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Rhetoric and Persuasion from the Classical Era Through the Modern Age

البلاغة والاقناع في العصر الكلاسيكي من خلال العصر الحديث

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Abstract :

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. The rhetorical theory offers a method for discovering the means of persuasion in discourse. Since the classical period up to the introduction of the new rhetoric, the views and perceptions have altered immensely in a myriad of ways. Consequently, I suggest, in order to overcome the complexity of understanding the rhetorical theory and its application, to go through the rhetoric's history which has always been focused on areas pertinent to persuasion. In this overview, I avoided to deal with the contemporary theories (and leave them to another occasion) because in the turn of the twentieth century, the new rhetoric broke down with the old tradition, the emphasis on persuasion, and new meanings and theories have promulgated in a quantity and audacity unprecedented in the history of rhetoric that the scope of the present article does not allow to cover.

Key words : *rhetoric, rhetorical theory, classical rhetoric, persuasion.*

الملخّص:

تعرف البلاغة على أنها فن الإقناع. وتقدم نظرية البلاغة طريقة لاكتشاف أدوات الإقناع في الخطاب. لكن منذ المرحلة الكلاسيكية إلى غاية نشوء البلاغة الجديدة، تقلبت الآراء والمفاهيم بطرق عديدة بهذا الشأن. وبالتالي وقصد تجاوز مسألة تعقيد مفهوم نظرية البلاغة وتطبيقاتها أقترح استعراض لمحة شاملة وموجزة لتاريخ البلاغة الذي لطالما كان مرتبطا بالإقناع. وفي هذه النظرة الشاملة تفاديت التطرق إلى النظريات المعاصرة (وترك ذلك إلى مناسبة أخرى) لأنه مع مطلع القرن العشرين انفصلت البلاغة الجديدة عن التقليد القديم وهو الصلة القوية بالإقناع، وانتشرت معان ونظريات بلاغية جديدة بأعداد وجرأة غير مسبوقين في تاريخ البلاغة إلا أن إطار هذا المقال لا يسمح بمناقشتها جميعا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البلاغة، نظرية البلاغة، البلاغة الكلاسيكية، الإقناع.

Introduction

The practice of rhetoric began in the Greek period. The main theories, practices and teachings of the art of the Greeks (500-400 BCE)[1] and the Romans (507 BC - 476 AD)[2] all constitute the classical rhetoric. In the Middle Ages (500-1400), rhetoric was devalued in Europe but was flourishing in the Arab world. The Renaissance and Early Modern scholarships (1500-1750), though contributed little to the rhetorical theory, have a share, here, to trace the continuity of the traditional work. It is worthy to note that this paper is confined to the old tradition which restricts the realm of rhetoric to persuasion and oratory contrary to the new trends that have appeared in the twentieth century and have given birth to an unprecedented huge number of rhetorical theories which regard rhetoric as encompassing approximately all forms of communication.

1. Rhetoric in Ancient Times

Dixon[3] claimed that "Presumably the oldest reference to rhetoric can be found in Homer's epic poem". Undeniably, several Greek and Roman philosophers contributed to the classical rhetoric.

1.1. Rhetoric in Ancient Greek

Though the practice of rhetoric began much earlier, many historians credit the ancient city state of Athens as the birthplace of classical rhetoric arose in 5th century BC. Because of the rise of democracy, every free man had to speak in the Assembly and persuade his countrymen to vote for or against a particular piece of legislation; they were also expected to speak on their own courts of law (Kennedy)[4]. The ability to do this successfully depended on one's rhetorical skills. With time rhetoric became essential to gain success in public life and schools began to be established by the sophists to teach this art. We will begin our tour in Ancient Greece with the Sophists, Plato, and Aristotle—who have come to be regarded as the forefathers of rhetoric.

1.1.1. The Sophists

The Sophists were itinerant groups of teachers who traveled from polis to polis and taught young men in public places how to go through communication effectively. As Hunt[5] notes, "the original sophists were professional teachers who helped meet the need for rhetorical training in Athens." Their paid services included: public performance, speech writing, instruction in argumentation and style, and clever word play even at the expensive of truth. Thus, to become a persuasive public speaker necessitated training in the manipulation of language, because, for them, language could never be objective since it was too culturally symbolic and emotionally charged. Over time, however, the sophists acquired a negative reputation as greedy, deceiving and arrogant instructors.

1.1.2. Plato

Plato was very critical of the Sophists for they used fallacious reasoning concealed in decorated language to deceive others. He did not regard rhetoric as an art but as a form of flattery because some people used it to escape punishment in trials. Indeed, Plato's central argument against rhetoric is "hinged on his conviction that the emotions are irrational in the sense that they undermine the rule of reason . . ." (Carroll)[6].

Later in his life, Plato realized that he had always made use of rhetorical techniques; therefore, he wrote *Phaedrus* (360 BC) in which he showed a positive role of rhetoric and laid down a fairly complete system for a proper, perhaps ideal, rhetoric. Plato's model stressed the role of audience when creating a rhetorical discourse. He did so by

calling rhetoricians to understand the souls of all men, of those of one's audience, and know what would move those souls toward the acceptance of what would a rhetorician bring.

1.1.3. Aristotle

If I went quickly through the Greek contributions to rhetoric, the case will be different with Aristotle. I will present his theory with some explicitness because Aristotle "provided the first comprehensive theory of rhetorical discourse" (Dillard & Pfau)[7] in the fifth century BC and persuasion was central to his theory. Gross & Walzer[8] note that "all subsequent rhetorical theory is but a series of responses to issues raised" by Aristotle's *rhetoric*.

Aristotle defined rhetoric within a persuasive framework: "[rhetoric is] the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever" (Aristotle[9], 1991, para. 1355 b). Persuasion, for him, can be achieved via a trichotomy of appeals: ethos (the character of the speaker), pathos (the emotional state of the hearer), and logos (the argument) (Covino & Jolliffe)[10]. It seems that these elements are respectively relevant to the three components of a speech: the speaker, the listener to whom the speech is addressed, and the subject that is treated in the speech (Aristotle)[11].

One mode of persuasion is ethos, a Greek word meaning 'character'. According to Aristotle, speakers must establish ethos through: (1) practical intelligence, (2) virtuous character, and (3) good will (Aristotle)[12]. The concept includes also morals, expertise and knowledge. To influence the audience, it is not necessary to be actually virtuous nor does a preexisting good character be part of the technical means of persuasion. Aristotle stresses the idea that appeal to ethos comes from a person's use of language i.e. any speaker who is well versed in his or her subject and well-spoken about it can gain credibility.

The Greek word pathos stands for suffering and experience. It represents an appeal to the audience's emotions. The success of any persuasive effort depends on the emotional dispositions of the audience for we do not react in the same way when we grieve or rejoice. Thus, the orator arouses emotions because they have the power to modify the people's reactions (Aristotle)[13].

Logos is also "a Greek term which means word or reason" (Ramage & John)[14]. It refers to persuasion by logical reasoning. Aristotle was the first to analyze an argument in a systematic manner.

He did this by dividing arguments into two types: inductions and deductions. Induction is defined as the move "from one or more similar cases, [to] arrive at a general proposition" (Aristotle)[15]. The inductive argument in rhetoric is the example. Unlike other inductive arguments, the example does not proceed from many particular cases to one universal case, but from one particular to a similar particular to form a general proposition. A deduction is an argument which departs from one or more general premises to reach logical certain conclusion. For instance, human beings are mortal (major premise); Plato is a human being (minor premise); so, Plato is mortal (conclusion). The deductive argument in rhetoric is called the enthymeme. An enthymeme has the function of a proof. More precisely, it is a rhetorical syllogism whose premises are based either on "probabilities or signs" (Aristotle)[16]. Signs "… are propositions that are necessarily … true"[17]. An example of sign-enthymemes could be: "Though inexperienced, he always manages crises successfully; so, he must be gifted." Here, the person's success in managing crises is a sign of his giftedness. Regarding probabilities, they "… are propositions that are generally … true"[18]. For instance, "Most migrant workers on the Estate were unemployed. We met David who had lived on the Estate for two years. David was Unemployed."

We notice, however, that the concept of enthymeme is problematic at two levels: form and influence on the audience. Concerning form, Aristotle fails to give a clear definition to this concept; he states: "an enthymeme is a rhetorical syllogism"[19]. A syllogism, by definition, comprises three divisions: major premise, secondary premise and a conclusion. In modern times, there exist three conventional orders of enthymemes. The first-order enthymeme suppresses the major premise. The second-order enthymeme suppresses the minor premise. The third-order enthymeme suppresses the conclusion. Other orders of enthymemes, in which two elements of the syllogism are suppressed, could be postulated (Edward & Robert)[20]. The question that I pose here concerns whether there is always an implicit premise or a conclusion. If yes, a pragmatic level must be distinguished for the unsaid is estimated to be so obvious but it may also be open to different interpretations on the part of the audience. For instance, a politician may say: "we are witnessing a terrible economic crisis" and stops or moves to something else. The implied conclusion from this premise could be: "we must keep

united", "we will suffer from hunger", or "we have taken the necessary steps to rise as soon as possible", etc.

Still with form, the other point I wonder about is whether all enthymemes take the form of a syllogism. Unfortunately, a clear-cut answer in the literature is not available.

Following Aristotle's model of an argument structure, the premise(s) of an enthymeme can be wrong; nevertheless, they can lead to a wrong, albeit logical, conclusion as in this example: wise men are just, since Socrates is just. Thus, this model helps us to analyze only the internal consistency of arguments and to be on the lookout for errors in reasoning. It appears that Aristotle's attention was directed toward types of substantial relations between premises and conclusions.

Generally speaking, Aristotle's approach to the enthymeme seems to shift from argumentation to logic, and it has a limited capacity in the analysis of arguments. The term argument, here, is taken to mean a reason given in support or dismissal of an idea. This reason could be given in the form of statistics, comparisons, laws, etc. These do not always suit the structured argument i.e. a conclusion deduced from premises. Even in everyday life, real arguments tend to be so messy and complicated that it is difficult, if not impossible, to analyse all of them according to the structure of a syllogism. Finally, Aristotle tends to focus almost exclusively on the form(s) arguments take, and this often requires the abstraction of context and content. Yet, context and content are deemed crucial when one comes to analyse arguments used in a discourse.

With regard to the enthymeme's impact on the audience, in an enthymeme whose one or two elements are omitted, the rhetor assumes that they are self-evident and that the listeners are active participants since they supply the missing part. Aristotle suggests that the enthymeme is particularly interesting given its relationship to its audience. He remarks: "enthymemes excite more favorable audience reaction"[21]. However, it seems that Aristotle is talking solely about the case when a speech is perfectly tailored to obtain a specific reaction from a particular audience. What he may not have accounted for is the possibility that an unintended audience encounters the rhetorical piece especially in the age of mass media now. As a result, enthymemes can undergo a variety of interpretations because of shift in their original context. I think, in this case, the use of an enthymeme can turn away from its original purpose of persuasion. The other point regarding

enthymemes is that the audience of a public speech is generally characterized by an intellectual insufficiency; therefore, enthymemes must not be as precise as a scientific demonstration and should be shorter than ordinary dialectical arguments.

All in all, Aristotle restricts logos to enthymemes and examples. The concept of enthymeme is obscure and problematic which makes it hard and fruitless to engage in identifying and analysing them. Because of these limitations, it becomes difficult for one to give a comprehensive analysis of arguments with the sole reliance on Aristotle's theory. The advantage of Aristotle's rhetoric is that it covers non-argumentative tools of persuasion. He makes orators aware of the need to stimulate emotions and make themselves credible.

1.2. Rhetoric in Ancient Rome

After the decline of the Greek Empire, the Romans inherited the rhetorical flavor but added just little to the Greeks' repertoire of persuasive techniques. For the Roman rhetoricians, the ideal orator was not merely one with exceptional gifts of speech, but also a "good man" with "all the excellences of character" (Butler)[22]. They considered the principles of moral conduct an integral part of the rhetorical art, not something to be left to the ethicists or philosophers. It was only about 300 years after Aristotle that the Roman rhetoricians started contributing works on the art of rhetoric. Among the most famous ones were Cicero and Quintilian.

1.2.1. Cicero

Cicero defines rhetoric as "speech designed to persuade" (Bizzell & Herzberg, eds.)[23]. For him, to be persuasive, a man needs knowledge in all fields: philosophy, politics, literature, ethics, law, medicines, and so on. He emphasizes the notion of 'audience analysis' by which he means that the speaker must adjust the speech to the social background and the intellectual level of the audience. Cicero's *De Inventione*[24] provides a tripartite division of public speech: deliberative, forensic and epideictic.

Deliberative rhetoric refers to speeches or pieces of writing that attempt to persuade an audience to take (or not to take) some action. A speech taking place in the legislative assembly or political debates in general falls under the category of deliberative rhetoric. This kind of rhetoric is usually associated with politics and is

concerned with decisions about future actions. Deliberative topics might include: taxes, education, legislation, health insurance, personal wellness, war and peace, and the defense of the country. Deliberative speakers would first raise interest in these topics; once interest is peaked, they might find that listeners have become more prone to being persuaded.

Forensic or judicial rhetoric is the type of rhetoric relevant to legal arguments advanced before a court; it requires decisions about whether a past event was according or contrary to the law. The purpose of the speaker is to accuse somebody or defend oneself or someone else. In the modern era, judicial discourse is primarily employed by lawyers in trials, in courtrooms.

The Epideictic oratory is also called ceremonial discourse; it is used to praise or blame during ceremonies. While the deliberative and judicial species have their context in a controversial situation in which the listener has to decide in favor of one of two opposing parties, ceremonial speaking does not aim at such a decision: it relates somebody's ideals and values to those of a diverse audience so as to praise or blame them for their deeds as being honorable or shameful. Ben Witherington[25] contends that, in general, epideictic rhetoric is highly emotional and meant to inspire the audience to appreciate something or someone, or at the other end of the spectrum, despise something or someone. This type of rhetoric includes funeral orations, eulogies, letters of recommendation, the language of openings and closings in addresses, speeches delivered in retirement or graduation occasions, in festivals, or in state visits, and the like. Interpreted more broadly, epideictic rhetoric may also include works of literature.

There is little doubt that these three categories do not exhaust the kinds of discourse possible. These three have persisted and still prove useful in rhetorical analysis, partly because they focus on common social situations where persuasion is important and on broad categories of intention. It might seem like these kinds are based upon where they take place, but it is rather a matter of what arguments are being used and whether the audience must take a stand or not. It is not uncommon to find two of the three types utilized in one single speech.

Another major contribution of Cicero is his establishment of the five canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery (Cicero)[26]. Elucidated from the perspective of a practicing orator, these categories supply a systematized way of analysis of rhetoric. They serve both analytical and generative purposes. That is

to say, they provide a template for the criticism of discourse (and orations in particular), and they give a pattern for rhetorical education.

The first canon is invention (inventio). It is concerned with finding arguments and amassing materials. So, the critic would analyze a speech to examine how the speaker established his ethos, how he stimulated the passions and whether or not his arguments were strong. Succinctly, in invention, elements that might have affected the speaker's choice of material are examined to identify the available means of persuasion.

The second classical canon of rhetoric is disposition (dispositio) which is concerned with the arrangement and organization of the material gathered. In the analysis of the speech, the task is to explain how the appeals within each part were organized and why that organization was genius for the purposes of the discourse.

Elocution (elocutio), also referred to as style, is the third classical canon of rhetoric. This canon permits the investigation of the use of language in discourse. The question is how the speaker made stylistic choices to achieve his/her purpose and how he/she adapted his language style to particular audience and subject. Cicero divided style into three types: the plain style for arguments, the middle style for charm and the passionate style for persuasion. Under the canon of style the critic ought to consider the orator's use of tropes and figures. The basic question for the critic is how well the style fits the audience and the occasion.

The other rhetorical canon is memory (memoria) by which is meant the study of the devices used to aid remember the speech during its delivery.

Delivery (pronuntiatio) is the fifth canon and is relevant to vocal utterances and body movements. Critics may want to know how the speaker presented the message, addressing both the effective use of voice and physical dynamics. It should be noted that memory and delivery have always been the least important of the five as they are not often addressed in rhetorical criticisms.

Although these categories have lost their specific labels and the boundaries have been blurred somewhat, they still form the basis for contemporary discussions that can be termed "neo-Aristotelian" (Baird)[27].

1.2.2. Quintilian

Oratory for Quintilian is the art of speaking well with the purpose of persuasion (Bizzell & Herzberg, eds.)[28]. He claims that rhetoric is an amoral activity but engagement in it needs to be done in a proper way which necessitates men of virtues so that they use rhetoric to tell but the truth. He embraced Cicero's classification of rhetorical discourse into forensic, deliberative, and epideictic.

In much the same way as Cicero who laid forth the five canons which have been used in education, Quintilian also was mostly interested in training, a fact which is demonstrated by his monumental four-volume work, *Institutio Oratoria*, the "most ambitious single treatise on education produced by the ancient world" (Murphy)[29]. It was more than a mere handbook of rhetoric; rather, it set out a program for educating the citizen-orator.

2. Rhetoric in the Middle Ages

Europe did not make significant contributions to the art of rhetoric during the dark ages and midieval works were mere compilations of the Greeko-Roman tradition. However, at the same period, rhetoric was evolving in other parts in the world namely in the Middle East.

To begin with, the Arab rhetoric is rooted in the pagan era that preceded the advent of Islam, termed Aldjahiliyyah. Outstanding poems and speeches stood as the preeminent forms of rhetoric. The more eloquent[30] a poet or an orator was, the higher their social status became. Interestingly, the ultimate purpose of those practitioners and recipients of rhetoric was to guarantee and examine the smooth and harmonious aesthetic dimension of the rhetorical text which used to come loaded with diverse rhetorical figures (not clearly delimited nor categorized at the time).

In short, pre-Islamic Arab rhetoric necessitated the development of taste, critical acumen and beautiful style with the goal of pursuing personal grace, leisure enjoyment and social advancement.

With the coming of Islam, people, astonished at the unsurpassable beauty of the Qur'an, embarked on studying the miracle of Muhammed's prophethood by looking for elements of beauty, then, describing, classifying and codifying them. As a matter of fact, the compilation of those aesthetic aspects was based on not only the Qur'anic text but also the pre-Islamic poems which both embody far-fetched rhetorical devices that adorn language.

As such rhetoric continued to evolve until it reached its peak in the Abbasid period (750-1258) when Abdu Allah Ibnu Almu'tazz and Aldjurdjani wrote, respectively, *Albadi'* and *The Secrets of Rhetoric*, two books which laid, among others, the foundations for the Arab rhetoric.

Regarding the definition of rhetoric, the Muslim rhetoricians generally agreed that it is the transmission of meaning utilizing correct, clear, appropriate utterances in a way to leave an impact on the audience. Al-Jāḥiẓ[31] stated that "A speech cannot be said to be rhetorical only if its meaning outruns its linguistic items".

Undoubtfully, the most distinguished contribution of the Arabs is their division of rhetoric into three branches: (1) word order or Ilm Almaani which embodies repetition, propositions (Alkhabar), non-propositions (Alinchaa), etc; (2) figures of speech or Ilm Albayan that includes devices such as metaphor and analogy; and (3) embellishment or Ilm Albadi' which covers elements like metonymy and alliteration.

Up until the twentieth century, the Arab rhetoric has not been influenced by the persuasion-based Aristotelian heritage and kept focused on taste, style decorum and clarity. Yet, we can assume that a beautiful and comprehensible text is meant to affect readers or listeners, thus, can also participate in a persuasive endeavor. It is this idea that made me think the present section on the Arab rhetoric is not irrelevant in this thesis.

Furthermore, the theoretical and practical Western views that rhetoric should be adapted to an audience, responsive to a situation and persuasion seeking barely exist in the Arab rhetorical studies. Still, the latter stress, more or less, the appropriateness (a hint to the audience and the situation) of a piece of rhetoric.

3. Rhetoric in the Renaissance and Early Modern Periods

The early modern period has been characterized by what Garsten[32] calls "attack on rhetoric". The beginnings of this attack can be traced to the rise of political and religious fanaticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fearing the effects of demagoguery on public opinion, the classical tradition was under-mined to downplay the role of persuasion. Such an attack contributed to an aestheticization of rhetoric that transformed it into "a literary enterprise rather than a political one"[33].

The shift of emphasis in rhetorical theory from persuasion to the aesthetic was most obvious in the belletristic movement led by

Hugh Blair and George Campbell in the late eighteenth century. That movement represented the first real alternative to the classical tradition as it radically expanded the scope of the discipline by combining the study of rhetoric, other arts (poetry, drama, and even biography and history), and literature into a common discipline, with an emphasis on taste, style, culture, and critical analysis of the most distinguished compositions. Put differently, rhetoric started to include the written forms while classically it was confined to oratory (Blair)[34]. The belletristic rhetoricians did, then, appreciate "the potentialities of persuasion as a force in a democracy and in a Christian society" (Golden & Corbett)[35]. In this area, they emphasized emotion over reason, distinguishing between "conviction" and "persuasion" and associating the latter with the human passions.

In all of these developments there was, clearly, something "new", hence, called "new rhetorics." They were not the only novel changes, yet. A new theory of rhetoric, another more "scientific" alternative paradigm to the classical emphasis on persuasion, was elaborated by George Campbell on the basis of the eighteenth century theory of psychology and the classical rules of discourse. His Resemblance Theory of rhetoric implies that the audience belief in a rhetor's claim is dependent on the extent to which the audience's response to the verbal stimuli of the rhetor "*resembles* the mind's ordinary response to actual experience" (Walzer)[36]. In order to achieve this, the speakers must consider appeal to emotions. For Campbell, emotions are also stirred using flourished style (Walzer[37]).

Conclusion

By way of concluding this chapter, the great Greek and Roman rhetoricians no doubt, contributed a lot to the rhetorical tradition. It is important to recognize that no single paradigm defines the classical rhetorical tradition. Rather, that tradition consists of ongoing debates over the best methods of rhetorical practices and training, and the aims, scope, and power of rhetoric – indeed, over the very definition of 'rhetoric' itself. Yet, we can identify two emphases in the classical rhetoric that have distinguished the rhetorical perspective ever since: (1) an emphasis on the interconnectedness between rhetoric and persuasion and (2) an overriding concern with the optimum techniques that persuasive efforts to be crowned with success.

Whilst the rhetorical tradition emphasized on persuasion, the modern scholarship brought several new perspectives to the field that ranged from an embellishment of rhetoric to inclusion of the written acts, to a more scientific perspective under the name of the Resemblance Theory.

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