Readings in Rhetoric

COMM 5320

Fall 2008

Tuesdays, 3:30-6:00 p.m.
Hellems 77

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and by appt.

Overview

This course provides an introduction to rhetorical thought in historical perspective. It emphasizes major theoretical writings in the Western tradition: in the first half of the semester, from ancient Greece, Rome, and the Jewish diaspora; in the second half, from nineteenth- and twentieth-century America and, to a lesser extent, Europe. Our attention is necessarily selective. The aim is to familiarize graduate students with the rhetorical tradition, engage them with texts and questions that continue to engage the fields of communication and rhetorical studies, stoke their minds with topics and historical figures that might be worth revisiting at a later date, and help move them toward competency in teaching undergraduate courses in rhetorical theory.

The class is reading-intensive and text-centered. In addition to introducing a substantive body of thought, it also aims to make all of us (myself included) better readers of rich and often difficult texts. I will lecture occasionally, but the bulk of our time will be spent in discussion of the readings, considered from a variety of perspectives. We will take turns offering summaries of the readings, and starting off with responses from questions distributed by me ahead of time. Questions will have us variously summarizing arguments, comparing authors and ideas, and considering the contemporary significance of concepts and perspectives we read about.

The course selects from the canon of rhetorical studies literature (the sophists, Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero), but pays attention to marginal figures along the way, too, including women in Greece, Rome, and nineteenth-century America. Rhetorical studies has traditionally focused on humanist texts to get its theoretical bearings, but we will also consider the rhetorical understandings of biblical traditions, which have exerted far greater popular influence than the humanists. The modern section of the course samples from a cross-section of significant thinkers who addressed rhetoric from multiple theoretical and disciplinary perspectives: among them, Transcendentalism, practical abolitionist politics, classical philology, literary criticism, sociology, philosophy, and history.

In a world understood as socially constructed, one can make the case that everything has rhetorical dimensions, including the scholarly endeavors of communication studies. To learn about rhetoric, then, is to be drawn into a way of thinking that can be applied to any subject matter or social practice. Rhetoric is a topic whose consideration has historically been linked to many of the big questions—about the nature and practical contours of knowledge, desire, belief,
opinion, faith, reason, emotions, character, gender, religion, culture, ethics, and politics, among others. Teachers of rhetoric were the original communication researchers, blending interpretation, pedagogy, and reflections upon practice in their accounts of the rhetorical arts (civil oratory, discussion, sermons, letter writing, and textual interpretation chief among them). The concepts they generated continue to offer heuristic schemes and animating ideas for thinking and scholarship, as we will see periodically in contemporary readings that supplement the primary texts, and show some of the ways that present-day scholars are ‘using’ the traditional and expanded rhetorical canons.

The course opens with consideration of different perspectives from which to read texts from the rhetorical tradition: as theoretical systems, bodies of thought animated by broader human problematics, expressions of a particular culture, elements of socio-biological patterns, points of comparison with other texts, components of longer intellectual and pedagogical traditions, and sources of still-vibrant and essentially contested ideas. As the course progresses, we will work to keep these different perspectives alive, while building our storehouse of knowledge about rhetoric and some of its key texts.

Course Requirements: Students are expected to take active part in class discussions each week—offering summaries of particular readings, taking stabs at answering reading questions, and participating more generally through talk and listening. In addition, they will write two brief 3- to 4-page reading response papers over the course of the semester, summarizing and reflecting on an idea from the reading that strikes them as fertile or intriguing, and variously unpacking its implications, comparing it to some other idea, or applying it to a practical research question of interest to them. We will have a take-home midterm exam after the ancient readings, which will give us a chance to bring together and reflect upon the first half of the semester (due October 28). At the end of the semester, students will hand in a mid-length (8- to 10-page) paper, which ideally grows out of one of the short reading response pieces. In addition, everyone will be assigned an oral final examination question, to be presented in a 10-minute presentation to the class during its regular meeting time in finals week (Tuesday, December 16). Grades will break down this way: 25% participation; 10% reading response papers; 25% midterm; 25% end-of-term paper; 15% oral final.

Required Texts:


**Recommended Texts** (for students with a primary interest in rhetoric, as you can afford them):


**Other readings** will be available through the course website, available through CU Learn (culearn.colorado.edu)

### Course Schedule

**August 26: Introduction to the Course**

**September 2: Starting Points for the Study of Rhetoric**

**Readings for Today:**


Rhetories from the Ancient World

September 9: Sophistic Rhetoric: Gorgias (487-376) and Protagoras (ca. 490-420)

Readings for Today:
Billig, “Protagoras and the Origins of Rhetoric,” pp. 61-80 in *Arguing and Thinking*
Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 2nd ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 3-12, 39-85 (as much as you have time to do)


September 16: Extending Sophistic Rhetoric: Michael Billig’s Social Psychology

Readings for Today:

September 23: Against the Sophists: Isocrates (436-338) and the Early Plato (427-347)

Readings for Today:

September 30: Reading Plato’s *Phaedrus*

Readings for Today:
October 7: Aristotle (384-322) and his Theoretical Taxonomy of Rhetoric

Readings for Today:

Read as much as the book as you can, beginning with Kennedy’s fine introduction. Attend particularly to the following sections of the book, and Kennedy’s useful footnotes among them: Bk. I, chs. 1-4; Bk. II, chs. 1, 20-22.3; Bk. III, chs. 1-2, 7, 12-13; and the Introduction to Dialectic from Aristotle’s *Topics* (pp. 1-61, 111-115, 161-169, 193-202, 210-11, 226-231; 263-66).

October 14: Rhetoric in Rome: The Ciceronian Orator (Cicero: 106-43 BCE)


*Recommended historical reading*, Conley, RET, 29-52

October 21: Biblical Rhetorics


Kennedy, “Literacy and Rhetoric in the Ancient Near East,” pp. 115-140 (esp. 133-37) in *Comparative Rhetoric*


Hebrew Bible (Old Testament):
- Exodus 1-4
- Proverbs 1-20
- Editor’s Introduction: “The Prophetical Books” (Metzger and Murphy, pp. 862-865)
- Micah

New Testament:
- Matthew 13
- 1 Corinthians 1-4, 12-16
- The Letter of James

October 28: Take-home midterm exam questions due in class and discussed.
Rhetoric after the Enlightenment: New and Revived Orientations

November 4: Biblical and Post-Biblical Murmurings: Nineteenth Century Figures (Election Day)

Readings for Today:
Margaret Fuller (1810-1850),
On Conversations (overview document):
http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/fuller/conversations-mf.html
Letter on the nature of proposed Conversations (1830):
http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/fuller/conversationsletter.html
“The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women” (1843)
http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/fuller/debate.html
Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), “Eloquence” (1847)
Frederick Douglass, (1818-1895), “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (1852):

Recommended Historical Reading: Conley, RET, pp. 235-259; Kenneth Cmiel, Democratic Eloquence (1990), pp. 11-39, 94-96, 112-120.

November 11: Rhetoric and Social Criticism: The Young Kenneth Burke (1897-1993)

Readings for Today

Recommended historical reading: Conley, RET, 260-277 (esp. 268-77).


Readings for Today:
December 2: Rhetoric and the Philosophy of Communication: Richard McKeon (1900-1985)

Readings for Today:

The early essays on the history of rhetoric “Rhetoric in the Middle Ages” (1942) and “Poetry and Philosophy in the Twelfth Century: The Renaissance of Rhetoric” (1946) give a sense of his entry point into rhetoric, via the history of rhetoric. For discussion purposes, thought, focus on the following essays:

“The Methods of Rhetoric and Philosophy: Invention and Judgment” (1966)
“The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age: Architectonic Productive Arts” (1971)
“Creativity and the Commonplace” (1973)


December 9: Rhetoric and (Post-) Marxism: Michele Foucault (1926-1984) & Terry Eagleton (b. 1943)

Readings for Today:

Tuesday, December 16: Meet together to present responses to oral exam questions. End of semester papers due.