

Teaching the Rhetorical in Classical Antiquity: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Introduction

I am a member of the Classics Department at Furman and Dr. Letteri is a member of Communication Studies, and we are going to present to you a course that we team-taught at Furman under the Humanities rubric called “*Reading the Rhetorical in Classical Antiquity*.” I will describe how we developed the course and the website (<http://facweb.furman.edu/~letteririchard/>), explain the course structure and content, the readings and assignments, evaluation and assessment, course outcomes, and financial support. Throughout we will demonstrate the website. First of all, we would like to share with you the theoretical background that informed the course.

Background: The Philosophy Behind the Course

It is a truism that the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome were permeated by rhetoric, the system of thought, speech, and self-presentation that lies at the foundation of our course. In one sense, what we are referring to here is an “ideological rhetoric,” a rhetoric inscribed in speech or stone that, might, for instance, espouse the supremacy of Greek democratic life over that

of Persian tyranny or articulate the virtues of Republican Rome in writing, metal, or concrete. In a more formal sense, we are talking about classical rhetoric, that original *ars* or *techne* of speaking that provided “a body of rules and recipes” for persuading an audience (Barthes, 1988, p. 11-95). For Roland Barthes (1988), “the classification [rhetoric] has imposed is the only feature really shared by successive and various historical groups” (p. 15). To Barthes, the influence of classical rhetoric has been so great that it constitutes a “metalanguage” that is “superior to ideologies of content and thus may be considered, in a more comprehensive sense, as “ideological in form” (pp. 13, 15).

The idea that the rules of classical rhetoric have become so imbedded in western culture that they themselves constitute an ideology-in-form permeating both literary and plastic texts is echoed in Tzonis and Lefavre’s *Classical Architecture: The Poetics of Order* (1986). They write [quote]:

Poetics and rhetoric were the backbone of the humanist culture that gave birth to classical music and classical literature as well as to classical architecture. Within the humanist circle the study of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian was an everyday affair.

Aristotle and the other theoreticians of poetics and rhetoric discussed formal devices, the *techne* of composition, in a general way, so that the results could be applied to any subject, to any class of thing (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.2.1). (p. 4) [end quote]

One here thinks immediately of the how the stylistic principles of *symmetria* (symmetry), *rhythmos* (rhythm), and *to metron* (measure or proportion) are not only represented in such works as the Doryphorus and the Parthenon but also are referred to directly in various accounts of Polykletos’ *Canon* (cf. Stewart, 1990, pp. 160-162, 263-266) and Vitruvius’s *De Architectura* (1960, p. 72). Beyond these original sources, studies done by such other scholars as Pollitt (1972), Castriota (1992), Fullerton (2000), and Zanker (1988) employ the

technical vocabulary of ancient rhetoric and compare the ideological aspects of ancient literary and rhetorical works to the formal and ideological elements of classical art and architecture.

Barthes' (1988) goal in examining the "old rhetoric", as he called it, was an attempt to find out how a "new semiotics of writing" could "come into being" (p. 13). The works of De Saussure (1983), Levi-Strauss (1963), Barthes (1973), Foucault (1988, 1990), and Lacan (1981, 2002), among others, have proven to be invaluable in creating a "new rhetoric" for the study of the formal and ideological character of written as well as visual texts. In the last few decades classical scholars have also begun to decode the signifying processes and signs that circulated within ancient culture. Indeed, there seems to be no shortage of such concepts as "ideological discourses," "narrative structures," and "binary oppositions," or examples of "the other" and "the gaze" in everything from epics and elegies to vase paintings and sculpture programs (Stewart, 1997, Cohen, 2000, Fullerton 2000, Fredrick 2002, Miller 2004). In short, this new literature provides invaluable interpretative tools to re-explore more traditional studies based in classical philology, rhetoric, and art history. That was the point of our course. Our objective was lodged, in part, in an effort to explore rhetoric as one of the original *technai* through which ancient Greeks and Romans expressed political, social, and cultural ideologies in a variety of texts--oral, written, and plastic. We employed classical rhetorical theory to structure an interdisciplinary study of various classical texts, emphasizing the seminal importance of rhetoric in antiquity and beyond. Like Barthes (1988), we implicitly claim that classical rhetoric was so pervasive in ancient culture that it can be considered an "ideology-in-form."

Course Development (Show Course Website Homepage)

The course was designed the sophomore-level course no prerequisites, although familiarity with classical literature, rhetoric, art, or history was advised. We hoped that the interdisciplinary nature of the course would stimulate students from a variety of majors to recognize the intertwining styles and cultural values embedded in various classical texts. We hoped that students with previous background in Classics would expand their understanding of the influence of rhetoric in classical antiquity, while students with little formal exposure would be able to situate their introductory study of classical antiquity within the perspectives of other disciplines. (And this did happen, although we ended up enrolling students from all four classes.)

Course Website and Student Assistants

To achieve this objective we needed to provide students with ready access to a variety of support materials. It seemed to us that a website was the best way to go. We built the web site with paid students assistants, following the principle of “separation of concerns,” that is, the data and content were organized by the faculty, while the digital structure for the timelines and database was developed by one of our research assistants.

(Web site) Starting from its homepage, the website offers

- a course description,
- an image database,
- an interactive timeline, and
- a set of links to the syllabus, announcements, and relevant sites such as *Perseus*, *Stoa*, and *Diotima*

The most labor-intensive parts of the site were 1) the Greek and Roman timelines and 2) the databases of art images. We will demonstrate each in turn.

1) The Timelines. (**Show Greek Timeline**) The timelines were built to provide students with a visual representation of the relationship between major historical events and major literary and artistic developments in any ten-year time period. The timelines scroll from left to right at two speeds, slower (**by pointing at the middle black arrow**) and faster (**by pointing at the lower double arrows**). Stopping at any date along the timeline will call up a page storing some metadata and/or image such as a pot or a map. (**Show Greek Timeline 450-440 B.C.**) If, for instance, a student were studying the period 450-440 B.C., this is what she would see. (For software see Appendix 1)

2) The Image Database. (**Go to Greek Database**) early on we decided to create separate databases for Greek and Roman art images for ease of reference. (For copyright issues see Appendix 2.)

As you can see, you can search the database in several ways, all of which are explained in the **Help Directions. (Follow Commands)**. The broadest searches can be conducted by selecting “**All**” from the **Period** bar, and then narrowing to **Period** or **Title** or **Keyword**. As you can see, a user can bring up multiple images at time. By clicking on any image, a user can isolate a specific image and its description.

A final, extremely helpful feature of the databases is the **Lecture Date**. By entering through **Administration** with a password (**badejpal**), faculty can select a group of images, mark them with the date of the lecture, and have only those images appear in class by entering the lecture date into the **Keyword** box. Students in turn can enter the lecture date in the **Keyword** box to bring up the day’s images at their home computers when reviewing the day’s class or preparing for their exams. The database is even designed to allow faculty to designate which images they would ask students to identify during exams

without the additional descriptive information. There are approximately 425 images in the Greek Art Image Database, and 435 images in the Roman Art Image Database. **(Leave up image.)** (For more on the process of creating the database, see Appendix 3).

Course Structure and Content

Because we were dealing with students with different levels of familiarity with ancient history, rhetoric, literature, and art, and an even more limited understanding of semiotics and cultural studies, we began with a rigorous and detailed introduction to our main methodologies: 1) classical studies, especially philology, archaeology, and history – stressing the importance of text-based evidence (“text” here being broadly construed to include the evidence of material culture as well as literary) to show how our examination of evidence from antiquity would both merge and diverge from traditional approaches. We devoted a lecture to the cultural, social, and psychological function of myth using Paul Veynes’ 1983 *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*

We devoted separate lectures to classical rhetoric, concentrating our efforts on eliminating students’ Platonic predisposition towards *logos* by exploring the role of *ethos* and *pathos* in oratory and art, especially in the Roman sphere where these arguments play a larger roles. Dr. Letteri lectured on semiotics and ideology to show how cultural studies scholars and classicists have used the works of Barthes (1973), Levi-Strauss (1963), and Marx (1947) to decipher the ideological and structural properties of myths and other narratives. These were the introductory lectures.

We organized the main portion of the course chronologically, concentrating on Periclean Athens and Augustan Rome. Within this historical framework, the bulk of our time was devoted to the rhetorical and semiotic

analysis of written, oral, artistic, and architectural texts of each period. Lectures were evenly divided between the instructors.

Readings and Texts

Primary texts included Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Cicero, Seneca, Horace, and Virgil. Primary spaces included the Athenian acropolis and the Augustan building program. Regardless of whether the texts were part of an overt propaganda program or artifacts from daily life, our objective to identify the rhetorical techniques and signifying processes used to communicate the ideological codes of Greece and Rome.

The two principal textbooks we used to achieve this objective were J.J. Pollitt's *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (1972) and Paul Zanker's *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (1988). These texts were chosen because each provides many examples of how rhetorical theory can be applied to the iconography of ancient Greece and Rome. For instance, take **the Charioteer of Delphi**. Pollitt (1972) analyzes this work in terms of its representation of the Classical *ethos* of self-control and excellence (*arête*) that helped the Greeks defeat the Persians (p. 45), and compares it to the "refuge in gesture" that characterizes Gorgias's heavily stylized *Encomium to Helen*, and the "decorative," "windblown" drapery of the Athena Nike that Pollitt argues "may reflect a despairing desire to retreat from the difficult intellectual and political realities" of the Peloponnesian War (pp. 114-125).

Zanker (1988) relies less directly on rhetorical categories when examining the period from the Late Republic to Augustan Rome. Nevertheless he shows how Octavian and Antony iconography drawn from the Atticist-Asianist debate raging at the time to play out their political rivalry (pp. 33-77). Quite useful to us also was Zanker's explication of the pastoral and moral *topoi* of Augustus's Atticism found in everything from Horace's *carmen saeculare* and

Virgil's *Aeneid* to the Ara Pacis and Third Style Roman wall painting. (For more on the texts see Appendix 4.)

Evaluation

Each student was required to present a thirty-minute report to the class and to write a term paper. Presentation topics included historical, art historical, literary, and rhetorical subjects. Each student was encouraged to choose a subject tailored to his or her major, area of interest, or degree of familiarity with the classical period. Term papers could be based on the same topic or taken in a new direction.

A mid-term and a final exam were administered, each consisting of slide identifications, short answer, and longer essays.

Course Outcomes

After two years' of course preparation, endless hours of work on the website, and the results of their presentations, papers, and exams calculated, we inevitably sat down together to assess our experience with the hope of discovering what we did right, what we did wrong, and what we would do differently.

We administered course evaluations and found mostly favorable comments on several points. Students recognized and appreciated the work we had done to create the course and the website; and commented on its value as an instructional resource. They relished the contrast and synthesis of our two teaching styles, personality, and areas of expertise. Most importantly they enjoyed the opportunity to study ancient culture from the perspective of modern theory. Most were quite supportive of our interdisciplinary approach to classical antiquity and expressed some personal pride at having participated in this experimental approach that they felt provided a comprehensive

framework for approaching other courses, whether in classics, history, or other disciplines. Nevertheless, many thought, as we did, that we included too much information at times, making it a challenge to synthesize ideas and concepts with texts.

In our own post-mortem we had a few criticisms. We had not set aside enough time for class discussions. Too often, we offered theoretical interpretations and moved on to our next topic, without allowing time for the students to think critically and independently about either the texts or the theory. In order to create more time for open-ended discussion and thought, we are considering two major changes to the course:

1. Limiting the introductory lectures on classical studies, rhetoric, and semiotics. Instead of front-loading our interdisciplinary methodology we will introduce new terms and principles and explicate disciplines and methodology as these become issues in the readings and lectures, so that theory and practice cohere more organically.
2. More drastically, we are considering cutting the course into two: one course on Periclean Athens and another on Augustan Rome.

(For other curricular issues related to the course, see Appendix 6).

Support.

Developing a course like ours does not come without a lot of financial support.

- We received a grant from the NEH that was part of a larger grant Furman had received from the Endowment to enrich the Humanities, and it provided summer stipends to each of us for curriculum development.

- We received two grants from the Technology Fellows Program of the Associated Colleges of the South, the consortium to which Furman belongs. The Tech Fellows program supports interdisciplinary studies in technology and the humanities, and curriculum development; we used the money to pay students to develop the website and image database.
- We received a grant from the Furman Advantage Program to employ a senior Classics major as a Teaching Fellow. His main responsibilities were to prepare the computer technology for use in class each day, pull up the images from the website while one of us conducted class, and hold mandatory weekly discussion groups for. He also gave a thirty-minute class presentation on Early Rome.

Conclusion

There is much more to say about the course but I will leave it at that for now. We hope our discussion has stimulated some thought as to how we might refine our course as well as how you might incorporate similar ideas and approaches in your courses. We welcome your questions and comments. Thank you very much.

Appendix 1: Software

Originally, these pages were designed in HTML but we can now use Dreamweaver to add any additional images and descriptions. The scrolling animation was produced in Macromedia Flash.

Appendix 2: Copyright Issues

Because of copyright restrictions on these images, these databases are supposed to be accessible in accordance with fair use practices, that is, accessible only to students in the course or for course-related purposes, such as this presentation. There are ways around this problem. We could have linked our site to the Perseus Image database or to one of the growing number of shared-use image galleries such as the Stoa Image Gallery (at <http://icon.stoa.org/>). We wanted a tightly customized gallery of images in many cases deliberately replicating the images in the students' textbooks, and so we went this route, all the while wondering what prison cuisine might taste like.

Appendix 3: Creating the Image Database

Faculty first chose the images they wanted placed in the database from various scholarly works, museum guides, postcards, etc., and used datasheets to document the information about the image that would be placed into the database. A student assistant was then responsible for scanning the images into a separate database (that is stored on the university's server and not seen by the user). Using a PHP language that users could interface with when using the image database, a second student assistant created a template for each image and description we see. She then developed a MYSQL database that created the search mechanisms, provided links to the unseen database of images, and allowed us access to each page were the faculty or a student assistant place the

information from the datasheets by entering through **Administration (badepjal)**.

Of the images in the database, some of which may have to be rescanned and most still need to be described. Altogether it took approximately four hundred student and two hundred faculty work hours to bring the website up to its present state. We hope to begin adding more images and descriptions to the database sometime after we consult with members of the History and Art departments to determine how we could expand the databases to accommodate their needs.

Appendix 4: Why Pollitt and Zanker?

Some of you may be thinking, “why chose Pollitt’s and Zanker’s work when neither are directly informed by semiotics or cultural studies?” We asked ourselves this question and nevertheless selected these works because: 1. each concentrated on the time period we wanted to focus on, mainly Classical Greece and Augustan Rome; 2. both were quite scholarly yet clearly accessible to the undergraduate reader; 3. both offered historical background information and references to oratory, literary, dramatic, and artistic texts we then assigned as readings of primary sources; and 4. both provided us with ample opportunities to conduct our own semiotic and cultural analyses or introduce those of other classical scholars. **(Greek Art Database: Parthenon: Metope)** For instance, based on Pollitt’s (1972) and DeCatriota’s (1992) analyses of the sculptural programs of Greek temples, we used semiotics to analyze the binary oppositions between the civilized Greek man of moderation (or “sophrosyne”) and the hubristic “other” who, paradigmatically, can be signified by either the barbaric centaur, the gender-crossing Amazon or the jingoistic Trojan-Persian.

(Roman Art Database: Augustus: Primaporta) Similarly, by introducing the concept of “intertextual codes” into Zanker’s (1988) analysis of the cuirassed statue of Augustus, otherwise known as the “Prima Porta,” we deciphered the allusions to the Doryphorus (controposto stance), the Arringatore (gesturing arm), Alexander the Great (parted hair), Venus (dolphin), Apollo (charioteer), and the victory of Parthia (breastplate), which, when integrated into this one sculptural text, represented Augustus as the ideal political and military leader, who, born of sacred lineage and protected by the Gods, returned the pride of its legions back to Rome.

Appendix 5: Examination Content

Students were given one hour to identifying all they could about art works, historical events and figures, literary characters, religious and moral concepts, etc., and one and one-half hours for an essay question. The essay question asked them to show the relationship between historical and cultural developments while applying some of the methodological concepts we employed to analyze both literary and artistic texts. For instance, for their final exam, we asked:

After the Second Triumvirate and the battle of Actium Octavian understood the need to unify and reconcile a variety of Roman groups both to restore the Republic and to establish the legitimacy of his rule and that of his successors. Explain some of the main ways he attempted to achieve these goals through his constitutional reforms and relations with the senate and the other orders, and through his cultural and building programs. Identify the important moral values Augustus sought to renew or strengthen with his cultural program and explain how the Attic rhetorical style and the Classical art style were thought to embody these values. In the process compare and contrast Republican verism and the Asiatic and Hellenistic styles as the embodiment of values that might be similar to or different from the Augustan agenda, and discuss the reasons for Augustus's return to classicizing and archaizing movements in art, literature, and speech.

Results were mixed, with students who kept up with the readings and were engaged with all facets of the course writing clear and well-developed explanations of the Augustan program, while other students described only the historical events or terms like verism, and/or Atticism without placing them in their historical context or applying these concepts to actual texts.

Appendix 6: Other Curricular Issues

We are also still considering other curricular issues related to the course. Focusing on either Greece or Rome almost necessarily precludes the course from becoming a requirement for the Classical Studies concentration. We have also been asked to teach the course as part of a Humanities study-aboard program that would travel to both Greece and Rome. For this we could surely simplify our old course but insofar as we both teach in very small departments and are responsible for yearly course offerings of major requirements, having both or one of us traveling aboard for the Spring term may not be feasible, but we are working on it. Finally, we hope to continue adding more images and descriptions to our databases and find ways, either through funding to pay for copyrighted images or searching the internet for images with no copyright restrictions, to provide scholars outside of Furman University with access to our database.

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