What is Rhetoric?

A simple answer might be the art of persuasion. However, since it was first conceptualized in ancient Greece almost 2,500 years ago, rhetoric has been variously defined by its many theoreticians and practitioners. For example, Isocrates defined rhetoric (indirectly) as the art of determining "what we should do or what we should say"; Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion"; Donald Bryant defined rhetoric as "the function of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas"; Robert Scott defined rhetoric as "not a matter of giving effectiveness to truth but of creating truth"; and Wayne Booth defined rhetoric as "the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared discourse."

What is Conceptualized Rhetoric?

In the first edition of Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times (1980), George A. Kennedy says, "All arts, including the arts of discourse, employ techniques to accomplish their purposes. The author may know how to use these techniques, but he may never have taken thought to define them, catalogue them, or conceptualize them. That is, he may be unable to state general concepts describing what he does when speaking, even though he may be a good speaker. One of the most remarkable features of the classical period in Greece is
the conscious conceptualization of human faculties, including grammar, rhetoric, logic, and poetics" (6).

Kennedy goes on to say that natural rhetoric occurs in all human societies, and he acknowledges that some degree of conceptualization of rhetoric occurred both in ancient India and in ancient China (for example, in Han Fei Tzu's [c.a. 280-233 BCE] Difficulties in the Way of Persuasion). He claims, however, that "Neither in India nor in China . . . did rhetoric become a separate discipline with a fully developed theory, its own logical structure, and a corpus of pragmatic handbooks. Such a degree of conceptualization is apparently found only in the Greco-Roman world, where it begins to appear coincident with the rise of Greek philosophy and other forms of conceptualization in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C." (7).

This claim has been criticized as ethnocentric, and in the two decades since Kennedy published this work, much new research has been published on non-Western rhetorics. I suppose that similar criticisms might be raised against the claim that the art of war was first conceptualized in ancient China in Sun Tzu's The Art of War, and that the art of love was first conceptualized in ancient India in Vatsyayana's The Karma Sutra. In any case, it is still useful to examine (1) the social and political conditions that led to the conceptualization of rhetoric in ancient Greece; (2) the nature of that conceptualized rhetoric and the key issues that early rhetoricians and their philosophical opponents debated; and (3) the modern political and educational legacy of classical rhetoric.

1. Social and Political Conditions Leading to the Conceptualization of Rhetoric

The traditional story of the first conceptualization of the art of rhetoric in the ancient Greek world is the after the overthrow of the tyrant of Syracuse (ca. 467 BCE), numerous property disputes went before the courts ("Before the time of the tyrants, this land was my great-grandfather's, and I want it back.") An enterprising fellow named Corax reputedly observed a number of cases being tried and abstracted from his observations principles that could be taught (for a fee) to others in order to increase their chances of successfully pleading their cases. Corax and Tisias, who may have been Corax's student, became renowned for their teaching. In 427 BCE, their fellow Sicilian Gorgias (480-375 BCE) became ambassador to Athens and brought with him a marked skill in rhetoric and a method of teaching it. For the Athenians, this was the equivalent of the British Rock Invasion.

This traditional story has been challenged by some modern scholars who wonder (1) if Corax and Tisias might be the same person (Corax means crow, an unusual name for a Greek, but perhaps a nickname for Tisias); and (2) whether either Corax or Tisias ever existed at all. In defense of the traditional story, oral traditions were passed on fairly reliably in ancient times—for about 600 years, for example, in the case of an oral tradition about the Trojan War. Aristotle, flourished just a century later, reports the contributions of Corax and Tisias (e.g. Rhetoric 1401311; see also Cicero's report in On Invention [2.6] of Aristotle's account of this tradition in his lost Synagoge Tekhnon).

In any case, one might ask why rhetoric took root in classical Athens. First, the rise of rhetoric in ancient Athens is probably overdetermined, not explainable by any single cause. The rise of literacy, the rise of democracy, and the rise of rhetoric seem to be intertwined, with each stimulating the other. Perhaps stimulating all three was perpetual Greek warfare, the discovery of silver at Laurium, the consequent expansion of the Athenian navy, and the need to enfranchise the lower-class oarsmen upon whom the navy's success depended.
2. Some Traditional and Contemporary Issues in the History of Rhetoric

a. Can Rhetoric be Taught?

If lower classes of Athenians are to be inspired to serve valiantly in the Athenian navy, then they must be enfranchised and they prepared to participate meaningfully in public deliberation. Those who professed the ability to teach this skill could become wealthy, as Isocrates did. The supporters of oligarchy and hereditary privilege, however, would claim that skill in public deliberation was innate and, implicitly, unique to the traditional upper classes. The rhetoricians would respond that this skill was in part innate, but in part also a function of training and practice.

b. Can Virtue be Taught?

One key concern in the various efforts to define rhetoric has been the notion of persuasion and the extent to which an emphasis on persuasion licenses deceit and manipulation. In Plato's Gorgias, Socrates allows for the possibility of a noble rhetoric, but denies that such a rhetoric has ever existed:

I am content with the admission that rhetoric is of two sorts; one, which is mere flattery and disgraceful declamation; the other, which is noble and aims at the training and improvement of the souls of the citizens, and strives to say what is best, whether welcome or unwelcome, to the audience; but have you ever known such a rhetoric; or if you have, and can point out any rhetorician who is of this stamp, who is he? ... For, indeed, I do not know of such a man. (503)

Quintilian was also deeply concerned with these two sorts of rhetoric; as he wrote in his Institutio Oratoria:

Too much insistence cannot be laid upon the point that no one can be said to speak appropriately who has not considered not merely what it is expedient, but also what it is becoming to say.... these two considerations generally go hand in hand. . . . Sometimes, however, the two are at variance. Now, whenever this occurs, expedience must yield to the demands of what is becoming. . . . the end which the orator must keep in view is not persuasion, but speaking well, since there are occasions when to persuade would be a blot upon his honour. (XI.1.8-11)

More recently, in his book Thought and Character: The Rhetoric of Democratic Education, Frederick Antczak has characterized these two types of rhetoric as rhetoric of indulgence and rhetoric of reconstitution (8), and he suggests that for reconstitutive rhetoric to be successful, we need to redefine our conception of rhetorical success. As an alternative to a choice between either crass expedience or principled but futile discourse, Antczak offers reconstitutive rhetoric, which--following Donald Bryant--involves "adjustments of ideas to people and people to ideas--a mutual reconstitution of thought and character" (11).

c. Technical Skills vs. a Liberal Education

One common early criticism of instruction in rhetoric was that all that was being taught was a package of technical skills that any charlatan could use "to make the worse appear the better case." Isocrates, for one, responded that in his school, students would receive a broad education. This Isocratean tradition, passed on through Cicero, is the fountainhead for the Western conception of a liberal education, as manifested, for example, in general education programs.
d. The Scope of Rhetoric

Another key theme in the history of rhetoric is the distinction between contingent knowledge (the traditional realm of rhetoric) and certain knowledge or "truth" (the traditional realm of theology, philosophy, and, by some accounts, science).

Aristotle limits the scope of rhetoric to the forensic, deliberative, and ceremonial discourse: "The subjects of our deliberation are such as seem to present us with alternative possibilities: about things that could not have been, and cannot now or in the future be, other than they are, nobody who takes them to be of this nature wastes his time in deliberation" (Rhetoric 1.2.1357a5); "Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which therefore we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity" (Rhetoric 1.2.1357a25).

Many contemporary scholars have suggested broadening this scope. For example, Carolyn Miller writes, "Over the centuries, we have become less certain than Aristotle was about many things, and what we call the new rhetoric reflects the extension of uncertainty to matters other than Athenian civic affairs—beyond ethics and politics to philosophy, science, and the academic disciplines in general; this extension represents what has been called the rhetorical turn. What is central to both the old, Aristotelian rhetoric and to this new, extended rhetoric is the function of deliberation, which is made possible and useful by uncertainty" (The Rhetorical Turn, p. 162).

In response, some have argued that the concept of rhetoric has become too broad and too vague. If, for example, we claim that all language or, even more generally, all symbol use is rhetorical, then, these critics argue, rhetoric becomes everything in general but nothing in particular. One defense of the broader definition of rhetoric is that rhetoric is not more diminished by claiming that all language or all symbol using is rhetorical than mortality is diminished by claiming that all humans are mortal.

e. Political vs. Literary Rhetoric

Another theme in the history of rhetoric is the tension between political rhetoric (civic discourse) and literary rhetoric (belles lettres), what Kennedy, following Vasile Florescu, refers to as littaurizzazione. As Brian Vickers notes, "For Isocrates ... rhetoric was the primary tool in education, and education was directed towards political activity and practicality. For Roman rhetoricians, above all Cicero, the link between rhetoric and the vita activa was fundamental. ... When rhetoric became corrupted [people] opted out of the active life" (In Defence of Rhetoric, 8). Tacitus was among the first to note that the shift to literary rhetoric, with an emphasis on style rather than invention, was a function of political oppression and the lack of (safe) opportunities deliberate public policy (Kennedy 111-112; Kinneavy in Murphy 26).

3. The Modern Political and Educational Legacy of Classical Rhetoric

The primary contribution of classical rhetoric to modern education and political life is providing an impetus for a liberal education that prepares citizens to be active participants in the civic life of their communities and in the larger world.
Reading, Class Discussion, and Quizzes

"We don’t understand anything until we’ve discussed it."

Russian Proverb

This course is based on common readings, on class discussion of those readings, and on the research projects described below. I expect everyone in the class to keep up with the reading and to participate in class discussion on a regular basis.

We’ll have three quizzes on our readings and class discussions.

Research Projects

In addition to our common readings, you’ll each select an independent research project. You’re free to select any appropriate topic for this project, but please do draw upon our common readings. You might want to begin with our common readings and then go on to explore some area that’s not well covered in these readings, such as any of the following: women in rhetoric; non-Western rhetorics; Aristotle’s Rhetoric; rhetoric and technical communication; rhetoric and ethics; electronic rhetoric; a given historical period (e.g., the sophistic movement) or figure (e.g., Aristotle). I encourage you to consider collaborative projects.

As outlined in the schedule of assignments below, you’ll work on this project in stages (proposal, progress report, final report). You could conduct your research project simply as a learning exercise for this class. However, I strongly recommend that you select a project that’s related to (or that you can relate to) your graduate research. You might, for example, use this opportunity to conduct a pilot study for your dissertation research or to conduct a substantial part of the research for your master’s project. Ideally, your final project would be suitable for a conference presentation or for publication in a scholarly journal.

Evaluation

Your final grade will be determined approximately as follows:

30% Quizzes (10% for each of 3 quizzes)
10% Research proposal
10% Progress report
10% Oral presentation
40% Final research paper

Oral presentations on your individual research projects are scheduled for the final two weeks of the quarter (see the Schedule of Assignments and Class Activities, below). In addition, there will be several less formal opportunities to share in class ideas for, progress on, and problems with your research.
MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Associate Dean of Students (7-2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, your department head, or the Affirmative Action Office (7-3310).

Schedule of Assignments and Class Activities

Dates indicate when reading and writing assignments are due, not when they are given. I've used the following abbreviations for our texts: AG = Ancient Greece; BR = The Birth of Rhetoric; RCR = Readings from Classical Rhetoric; CH = Cultivating Humanity. Please bring to class each day the book we are currently reading.

Week 1:
TU Class begins: introductions; overview of course/review syllabus
TH AG Preface and Ch. 1 Early Greece and the Bronze Age

Week 2:
TU AG Ch. 2 The "Dark Age" of Greece and the Eighth-Century "Renaissance"
TH AG Ch. 3 Archaic Greece (c. 700-500 BCE)

Week 3:
TU AG Ch. 4 Sparta
TH AG Ch. 5 The Growth of Athens and the Persian Wars

Week 4:
TU AG Ch. 6 The Rivalries of the Greek City States and the Growth of Athenian Democracy
TH AG Ch. 7 Greece on the Eve of the Peloponnesian War

Week 5:
TU AG Ch. 8 The Peloponnesian War
TH AG Ch. 9 The Crisis of the Polis and the Age of Shifting Hegemonies
Reading and discussion quiz #1

Week 6:
TU BR Introduction; Ch. 1 Much Ado about Nothing: Gorgias' On What is Not
TH BR Ch. 3 In Praise of Fallen Women: Gorgias' Encomium of Helen
RCR pp. 30-36 (on Greek rhetoric and Gorgias)
500-750-word research proposal due; schedule individual conferences to discuss proposals

Week 7:
TU RCR pp. 43-57 Isocrates' Against the Sophists and Antidosis
TH BR Ch. 3 In Defense of Reason: Plato's Gorgias

Week 8:
TU RCR pp. 58-74 Plato's Gorgias
TH BR Ch. 4 Afterlives
Week 9:
TU BR Ch. 5 Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: Mighty Is the Truth?
TH RCR pp. 107-160 Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

Week 10:
TU BR Epilogue: Does Philosophy have a Gender?
   Progress report due (500-750-word narrative description of progress toward
   completing research and/or drafts of significant sections of your paper)
TH Reading and discussion quiz #2

Week 11:
TU CH Introduction: The Old Education and the Think Academy
   Ch. 1 Socratic Self-Examination
   Ch. 2 Citizens of the World
TH CH Ch. 3 The Narrative Imagination

Week 12:
TU CH Ch. 4 The Study of Non-Western Cultures
TH CH Ch. 5 African American Studies

Week 13:
TU CH Ch. 6 Women's Studies
   Ch. 7 The Study of Human Sexuality
TH CH Ch. 8 Socrates in the Religious University
   Conclusion: The "New" Liberal Education
   Reading and discussion quiz #3

Thanksgiving Break

Week 14:
TU Oral presentations (approximately 30 minutes each)
TH Oral presentations

Week 15:
TU Oral presentations
TH Oral presentations; submit final papers (approximately 2,500-3,000 words [10-12
   pages]); evaluations