

Introduction

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Does the past that has given shape to modern rhetoric studies make us more or less able to address contemporary concerns and flourish in the modern university? The question is the basis of a compelling current debate within rhetoric studies. In addressing this question, contributors to this volume have taken the concept of ‘tradition’ as the central problematic. In the early stages of the development of programs of advanced study devoted to rhetorical theory, history, and criticism—in the United States, predominantly in departments of English or speech communication—reference was often made to something called “the rhetorical tradition.” The title was honorific, suggesting at once a long and distinguished history, a sizeable collection of texts containing serious ideas, and a sense of unity, vitality, and purpose. Understandably, then, the term *rhetorical tradition* was regularly invoked as part of efforts to authorize or legitimize a program of study to external audiences within the academy, including those with whom rhetorical studies would need to compete for resources and recognition. And for a time, such invocations were performed without reflection. The existence of the rhetorical tradition was assumed by specialists who could be confident that at least fellow scholars in the history of rhetoric had a clear sense of what it was.

There are signs that testify indirectly to the success of such appeals to the tradition. One of these was an increase in publishing forums and academic positions in rhetorical studies in the mid- to late twentieth century. The same period witnessed a corresponding growth in numbers and strength of graduate programs, especially in rhetoric and composition. This development, in turn, created new demand for resources to facilitate such study: synoptic histories of rhetoric (like those of Kennedy or Conley), anthologies of primary texts (notably, Bizzell and Herzberg’s collection, but now also Brummett), and

encyclopedias of rhetorical concepts and authors such as those edited by Theresa Enos and Thomas Sloane. The term *tradition* figures prominently in many of these books, often appearing in their titles (e.g., Kennedy; Conley; Bizzell and Herzberg). Through these and other comparable sources, an increasing number of graduate students have become acquainted with the history of the discipline. More than this, they have been encouraged to see this history as constituting a tradition.

But the repeated evocations of 'the rhetorical tradition' had the perhaps unintended effect of reifying the concept. This outcome has been the cause of growing concern for scholars in both speech communication and rhetoric-composition. Several in the current generation, including many of the contributors to the present volume, have urged us to reconsider the story of rhetoric promoted in the standard historical accounts and have raised awareness of the dangers attaching to unreflexive gestures toward "the tradition." In one view, 'the rhetorical tradition' is acknowledged as a perhaps outmoded but still convenient label. It performs a grouping and unifying function; it orders the immense mass of historical materials and perspectives that may be deemed relevant to the study of rhetoric in its various contemporary guises. In this respect, rhetoric's self-conception, its self-presentation, and its intellectual autonomy have long relied on an identification with "the tradition," a situation that becomes self-perpetuating as invocations of the tradition become the basis for rhetoric's claim to "hang . . . together' as a domain of knowledge" (Charland 119).

That even this minimum of order, unity, or coherence may be artificial—imposed rather than organic—is not cause for acute anxiety but at the same time leaves the tradition without claim to any special reverence. For example, one should thus be able to accept references to "the classical tradition" of rhetoric, while at the same time recognizing that the label actually yokes together several very distinct, often competing perspectives, each of which may be the source of its own "tradition." If some have been satisfied in sustaining this rather benign double-consciousness, others have called for more serious interrogation of the relationship between rhetoric's past and present. Here too the idea of tradition has figured prominently. S. Michael Halloran's 1976 essay "Tradition and Theory in Rhetoric," for example, argued that there was a profound disconnect between classical rhetoric with its goal of "prepar[ing] others to speak in conformity with the established conventions" and modern inquiry focused on the construction of theory (239). While Halloran did not reject the possibility of a meaningful rapprochement between the classical and modern, he did provide a particularly clear summary of the inadequacy of then current conceptions of the tradition: "[I]f there is such a thing as a rhetorical tradition, it cannot be successfully defined by either the kind(s) of discourse it deals with or the precepts for discourse it offers. There is just too much disagreement in these areas among the people whose writings are supposed to articulate the tradition" (235).

If Halloran's essay unsettled the long-supposed continuity between ancient and modern rhetoric, the years following its appearance generated more caustic critique. Beginning in earnest in the late 1980s, attention turned from how to define the rhetorical tradition to consideration of the dangers of inherited definitions. The available full-scale histories and anthologies of rhetoric were together implicated in the process and politics of canon formation and, thus, opened to charges of inadequacy on several counts, exclusivity chief among them. In this view, 'the rhetorical tradition' is often employed as a synonym for a fixed set of texts, concerned with a rather limited range of discursive practices and overwhelmingly authored by white European males.² In the context of this debate, Hans Kellner observed that "appeals to the rhetorical tradition configure a version of that tradition in the act of calling it forth" (245)—and this particular ("canonical") conception of tradition appears to underlie much recent work in the history of rhetorical theories and practices that fall outside the received canon, notably those authored by women or by non-whites, or those having origins outside the European continent. 'The rhetorical tradition' appears regularly in titles of such works—indeed, at least as regularly as it had in the older work—but is invoked not with reverence but rather as a backdrop or, commonly, as a foil against which new scholarship can be framed.³

Enough has been said to suggest that even when it is not openly contested or interrogated, the concept of tradition haunts the contemporary study of rhetoric. I employ the spectral metaphor deliberately and intend it to serve as a sort of counterpoint to a slightly different image once invoked by Thomas Miller. "The rhetorical tradition," he wrote, "is a fiction that has just about outlasted its usefulness" (26). While attention is naturally drawn to the "fiction" in Miller's sentence, I would like to lay special stress on the "just about." In this spirit, readers of the current book are encouraged to read its title, *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition*, not as a proposition to be defended but as an opening to several problem areas addressed in the chapters that follow. The title's second "the" generates initial questions: Is there such a thing as "the" rhetorical tradition, and if so, what is it? Similarly, "viability" is an open issue—the viability of "the," or any, rhetorical tradition cannot be assumed. And so follow a number of further questions: If the rhetorical tradition is a fiction, has its usefulness finally come to an end? Might the rhetorical tradition be reconceptualized, refigured as a "better" fiction that may have considerable use in future? Might a traditionalist conception of "the" tradition still serve an important function in the current academy or outside it? Should 'the tradition' be permanently replaced with 'traditions' (plural) as Miller and others have argued? Is it preferable to conceive rhetoric's historical tradition(s) as irreducibly multiple? Is it possible to do so and still retain some minimal level of coherence deemed necessary for disciplinary recognition in the contemporary (and future) academy or for the maintenance of successful interdisciplinary alliances?

While all of the scholars in this volume take such questions seriously and critically, their answers are diverse and sometimes at odds. Because contributors were selected, in part, for the different perspectives they bring to the study of rhetoric and its tradition(s), it is hardly surprising that the chapters do not present a unified front. The chapters can, however, be grouped into two basic sorts. In part 1, five chapters address historiographical and definitional issues. Richard Graff and Michael Leff consider the various ways in which the rhetorical tradition has been shaped under the pressure of successive waves of revisionist and critical historiography in twentieth-century rhetorical studies. Beneath some subtle differences of emphasis, they note broad commonalities in the calls for new histories out of the fields of speech communication and rhetoric-composition, tracking the development of a generally “unsentimental attitude toward tradition.” They contend, however, that some notion of tradition is desirable, not least for its capacity to sustain a sense of intellectual community; they then describe the history of rhetorical pedagogy and teaching practices as a tradition that resonates strongly across disciplinary divides and yet also encourages sensitivity to the particularities of specific historical moments. Where Graff and Leff emphasize a conception of tradition that aligns it with the history of teaching, Alan G. Gross’s chapter argues for a view of tradition that emphasizes the development of rhetorical theory. More specifically, Gross urges rhetoricians to attend to what he calls (following W. B. Gallie) “essentially contested concepts.” Following Gallie, Gross contends that such concepts provide the intellectual core of humanistic disciplines such as rhetoric. As he shows through an investigation of the concepts of ‘bringing-before-the eyes,’ ‘vivacity,’ and ‘presence,’ individual efforts to grapple with them can lead to theory refinement but do not presuppose or demand a single grand and continuous narrative of rhetoric’s history.

Where Gross focuses on contested concepts within the realm of rhetorical theory, Leah Ceccarelli directs attention to the “ends” toward which rhetoric aims. She identifies three such ends—the aesthetic, the epistemic, and the political—and locates their sources in classical Greece. But the thrust of Ceccarelli’s argument is to show that these are not merely ends for the practice of rhetoric; rather, they also provide the coordinates for the rhetorical criticism of such practice. This she demonstrates through a work of metacriticism on studies devoted to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Although she admits that a given critic (or rhetor) can rarely be characterized as holding to one single end to the exclusion of the others, her case models a fruitful way to account for competing interpretations of the same work. More than this, Ceccarelli’s chapter suggests that the three ends, present and often competing from the very origins of Western rhetoric, are the source of a productive tension that continues to animate the study of rhetoric.

Neither Gross’s discussion of bringing-before-the eyes, vivacity, and presence nor Ceccarelli’s metacriticism on the Gettysburg Address takes us out of

the orbit described in the older histories of rhetoric and encapsulated in the standard anthologies. Their choice of objects might thus be taken, in simplistic terms, to suggest a kind of traditionalism that tends to draw one ever back to the canon. As we have already noted, the constitution of the rhetorical canon has been the locus of especially keen dispute. In his contribution, Robert N. Gaines considers the sources of disagreement and the values and priorities evinced in this dispute. Focusing on the classical period, Gaines argues that no canon-based conception of the rhetoric of Greco-Roman antiquity will ever be sufficient and is liable to impoverish historical research on the period. He then describes a conceptual alternative to the canon—a “corpus,” which he contends should include not a limited number of texts about rhetoric but rather an expansive array of objects, artifacts, and representations of rhetorical theory, pedagogy, practice, and criticism.

Like others in this collection, Janet M. Atwill maintains that interrogation of rhetoric’s relationship to tradition(s) leads us to reconsider the relationships among rhetorical theory, practice, and pedagogy. In her chapter, Atwill explores the viability of classical traditions of civic rhetoric by outlining versions of civic virtue in antiquity and two contemporary conceptions of civic rhetoric. She suggests that concepts of ‘virtue’ and ‘rhetoric,’ in both eras, have been shaped by especially powerful models of political order: in classical Athens, *harmonia* and *isonomia*; in contemporary rhetorical theory, civic republicanism and liberalism. The shaping force of ideology, however, is not restricted to traditions since, as she argues, academic investigations, themselves, are also shaped by political ideology, including left political critique. Put another way, scholarship is contingent on its own traditions of research conventions.

The chapters in part 1, by and large, consider tradition in rhetoric at a rather broad conceptual level. They offer different perspectives on or visions of the concept of tradition. In Atwill’s consideration of the competing models of political order, for example, or in Ceccarelli’s identification of the different “ends” of rhetoric, we are encouraged to view tradition as centered on points of persistent or recurring tension or contestation. But while such acts of re-view or re-vision may enable us to “see” tradition(s) more clearly or completely, they do not necessarily seek to assess tradition’s role as a living force, one that simultaneously enables and constrains. Such assessment becomes central in the chapters that make up part 2. However one defines a tradition, its vitality will be measured by its capacity to address the needs of the present. The five chapters of part 2 present varying assessments of traditional rhetoric and its ability to account for contemporary discursive practice, to address contemporary pedagogical concerns, and to enable or, alternatively, disable critique.

In her contribution, Susan C. Jarratt considers the rhetorical responses to the events of September 11, asking how materials inherited from rhetoric’s

past might serve us in a time of national crisis. She offers the ancient Greek practices of epideictic or funeral oratory as “resonant analogues” for the discourses of memory and mourning that followed in the wake of September 11. Although she notes the tendency of such practices to devolve into state ritual and patriotic display, Jarratt notices in the latter case a tension between a dominant nationalistic discourse and a variety of resisting rhetorics produced by a newly (re)constituted public and disseminated through virtually every available medium.

The chapters by William Hart-Davidson, James Zappen, and S. Michael Halloran and Thomas J. Kinney and Thomas P. Miller make claims bearing directly on some of the themes of part 1. Both argue that rhetoric’s history of involvement in elitist institutions has, regrettably, defined it. But both insist that its long commitment to the education of citizens and to political involvement puts rhetoric and rhetoric scholars in a position to promote participatory democracy in the face of the determinative forces of technology and capitalism. Both chapters not only argue for a new conception of rhetoric but also accept the challenge of showing how this “new” rhetoric has contributed or could contribute to democratizing deliberations about new technologies. Hart-Davidson, Zappen, and Halloran and Kinney and Miller contend that if contemporary education in literacy and rhetoric is to continue to find value in traditional or canonical approaches, it must also be careful to recognize and at times correct many core assumptions attaching to rhetoric’s historically dominant articulations.

In their contributions, Arthur E. Walzer and Jeanne Fahnestock argue that even canonical texts of the past still have much to teach us in the present—indeed, that they can be heard to speak very subtly to some of today’s most pressing problems and interests. Walzer analyzes the circumstances and arguments of two of Isocrates’ discourses, *Archidamus* and *On the Peace*, in order to assess their pedagogical status and potential relevance. Walzer discovers in Isocrates’ model of education in political wisdom a purpose (to create critical citizens) and a method (that of *dissoi logoi*) that he argues can form the basis for courses in citizenship education today. Fahnestock reevaluates a specific component of traditional rhetoric, the theory of figures or schemes of style. She shows how historical-rhetorical accounts of the figures of parallelism and paronomasia shadow and in some cases prefigure insights into language currently being advanced in the field of cognitive science. Ironically, the very same figurist rhetorics that many commentators have said killed the rhetorical tradition are transformed, in Fahnestock’s account, into a source of considerable vitality.

Fahnestock’s comparison of the views on language within the fields of cognitive science and traditional rhetoric reintroduces the subject of disciplinary unity and division—an issue of considerable salience in rhetoric studies. As an academic discipline, rhetoric is currently housed in a number of differ-

ent university departments. If the hope that this volume holds out for rhetoric is to be realized, scholars in this sometimes seemingly amorphous field will need a mutual appreciation for the different ways in which rhetoric is understood and practiced in English composition and speech communication. In the afterward, Steven Mailloux draws on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer to reflect on how tradition defines and distinguishes rhetorical studies as an interdiscipline and on the advantages of cross-disciplinary conversation and cooperation. Because the scholars who have contributed to this volume by intention come from both communication studies and English, the editors hope that *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition* successfully models the type of cooperation that can assure the vitality of rhetoric well into the future.

NOTES

1. This way of approaching the rhetoric of Greece and Rome is actually quite “traditional.” See, for example, Friedrich Solmsen’s well-known essay wherein an Aristotelian or peripatetic “tradition” is set apart from the “Isocratean tradition.” A similar tendency is evidenced in George Kennedy’s tripartition of classical rhetoric’s “Christian and secular tradition” into distinct “strands”—the sophistic, technical, and philosophical—or in Thomas Conley’s somewhat looser division of the “European tradition” of rhetoric into “four models” he discovers in classical Greece. Compare also the treatment of Duhamel, discussed by Graff and Leff in this volume.

2. From this perspective, tradition is not uncommonly described as a binding or constraining force. As Jacqueline Jones Royster has put it, Western “traditions of theory and practice” that have dominated the study of rhetoric “have tended to function with a heavy and relentlessly constraining hand” (149).

3. See, for example, the recent collections titled *The Changing Tradition: Women in the History of Rhetoric* (Sutherland and Sutcliffe) and *Alternative Rhetorics: Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition* (Gray-Rosendale and Gruber). The editors of the former offer the following categories to group their essays on the history of women’s rhetorics: “excluded from the rhetorical tradition,” “alongside the rhetorical tradition,” “participating in the rhetorical tradition,” “emerging into the rhetorical tradition,” and “engaging the rhetorical tradition.” In such an arrangement, “the rhetorical tradition,” while hardly viewed as a staid monolith, figures centrally as a means to classify the many diverse strands of contemporary inquiry into rhetoric’s past.

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