much money Isocrates could command for his course of study. "The fee for his course was 1,000 drachmas, at a time when a day laborer was paid about 1 drachma a day."⁶⁸ If we consider what someone making minimum wage today might bring home in a day, and multiply that sum by one thousand, we get a relative idea of the cost of a course from a famous Sophist.

Was Isocrates, in fact, a Sophist? This is a matter of some controversy. Whereas the great Sophists of the previous generation came from outside of Athens, Isocrates was a native Athenian. Whereas they were itinerants and cosmopolitan in their outlook, Isocrates was a devoted pan-Hellenist, that is, a Greek who believed in the unity and expansion of Greece, and in the general superiority of Greek culture to other cultures. Moreover, in some of his writings, such as the essay *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates was critical of the earlier Sophists. For these reasons, some historians are reluctant to classify Isocrates as a Sophist. Still, he was a student of Gorgias, held some views in common with the early Sophists, and taught rhetoric for pay. Objections notwithstanding, we will treat Isocrates as representing the sophistic influence in Athens. Isocrates did consider himself a Sophist, despite his harsh criticism of other Sophists on some points.

Isocrates was well educated in his youth, and was, like Plato a little before him, part of a group of young men who followed Socrates. He eventually gave up the study of philosophy, however, and studied rhetoric. Jacqueline de Romilly notes that Isocrates "studied under Gorgias, having traveled to Thessaly to attend his lectures."⁶⁹ Later, in Athens, he hired out his services as a speechwriter. Failing at this endeavor, he began to teach rhetoric around the year 390 B.C. His teaching was joined with his own passionate advocacy of active political involvement.

Isocrates' approach to education was more rigidly structured than that of the earlier Sophists. He taught rhetoric in part by the use of model speeches that he himself composed. Many of these speeches reflect his ardent practical interest in Greek political issues. Two of the more famous are the early speech, entitled *Panegyricus* (c. 380 B.C.), and the *Plataicus*. Some of Isocrates' speeches were circulated as written documents, and are considered some of the earliest polemical treatises on political topics. Among these are *Symmachicus* and *Areopagiticus*. Isocrates' tendency to write out his speeches and to circulate them in this form marks a general shift in Greek rhetoric from a predominantly spoken medium to one emphasizing written discourse.⁷⁰ It also suggests the sort of reputation Isocrates hoped to cultivate. Andrew Ford writes that "Isocrates wanted to be thought of finally not as a teacher of orators, but as the teacher of the nation, as a serious and weighty commentator on the affairs of Greece."⁷¹

Much of Isocrates' interest in rhetoric was a consequence of his concern for preparing Greek leaders to make wise and effective political judgments. He attracted talented students to his school, many of whom became famous and influential as statesmen and orators. His greatness as a teacher was unsurpassed, and his highly refined pedagogical approaches became models for later educators. Isocrates' teaching was not aimed at creating clever and entertaining speakers, but rather at improving the political practices of Athens. Poulakos points out that Isocrates' teaching of rhetoric "introduced two new requirements to rhetorical education—the thematic and the pragmatic." Poulakos explains that "the thematic asked that rhetoric concentrate on significant matters while the pragmatic demanded that it make a positive contribution to the life of the audience."⁷²

For Isocrates, it was rhetoric—"the power to persuade each other"—that made human civilization itself possible. In his speech *Antidosis* (c. 353 B.C.) he argues that "there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish."⁷³ What, then, could be more significant than the study of this art?

Isocrates grounded this highly intentional, nationalistic, and morally oriented rhetorical training on three factors: natural talent, extensive practice, and education in basic principles of rhetoric. Where natural talent was lacking, there was little even a talented teacher could do to compensate for its absence. Where talent was present, Isocrates believed that it could be developed through instruction and practice. But Isocrates also insisted on high moral character in his students. This concern for

ethos, or the speaker's character, set Isocrates apart from other Sophists whose orientation was decidedly more pragmatic. *Ethos*, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, remained a central concern in Greek rhetorical theory.

The style of Isocrates' speeches was elegant, though some historians have accused him of being relatively unconcerned about factual accuracy. Isocrates' style influenced later orators such as Demosthenes and Cicero. Though he claimed to teach effective oratory, Isocrates did not claim to be able to teach *arete* or virtue.⁷⁴ "Let no one suppose," he wrote, "that I claim that just living can be taught; for I hold that there does not exist an art of the kind which can implant sobriety and justice in depraved natures."⁷⁵ [That is, no one can be taught to be moral who does not already possess the kind of nature that desires to live a moral life.] For the Sophists to claim that they could teach anyone *arete* or virtue was simply absurd. Isocrates did, however, advocate high moral standards in his students and in the citizenry generally. He upbraided the Athenians for heeding the corrupted rhetoric of politicians who promised them what they wanted, but who did not care about either the health of their souls or the city's good. Isocrates advanced the same analogy between medicine and rhetoric that Plato employs in the dialogue *Gorgias*.⁷⁶

Isocrates taught that rhetoric should be used to advance Greek ideas and institutions, and held in disdain the shoddy rhetoric practiced in the courts and legislature.

In this way he agreed with Plato. Enos writes that "Isocrates was committed to the notion of a united Greece and believed that rhetoric was a tool that empowered his educational system to promote such an ideal in a number of different areas."⁷⁷ Isocrates also staunchly advocated the fair conduct of trials, including letting the accused have an equal chance to defend himself in court.⁷⁸ But his greatest cause was pan-Hellenism, which focused on urging unity among the Greek city-states (following the lead of Athens, of course) against their common foe, Persia. This goal required convincing the city-states to leave off warring with one another, a practice that drained their resources and left them vulnerable to attack by outside forces. Despite the warnings of Isocrates and others, including Demosthenes, Philip of Macedon put an end to all efforts toward pan-Hellenism by his crushing defeat of the Greek armies at Chaeronea.

Aspasia's Role in Athenian Rhetoric

Women did not have an easy lot in ancient Athens. They were not recognized as full citizens, and were prohibited from a variety of occupations and public events. Even aristocratic women were seldom seen in public, and their "activities, movements, education, marriage, and rights as citizens and property holders were extremely circumscribed." Most women "were confined within the house at all times, except on occasions of religious festivals."⁷⁹

Making speeches was one activity from which Greek men typically barred Greek women. In the rhetorical arena, as in others, the treatment of women in ancient Greece

stemmed directly from male attitudes. The Greek writer Democritus, for example, "asserts that women should not be allowed to practice argument because men detest being ruled by women. In asserting this, he describes a detestable—and not fictional—practice." Historian of rhetoric C. Jan Swearingen writes that an edict entitled "On Pleading," which dates from the sixth century A.D. "repeats the terms of Democritus' proscription: 'It is prohibited to women to plead on behalf of others. And indeed there is reason for the prohibition: lest women mix themselves up in other people's cases, going against the chastity that befits their gender.'" ⁸⁰

As democratic reforms took hold in Athens, the place of women did not improve. Because they were still denied citizenship, women "did not participate in any formal public functions."⁸¹ In fact, the very reforms that opened the way to more Greek citizens to participate in politics seem to have worked *against* women's participation. "It remains a remarkable feature of Greek history," writes Ellen Wood, "that the position of women seems to have declined as the democracy evolved..."⁸² This is likely because the larger number of men now involved in politics made it even more difficult for women to find a place in public life. Only in rural regions and in some less democratic city-states, such as Sparta, did the place of women improve slightly during the fifth and fourth centuries.

As we will note in subsequent chapters, women throughout history often have found it difficult to participate in the rhetorical life of their communities. The harshness of attitudes toward women in the ancient world makes the story of Aspasia, a female rhetorician of the sixth century B.C., particularly intriguing. As Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong write of this remarkable woman, "Aspasia left no written remains. She is known through a handful of references, the most substantial of which are several paragraphs of narratives in Plutarch's life of Pericles and an oration attributed to her in Plato's dialogue *Menexenus*." In response to the assertion by some historians that Aspasia was a legendary figure, they write, "allusions to her by four of Socrates' pupils help to confirm Plutarch's assertion that Aspasia was indeed a real person, a teacher of rhetoric who shared her knowledge and political skill with Pericles, perhaps helping him to compose the funeral oration attributed to him by Thucydides."⁸³

Aspasia apparently hailed from Miletus, a Greek colony along the coast of Asia Minor. The great Greek general and orator Pericles lived with Aspasia "as a beloved and constant companion."⁸⁴ Aspasia's knowledge of politics was without equal, as was her ability as a rhetorician. She is reputed to have "taught the art of rhetoric to many, including Socrates, and may have invented the so-called Socratic method."⁸⁵ It has also been argued that Aspasia actually wrote Pericles' famous "Funeral Oration," one of the most powerful rhetorical performances of antiquity. Plato notes in his dialogue *Menexenus* that when Socrates was asked whether he could meet the challenge of giving a speech at a public funeral for men who have died in battle, "the philosopher replies, 'That I should be able to speak is no great wonder, Menexenus, considering that I have an excellent mistress in the art of rhetoric—she who has made so many good speakers, and one who was the best among all the Hellenes—

→ If you write
Aspasia
with a female
historian
the

Pericles, the son of Xanthippos.'"⁸⁶ Socrates himself, then, acknowledges that Aspasia was his rhetorical tutor, and that she had played the same role for the great leader, Pericles. Aspasia's story underlines both the tremendous rhetorical ability of a remarkable woman, and the stringent limits placed by the ancients on women in the domain of rhetoric.

Conclusion

The number of Sophists working in Greece was never large, nor were they a major part of the scene in city-states like Athens for a long period. The greatest of the Sophists were active in Athens between about 450 and 380 B.C. Nevertheless, these provocative rhetoricians had an amazing influence over Greek life and thought. Jacqueline de Romilly is not exaggerating when she writes that "the teaching of both rhetoric and philosophy was marked forever by the ideas that the Sophists introduced and the debates that they initiated."⁸⁷ Why, we may ask, is this the case? Several reasons suggest themselves.

First, the Sophists emphasized the centrality of persuasive discourse to civilized, democratic social life. Their thinking on this matter was often insightful, and provoked discussion of rhetoric's role in democratic civic life. Second, the Sophist's appreciation for the sheer power of language also marked a theme that would continue to be important to later intellectual history in the West. Their explorations of this theme are still important to the discussion of language's centrality to thought and social life. Third, it is probably the case that the Sophist's arguments for a view of law as rooted in social conventions, and for truth as relative to places and times, influenced later philosophical and political thought. Finally, the Sophists' tendency to place rhetorical training at the center of education constituted an innovation that would continue to have influence for centuries.

There are several strikingly modern factors in the Sophists' approach to rhetoric and education, and their prescience on a number of important issues in philosophy, politics, and rhetoric are only now being fully appreciated. Contemporary scholars are currently reassessing the contributions of this remarkable group of teachers, theorists, and practitioners of rhetoric. It is also important to note, however, that when studying the Sophists we are unavoidably confronted with the central ethical concern that attends rhetoric throughout its history. Rhetoric is a kind of power, and power can be used for good or for bad purposes. The Sophists were notorious in part because they disregarded conventional Greek ideas about the moral uses of language and argument. They also ignored moral conventions concerning who could or could not be educated in the powers of language. The Sophists insisted that persuasive arguments can always be made on either side of an issue, not just on the side favored by those adhering to prevailing moral assumptions. These crucial ethical questions about the power of language and who should have access to that power, once introduced by Gorgias,

regard less
of morality