Bending Opinion

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2 Rhetoric, Classicism and Democracy: The Conveyance of Moral and Political Values in Late Antique Rhetorical Education

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2.1 Introduction
It is a standard commonplace in rhetoric that perfect eloquence cannot be learned from books alone. Detailed theoretical and technical advice may help to a certain extent, but nothing will ever really be achieved without practical exercise in any of its basic manifestations, be it in reading, writing or speaking. For this reason, at all times, practical exercises have played a vital part in rhetorical education. All ancient handbooks unanimously bear testimony to this truism. The anonymous author of the so-called Rhetoric to Herennius, for instance, makes “exercise” literally the last word of his entire treatise (4.69), and he frequently refers to the importance of exercise throughout his work (e.g., 1.1; 1.3; 1.12-13; 2.7; 2.12; 3.14; 3.20; 3.27; 3.34; 3.39-40; 4.7; 4.27; 4.58).

Unsurprisingly, then, as soon as rhetoric became a major subject in the ancient educational system, it developed a detailed program of classroom exercises. An elaborate curriculum of exercises was established in Greek rhetorical schools during the Hellenistic period, i.e., in the last two centuries before the Christian era (Marrou 1955, pp. 252-57 and 297-303, Bonner 1977, pp. 250-51), a program that was also soon adopted by the Romans (Gwynn 1926, pp. 34-41). The pivotal type of exercise was, of course, the so-called declamation, a fully fledged speech on an imaginary subject assigned by the teacher and elaborated and delivered orally by the student (see Russell 1983). But additionally, as a preparation for this developed stage, and in order to provide a smooth transition from education in grammar to the teaching of rhetoric proper, preliminary exercises were devised called progynasmata (Clark 1957, pp. 178-212, Bonner 1977, pp. 250-76, Kennedy 1983, pp. 54-73,
Pernot 2005, pp. 146-51). While declamation was oral, these were essentially written exercises, which students could use to exercise themselves in individual parts, elements or features of an oration, before they eventually ventured on the declamations proper.

2.2 Rhetorical exercises and moral education

Yet rhetoric, as the art of speech, clearly cannot be practised in an abstract and purely formal way, devoid of any specific content. Even a moot speech or debate needs to have a definite subject or topic to develop. The typical subject matter of rhetoric, however, as Aristotle already knew, is the field of human action and behaviour, and thus of ethics and politics which, in Aristotle’s eyes, are the disciplines most closely related to rhetoric (cf. *Rhetoric* 1.4-8).

Consequently, rhetorical exercises too, if they are supposed to prepare students for true oratorical practice, cannot help dealing in some way with moral or political matters, even if this is only on an imaginary or fictitious level. If the topics assigned were drawn from some remote myth or legend, or were completely fictitious, as was in fact more often than not the case in ancient declamations and related exercises, even then the arguments employed would nonetheless have to be grounded in the experience of real life, and would have to comply with general moral or political values.

By the same token, both in ancient education and way beyond, rhetorical exercises have always been used deliberately not only for teaching students the formal skills of oratory, but also for conveying to their minds the general values of ethics, politics or even religion, in order to prepare them for their future roles in society. However, these values may, in any particular case, be either in accordance or at variance with the value system prevailing in the relevant society. In the former case, their effect will be an affirmative one and confirm the dominant ideas and values of that society. In the latter case, by contrast, the ideas underlying the argumentation can be subversive as well. The reasons for such subversive tendencies may be manifold. In certain cases, they may result from a deliberate and aggressive seditious or anarchical disposition adopted by a teacher or textbook author. Yet more often than not, the reasons will be much simpler and more straightforward than that. At times, an extreme conservatism will simply have refused to realize that things in the real world have changed over time, and that the prevalent values of a culture or society have also changed. Just imagine the possible case of a present-day reprint of a textbook dating from the fifties or sixties, which still im-
plicitly takes racial segregation for granted in the choice of topics for its exercises, or considers single mothers and fathers a social anomaly rather than an everyday phenomenon. Since textbooks usually live to see a number of student generations, but society and its values keep changing at an accelerating pace, these are increasingly common experiences nowadays.

In former times, the pace of social and political change may certainly have been less rapid than it is today. Yet nonetheless, changes did occur. In this chapter I intend to focus on a particularly conspicuous historical case of such a change in society and the political and religious setting which brought about an obvious divergence between the values conveyed in classroom education in rhetoric and those from the reality of that society. The case I have in mind concerns the period of late antiquity. I will first try to outline the special historical circumstances which characterized that particular period, and the special conditions under which rhetorical education was practised in those days; I will then substantiate and document this by a particular case study, using as an example a popular classroom textbook of rhetorical exercises from the late fourth century CE. A brief comparison of the results with the very different appearance of corresponding medieval and early modern practices will finally lead to reflections on the present-day problem of how to choose appropriate assignments for rhetorical exercises in an age dominated by political correctness.

Late antiquity (according to the most popular definition ranging roughly from the second to the fifth or sixth century CE) was a period which saw not only the transformation of the Roman Empire into a truly absolute monarchy, but also the rise of Christianity from a marginalized, suppressed and persecuted sect to the status of official state religion, to name only the two most fundamental and distinctive changes that took place within that period. Compared to these fundamental changes of a society, however, late ancient rhetorical education, which undoubtedly was the most dominant educational factor in that society, was a thoroughly conservative enterprise and persisted in practically unchanged form for nearly half a millennium. The main reason for this amazing constancy and persistence was arguably the petrifying effect of a stern conservatism and classicism. What kind of classicism was this, and what reasons motivated it?

2.3. Rhetorical education and classicism
Everything started with a purely linguistic or stylistic phenomenon. As early as the first century BCE, rhetoricians such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus,
driven by an open dissatisfaction with the Hellenistic koiné style of the Greek of their times, called for a return to the Greek of the classical period of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE (see Gelzer 1978). They wanted to get back to the plain and sober Attic style which orators such as Lysias, Isocrates or Demosthenes had used, authors who were therefore to be imitated on all accounts.

This movement of Atticism, as it was called, was associated with the predominantly Greek movement known as the Second Sophistic, which had its heyday in the second and third centuries CE (see Anderson 1993 and 2007, Whitmarsh 2005). It was, however, not confined to style only. Stylistic imitation presupposed some close reading of those old Attic authors, and, by way of this process, a natural absorption of the contents and the ideas of their writings and speeches, which thus re-emerged and gained new value. In this way linguistic Atticism resulted in the more general concept of cultural Atticism. In declamations, for instance, topics related to the orator Demosthenes and his fight against King Philip of Macedon were among the most popular. Other popular topics related to the Persian Wars or the Peloponnesian War, in both of which Athens played a decisive role (see Bowie 2004, pp. 70-72 and 82-83). Moreover, themes from Greek myth, mostly taken from Attic tragedy or from the Homeric epics, were frequently used in rhetorical training as well. This obsession with the grand Attic past even infected the Romans, who also developed a certain preference for the same kinds of themes in their own rhetorical schools.

Yet the real world of those times was far different from this idealistic picture. Greece was dominated by Rome, and the Roman Empire was steadily developing into a centralistic and increasingly oppressive system of absolute monarchy. Nonetheless, in their classrooms, the rhetors and sophists of the imperial period continued to glorify the political and moral ideals of classical Athens, such as democracy vs. monarchy, independence vs. subservience, provincialism vs. centralism and the rule of law vs. tyrannic despotism. This repertoire of topics for rhetorical education did not change much throughout the entire imperial period. We find it in Hermogenes of Tarsus in the second century and in Libanius and Aphthonius in the fourth century.

This obvious discrepancy between the idealistic world of the classroom and the hard facts of the real world outside cannot have gone unnoticed by teachers nor by students. It is thus surprising that it seems not to have been theoretically reflected in any way. We do hear complaints from Roman
authors (such as Quintilian or Tacitus) about the lack of realism in classroom rhetoric, but this is mainly concerned about the employment of completely unrealistic laws in declamations and the fanciful fictitious stories about pirates and raped virgins, war heroes and tyrant slayers, prodigal sons and miserly fathers, jealous stepmothers and covetous doters that were so popular in judicial declamations (the so-called *controversiae*, as opposed to the more historically-oriented deliberative declamations, known as *suasoriae*).

The Greeks, on the other hand, apparently relished this rhetorical classicism as a matter of national pride in a situation of political oppression. Atticism was enhanced, if not triggered by the need of the Greeks to define their own identity within the context of the Roman Empire (see Bowie 1970, Swain 1996, Goldhill 2001). It provided them with a kind of cultural identity (“Greekness”) that had little to do with ethnicity, but was mainly a construct established by means of rhetoric (see Whitmarsh 2005, pp. 32-37 and 52-54). Yet, amazingly, we do not hear much about any particular impact that this constant inculcation of political and social ideals from a glorious, but distant past would have had on late antique society, although the entire contemporary political and administrative elite must necessarily have passed through this educational process as it provided the essential gateway to prestige and power (see Schmitz 1997).

### 2.4 A model case in point: Aphthonius’ *Progymnasmata*

A particularly instructive example of this classicizing attitude from a very late stage within late antiquity is the short, but highly influential textbook of rhetorical exercises entitled *Progymnasmata*, written by an author called Aphthonius. Towards the end of the fourth century CE, Aphthonius lived and worked as a rhetor or teacher of rhetoric in the Syrian town of Antioch, which is now Antakya in Southern Turkey, close to the present-day Syrian border. He was a student of the famous rhetor Libanius, who ran a well-established rhetorical school in Antioch (see Cribiore 2007). Aphthonius’ writings would seem to adhere fairly closely to the teachings he found in Libanius’ school.

The fourth century was a particularly interesting period, since it is that very century which saw the rise of Christianity from its toleration within the Roman Empire by Constantine in 313 to the position of official state religion under Theodosius in 391 (see MacMullen 1984). Moreover, the official political separation of the Eastern and Western parts of the Roman Empire in the year 395 also took place at the very time that Aphthonius most proba-
bly wrote his little handbook. Furthermore, in that period, Antioch was also a hot spot of religious dissension and debate. By the late fourth century, the town was already about eighty percent Christianized and the see of an important Patriarchate which, according to church tradition, was founded by the Apostle Saint Peter himself (see Sandwell 2007). Antiochian theologians (such as Eustathius of Antioch, Diodorus of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoretus of Cyrus, Ibas of Edessa, and later of Nestorius) battled with their Alexandrian opponents over the divine and human nature of Christ. Yet in the midst of all this, the rhetorical school in particular continued to be a stronghold of Greek pagan culture (see Norman 2000). Libanius himself was a pagan and a close friend and admirer of the last non-Christian emperor Julian the Apostate. Nonetheless he had many Christian students (such as John Chrysostom or Theodore of Mopsuestia) as well as pagan students, one of whom was Aphthonius.

Aphthonius’ textbook of progymnasmata was a short primer of fourteen basic rhetorical exercises (viz. fable, narration, chreia, maxim, refutation, confirmation, commonplace, encomium, vituperation, comparison, ethopoëia, description, thesis, and proposal of a law), for each of which he not only provided detailed theoretical instructions, but he also offered an elaborated model example. It is predominantly in these examples (which, by the way, were most probably the main reason for the booklet’s popularity) that a very specific set of moral values and political opinions clearly emerges.

As his own example for the exercise of Commonplace, for instance, which is basically an amplificatory, vituperative elaboration on some morally depraved stock character (such as, for instance, a parricide, a traitor, an adulterer, a murderer etc.), Aphthonius chooses the figure of the tyrant (Kennedy 2003, pp. 106-08). Throughout the exercise the stock character of the tyrant is persistently described in opposition to, and against the background of, the ideal of Athenian democracy and the rule of law. The tyrant’s disdain for and rescission of the laws is addressed repeatedly, most clearly so in the prooemium: “Since laws have been established and courts of justice are part of our government, let one seeking to annul the laws be subject to the laws for punishment” (Kennedy 2003, p. 106). His thoughts are described as follows: “I shall seize the acropolis and put aside the laws, curse them, and thus I shall be a law to the many, not the many to me” (ibid. p. 107). One major argument against tyranny is that it is unconstitutional (at least with respect to the Athenian constitution). For: “As a benefit to us [our ancestors] in-
vented a constitution free of domination, and quite rightly so” (ibid. p. 106). Most strikingly, however, the tyrant is never contrasted, as one might also have expected, with the character of the wise and benevolent king, so that this vituperative accusation could well be interpreted as a critique of monarchy in general. This becomes even more obvious when, in the more individualized assignment of Vituperation, it is King Philip of Macedon who is chosen as the model example (ibid. pp. 112-13). Here again, the king is clearly described as the stereotype of the barbarian and the tyrant, and he is for his part also depicted – even if less explicitly so – in strong contrast to the ideals of Athenian democracy and freedom, which he was to suppress and annihilate long before the Romans ever appeared on the Greek stage. The basic idea of this model piece, which draws heavily on various motifs from speeches by Demosthenes (see ibid. pp. 112-13, footnotes 66 and 68) is, of course, perfectly in line with the general tendency of classicism and Athenocentrism that was so prominent in imperial Greek rhetorical training.

The corresponding model example for the exercise of Encomium is – and very fittingly so – a praise of the Athenian historian Thucydides (ibid. pp. 108-10). Not only does this again strike the right note of Athenian classicism (in the theoretical instructions, Demosthenes is explicitly named as the other principal option and, to distinguish collective from individual praise, Aphthonius refers to the example of a collective encomium of all Athenians vs. an individual encomium of one particular Athenian (ibid. p. 108); but it also, once more, offers ample opportunity for praising the institutions and benefits of Attic democracy in its finest days, as for instance when Thucydides is said to have been endowed with “the double benefit of a strong ancestry and a democratic constitution,” to have been “prevented from being rich unjustly by the equality of law,” or to have been “nurtured under a constitution and laws that are by their nature better than others” (ibid. p. 109). Nor does the author miss the opportunity to glorify the great deeds of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War (ibid. pp. 109-10). Besides these outstanding examples, there are also various other passages scattered all through Aphthonius’ Progymnasmata, which contain hidden or open critiques of monarchy and praise democracy as the better of all constitutions.

Aphthonius’ unswerving partisanship for the rule of law without any restrictions is most obvious in the example he devises for the exercise of Proposal of a Law, in which he attacks a proposed law that prescribes that an adulterer may be killed on the spot by the deceived husband (ibid. pp. 124-
27). In this piece Aphthonius repeatedly states that the law must stand above all other things, that nobody can be exempt from it, and that it must be the prerogative of judges and juries, and no-one else, to administer justice.

Considering that Aphthonius lived and worked in a predominantly Christian community and environment, it is also worth remarking that all his examples are exclusively pagan in character. Narratives of pagan myths are his favourite choices for the illustration of assignments such as Narration (Aphrodite and Adonis, *ibid.* p. 97), Refutation and Confirmation (Daphne and Apollo, *ibid.* pp. 101-03 and 104-05), or Ethopoeia (Niobe, *ibid.* pp. 116-17). But most noticeable of all, for the exercise of Description, he offers a detailed description of the magnificent pagan temple and precinct of the god Sarapis, once situated on the “acropolis” of the city of Alexandria (*ibid.* pp. 118-20), which, however, in Aphthonius’ own lifetime, in the year 391, was burnt down and razed during a riot triggered by the Christian faction in town, at the instigation of the patriarch Theophilus, and with tacit consent of the Christian emperor Theodosius (cf. Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* 472; Sozomenus, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.15). The temple was a miracle to visitors, and an imposing example of pagan culture in Alexandria (see McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes 2004). Its selection as a model example in a school textbook is therefore certainly not accidental, but can be interpreted as a deliberate act of assertion of Greek pagan culture and as a protest against its wilful vandalization by a Christian mob. In passages such as this, Aphthonius, like his teacher Libanius, takes an unmistakably pagan stance in the midst of a meanwhile predominantly Christian environment. With respect to other passages, one may even speak of a completely secular tendency, for instance when Aphthonius occasionally remarks that the commonly believed stories about the gods may, after all, just be mere fictions made up by the poets (see e.g., Refutation, Kennedy 2003, pp. 101-02, Encomium p. 110).

All these various features in Aphthonius’ work, which was widely used for teaching beginners in rhetoric, were very clearly totally at odds with the real contemporary political world outside the classroom. This raises the question: what kind of impact might those teachings have had on society? Was the interior world of the rhetorical school really so completely insulated from the real world outside that nobody ever noticed the blatant discrepancies? Or were they intentionally ignored? Or did the employment of those themes and topics contribute to the establishment of a kind of liberal-thinking intellectual elite of scholars who were well aware of both the assets and the
drawbacks of democracy on the one hand, and of their own monarchic and hierarchic society on the other? The mere fact that not even state officials seemed to have taken offence at the kind of ideas that were expounded in rhetorical schools appears to reveal an astonishing amount of liberal thinking.

2.5 Contrasting practices in medieval and early modern times

That such liberal-mindedness of the sort described above was far from being a matter of course, can be easily demonstrated by a contrastive glimpse at later periods in the history of Aphthonius’ little manual, which was also widely used in the Byzantine and (in multiple Latin translations) in the early modern period (for a survey, see Kraus 2005, pp. 164-65 and 167-83). Basically, the core of its text was transmitted in unaltered form, but a considerable number of additional model examples were composed to adapt the work to contemporary needs and ideas. Byzantine scholars, for instance, added a great number of clearly Christian examples, taken from Scripture, from the lives of the saints, or even from controversial theological debates; these would praise typically Christian virtues and values such as humility or steadfastness in faith, and markedly Christian heroes such as the martyrs (for details, see Hunger 1978, pp. 111-16). There were also explicit commitments made, and subservience shown, to the politics of Byzantine emperors; particularly so in times of internal quarrels or external wars (see ibid. p. 111).

In a similar way, in their adaptations of Aphthonius’ textbook, Renaissance scholars would also add examples in which they would take a clear stance on the political or religious issues of their day. In the age of the Reformation, in particular, authors from both sides of the denominational divide openly acted as partisans of their respective parties by unconditionally ex-tolling the political and religious commitments of their own side, while at the same time mercilessly and ruthlessly attacking and censoring the opposing party. These model examples were deliberately used for aggressive political and religious indoctrination and argument. While allegedly practising the art of rhetoric, students would thus subconsciously absorb their lessons in controversial theology and party prejudice. One would find refutations of Roman Catholic dogmas, accusations of alleged crimes committed by the “papists”, offensive vituperations of Popes and Catholic bishops and corresponding eulogies of pro-reformation princes and potentates on the Protestant side as well as defences of the Catholic creed and religious practices, encomia of saints, and aggressive slanders and vituperations of outstanding re-
formers and their secular supporters on the Catholic side. This was particu-
larly so in Jesuit circles, which were highly influential in rhetorical education
in those times (for details, see Kraus 2008, p. 65). In that period, which was
dominated by religious strife, teachers in rhetorical schools were very clearly
taking sides, and the model examples presented to students were, as a rule,
strongly affirmative of the respective values. Internal criticism was not meant
to be. Evidently, the amazing toleration of the huge discrepancy between the
values presented in classrooms of rhetorical schools and the reality of the po-
litical world outside, which we observed as the result of a long-standing and
excessive classicism in the late antique period, had vanished.

2.6. Conclusion: Lessons to learn for contemporary teaching
What then can we learn from those ancient stories? In our modern globalized
and pluralistic societies, very often we do not even know if any fixed sets of
values to agree or disagree with exist at all. Perhaps human or civil rights may
be something everyone could (or should) agree on. But basically, the prin-
cipal commitment is not to make any commitments at all. Everything seems
to be dominated by the rule of political correctness, which is often a com-
mitment to non-commitment, and if there is a commitment, the side to be
taken is almost mandatory, and the opposing view is strictly banned.

Yet rhetorical exercise will always have to make controversial com-
mitments and to take controversial sides in public deliberation. Otherwise it
would not be rhetoric. Strict observation of the rules of political correctness
would make any reasonable choice of examples for rhetorical exercises ex-
tremely difficult and awkward, if not impossible. Almost any assignment we
choose would be open to criticism from some social, religious or other group
within society. Consequently, for instance, most of the “contemporary” ex-
amples of exercises recently offered by Frank D’Angelo for rhetorical training
in the spirit of Aphthonius’ Progymnasmata, such as, e.g., Confirmation or
Refutation of newspaper stories on a “Man Arrested in Scalding of a Tod-

dler” (D’Angelo 2000, p. 123) or a conflict between two high school students
(ibid. p. 127), Praise, Vituperation or Comparison of local public figures,
characters from TV soaps, familiar locales or works of art (ibid. pp. 160 and
187), Speeches-in-Character of caring parents sending their son or daughter
off to college (ibid. p. 207), or Discussion of a law that would prohibit the
taping of TV movies without paying royalties (ibid. p. 241), are not concerned
with top-level political issues, but rather with issues of either more local or
very general interest. Some hotter potatoes, however, can be found in the book by Crowley and Hawhee (1999, e.g., was George Bush Sr. right to pardon several people connected with the Iran-Contra affair? pp. 333-35, or discussion of a law that permits pornography, pp. 363-64).

Perhaps we not only cannot, but also need not, and even should not, always strictly observe the rules of political correctness when assigning tasks to our students. Otherwise we will implant invisible razors in their heads that will curtail and crop their inventive imagination and fancy. We might learn something from the way earlier periods in history managed to endure and tolerate discrepancies between classroom exercises and social and political reality, namely that rhetorical education will never be able to abstain completely from making explicit or implicit commitments to sets of moral, social or political values, but that these sets of values need not imperatively coincide with any given society’s “official” values, and that practical exercises in rhetoric should be regarded as a kind of playground instead (or marketplace, to take up the metaphor of Ineke Sluiter) for experimenting freely with various kinds of ideas and values, in order to weigh them up and compare them against one another in open and unrestrained debate, and in this way learn how to make our own independent and well-founded commitments.

References

¹ In her opening plenary speech of the Second Conference of Rhetoric in Society in Leiden.


