

Bon Voyage: A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies

[Open Access Journal; Indexed in NepJOL]

ISSN: 2382-5308 (Print); Published by Department of English,
Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu
Nepal <http://ejournals.rrcampus.edu.np/ejournals/bonvoyage/>

Politico-Cultural Exigencies and the Rise of Rhetoric in Classical Greece

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/bovo.v5i1.64369>

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Abstract

Did rhetoric naturally evolve from the inherent power and potential of language, or were specific political and cultural conditions instrumental in driving its development in classical Greece? This paper explores this question by adopting a historical approach to rhetoric and a rhetorical approach to history. It draws on the perspectives of sophists such as Gorgias, the anonymous author of “Dissoi Logoi,” and Isocrates, as well as the rhetorical-philosophical orientations of Plato and Aristotle. In conducting this study, I employ a methodological review approach that relies on the scholarship of rhetoric and rhetorical history and critically analyse available sources and the arguments developed in the field. Through this approach, I argue that the emergence of rhetoric in classical times was prompted by several exigent factors, including humanism, democracy, education, literacy, and legal practices. Therefore, theorizing and practicing rhetoric beyond the cultural-political context is inherently partial and incomplete.

Keywords: *rhetoric; rhetorical history; sophists; democracy; origin and development of rhetoric*

Introduction:

To respond to the question mentioned in the abstract above, it is essential to strip away the multifarious connotative and denotative meanings that the tiny word ‘rhetoric’ carries. Some of these meanings, but are not limited to, include: the art of persuasion; oratory

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skills; the art of effective speaking and writing; the study of effective communication; a means of creating social justice and equity; the study of principles and rules of composition; the study of tropes and figures of speech; the study of the relationship between knowledge, power, and language; the study of discourse; the study of ethos, logos, and pathos; insincere, lofty, extravagant, colorful, and pompous style of speaking and writing; propaganda; empty speeches; verbose or grandiloquence; the art of deception; and so forth. This unpacked list encompasses a wide spectrum of meanings, ranging from positive and neutral to negative implications. The multifaceted nature of the term ‘rhetoric’ and its possible meanings stem from the fact that it is fundamentally concerned with the language use which offers extensive possibilities that can be employed to achieve specific purposes. The diverse and sometimes contradictory meanings associated with the term ‘rhetoric’ further motivated me to explore and investigate the conditions that drew me towards the philosophical and intellectual dialogues in classical Greece.

Historical Origin of Rhetoric:

Exploring the history of rhetoric, it is important to acknowledge the inherent challenge in pinpointing its precise origin. Determining the exact beginnings of rhetoric and identifying its initiators pose further significant difficulties and may have to be considered virtually impossible tasks as well. Classic sources such as Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg’s *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (2001) and James A. Herrick’s *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction* (2018) tentatively place the formal inception of rhetoric in the fifth century B.C. Spatially, rhetorical practices were predominantly practiced in Greek courts and assemblies. Geographically, the practice of rhetoric was primarily centered in Greek courts and assemblies. However, it is crucial to recognize that these spatial and temporal references are not universally agreed upon. Instead, these perspectives are primarily rooted in Western traditions and they often overlook the practices of non-Western traditions. Supporting this, a rhetorical historian D. A. G. Hinks also firmly believes that tracing the history of rhetoric prior to the fifth century B.C. is a futile endeavour, contending that such efforts are “irrelevant to the proper history of rhetoric” (61). However, Hinks’ perspective can be considered somewhat narrow-minded because rhetoric, as a skilful use of language, likely had its beginnings within the writings of ancient poets like Homer.

In contrast to Hinks, Richard Leo Enos, a historian of Greek rhetoric, argues that the roots of rhetoric can be found in the works of Homer, Hesiod, and Rhapsodes. On one hand, Hinks credits Corax and Sicily as the inventors of rhetoric, while Aristotle attributes this invention to Empedocles as “the one who invented rhetoric” (qtd. in Enos 57). James A. Herrick, another historian of rhetoric, also contemplates on the idea of invention, stating “the origins of rhetoric may be traced to Greek city on the island of Sicily in the fifth century

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BCE and to a shadowy figure known as Empedocles” (34). These conversations provide a whirlpool picture that no source can exactly pinpoint who, when, where, and how this discipline was invented, and what exigencies it served to.

However, in the context of classical Greece, it becomes evident that the roots of rhetoric are closely tied to the practices of sophists who were among the first to bring rhetoric into the spotlight. According to Jonh Scenters-Zapico, “first sophists were the first to offer systematic instruction in the arts of speaking and writing” and that art of ‘speaking and writing’ is what we understand today as rhetoric (52). This argument underscores the notion that the practices of rhetoric existed in various forms, but the sophists first made it ‘systematic’ through instruction on effective language use. In the broader scope of human civilization, as depicted by historians such as Yuval Noah Harari in *A History of Mankind*, it is acknowledged that one of the earliest tools of human civilization was language, or in some cases, its manipulation. Harari argues that the evolution and practices of human language were intimately connected to the rise and sustenance of human civilization. With the evolution of language, people practiced their ways of living by communicating, influencing, and exerting control over each other. In the absence of language, these objectives could only be achieved through the use of physical tools and weapons. Though Harari’s focus is not on rhetoric as such, his arguments about language as the most feasible means of human communication, sustenance, and survival showcases an inherent relationship between language and rhetoric.

Exigent Factors Behind the Rise of Rhetoric:

The response to the question of exigencies behind the invention and formalization of rhetoric encompasses the political-cultural contexts of classical Greece, which include the following elements: a shift from the theocentric to the anthropocentric worldview; changes in governing systems; transitioning from aristocracy to democracy; a growing interest in literacy and knowledge acquisition; the influence of sophists to Athenians; and deeper contemplation of the thinkers towards the role of language, and so forth. I argue that these factors collectively had a strong influence in shaping rhetoricians of the time such as sophists (Gorgias and the author of “Dissoi Logoi”), Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle.

Firstly, classical Greece experienced a transition from the theocentric worldview, where the divine was at the center, to the anthropocentric worldview, which emphasized the significance of humans, and played the role of catalyst for the rise and development of rhetoric. Greek humanism was grounded in the belief that humans possessed inherent abilities to invent, understand, and exert control over the world around them. Language was the manifestation of this potential within humans. Before this shift in perspective, people placed strong faith in the divine and they did not fully trust in their own capacities. Enos also acknowledges this shift when tracing the development of rhetoric as a discipline in the Western world:

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More importantly, with this [potential and power of human towards invention] consciousness, there is an emerging shift from a theocentric notion to more of an anthropocentric notion of discourse. The supremacy of the gods as the generating force of effective expression would be challenged to the extent that words and arguments could be composed by sophists so powerful that they could defy the very existence of the gods who had once credited with giving them the divine power of speech. (10)

This celebration of human power to construct effective and persuasive discourse, whether in the form of literary writings (such as Homer, Hesiod, and Rhapsodes) or in the form of speech (as practiced by the sophists) served as the humanistic foundation of classical Greece in the formalization of rhetoric as a discipline.

Secondly, rhetoric that emerged with the sophists was developed during a period characterized by early stages of state formation and the evolution of governance systems. Rhetoric was closely intertwined with the necessities of creating and advancing these governments and establishing social structures. In this context, rhetoric played a crucial role as a potent cultural force, instrumental in ensuring the effectiveness of governance systems, maintaining justice, and cultivating virtue and wisdom. As Charles van Doren noted in his *A History of Knowledge* (1991), this era witnessed conflicts and warfare between city-states, whether driven by a quest for power or the pursuit of material gain and prosperity by the ruling class. While physical weapons were undoubtedly employed to address these contingencies, intangible tools like language, could help people influence others within and outside city-states. These practices were common in the political and cultural contexts of classical Greece. The decline of oligarchic governance, sometimes coupled with the unsettling of aristocratic rule, and the evolution of democracy were additional factors contributing to the development of rhetoric as a practical discipline in ancient Greece.

Herrick also contends that “Athens’ relatively open atmosphere and the emerging democratic political system proved fertile ground for rhetoric’s growth” (34). In a democracy, the power of persuasion and effective communication were crucial, and rhetoric became a valuable tool in political practices and discourse. John Poulakos unpacks this context stating that

the aristocracy of the nobility was yielding to a democracy of citizens; the aristocracy of the myths was losing its authority to a democracy of public arguments; the aristocracy of the oracles was receding before a democracy of human laws; and the aristocracy of poetry was relinquishing its glory to a democracy of prosaic discourses. In short, this was a change from the few to the many or, to put it in Aristotelian terms, from the extremities to the middle. (13)

The democracy of that time, however, differed significantly from our contemporary understanding of it. It operated as a direct representative system in which all citizens

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functioned as representatives within the assembly. This unique form of classical democracy created another compelling need for rhetoric, providing individuals with a means to influence others. People likely believed rhetoric was essential for them to experience and uphold justice, maintain the rule of law and civil order, enable effective governance by rulers, and efficiently administer public affairs, among other public and personal concerns. That is why, it is worth noting that the Athenian democracy did not guarantee equality for all as “political participation was restricted to free, native-born men, women, slaves, and metics (foreigners) held lower status” (Bizzell and Herzberg 20). Rhetoric, therefore, likely served the interests of a handful of socially and economically privileged individuals, particularly the aristocratic, young, Athenian males.

In classical Greece, it is virtually impossible to definitively determine whether democracy led to the foundation of rhetoric or vice versa. However, it can be argued with confidence that both democracy and rhetoric are mutually influenced and intertwined in such a way that the absence of one would likely have hindered the development of the other. Regarding the relationship between sophistic practices and democracy, Poulakos argues that “the sophists can be said to have been both the beneficiaries and benefactors of an age of cultural exuberance, political expansion, economic growth, intellectual experimentation, and robust artistic expression” (11).

This concept of sophists as ‘both the beneficiaries and benefactors’ help to partially resolve whether rhetoric emerged from the political-cultural circumstances or contributed to their rise. Here, sophists’ rhetoric intersected with the democracy and freedom of Greece, and while it coexisted with the unequal treatment of the metics. Metics were not recognized as equals, yet Athenians heavily relied on their teachings. Without their training (as provided by the sophists), it would have been challenging for Athenians to engage effectively in public affairs, such as courtroom defense and governance. It was also noteworthy that “Georgias, [a metic sophist], was awarded many honors not usually given to foreigners in Greece, such as invitations to speak at the festivals” (Bizzell and Herzberg 42). Here, one could argue that the sophists’ teachings laid a solid foundation for the establishing the Athenian democracy, as the tyrannical system would not have made this possible. Simultaneously, without the practices of the democratic system, it would have been virtually impossible for sophists to come to Athens, disseminate their skills, and train the local population. These contextual factors provide a space to cast doubt on Plato’s opposition to the sophists, as he might have been motivated by his nationalist ideology. However, Plato’s lampooning of Georgias’s rhetoric did not impede the growing popularity of rhetoric in Athens; instead, it became a subject of debate and argumentation for subsequent philosophers like Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and others.

At this point, Georgias’ rhetoric can be viewed at by situating within the democratic and humanistic atmospheres nurtured by the Athenian culture, as he explicitly articulates in

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his “Encomium of Helen.” In the text, he argues that “I have by means of speech removed disgrace from a woman; I have observed the procedure which I set up at the beginning of the speech; I have tried to end the injustice of blame and the ignorance of opinion; I wished to write a speech which would be a praise of Helen and a diversion to myself (46). The use of rhetoric to combat ‘injustice’ and ‘disgrace’ is a notable example of its contribution to the flourishing of democracy in Athens. Rhetoric, employed to counter undemocratic forces like injustice and harm inflicted on women, underscores how rhetoric served democracy and, reciprocally, how democracy supported rhetoric. Another piece of evidence supporting the interconnectedness of rhetoric and politics comes from the essence of “Dissoi Logoi”, an anonymous text attributed to the sophists of the time. T. M. Robinson, a prominent critic of the text “contends that the topics of all nine . . . sections [of the text] are related to the general theme of good governance and how it is to be maintained through discourse” (Bizzell and Herzberg 47).

Thirdly, the crucial catalyst for the rise of rhetoric in classical Greece was the keen interest of Greek people in literacy and their passion for knowledge. While the culture of literacy evolved during “the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. [with the pervasiveness of] the alphabet and writing (Enos 17), oral practices still held significance. In this context, the sophists’ ability to captivate the hearts of the Athenian people can be understood as a reflection of their devotion to knowledge and skills. In this regard, rhetoric can also be viewed as a force to have a significant impact on bringing a gradual shift from tyranny to oligarchy to democracy to meritocracy in classical Greece. Plato, for instance, emphasized in his *Republic* that a ruler’s qualification should not merely be persuasive or effective speech rather it had to be a rational and philosophically mindedness i.e., intellectualism and merit.

Hence, literacy and Greek people’s passion for learning, as evidenced by their money, energy, and time investments, can be seen as the cornerstone of the rhetoric in the classical era. The link between education and rhetoric, or literacy and rhetoric, was connected to Isocrates. By establishing the academy of rhetoric, he introduced ‘the kairotic’ dimension of rhetoric by which he meant that rhetoric needed to be taught to enable students to address specific occasions or situations they might encounter. Isocrates also departed from other sophists by “admit[ting] only older adolescent boys who had already mastered the stylistic studies associated with grammar” (Bizzell and Herzberg 68). In this way, Isocrates’s rhetoric as an educational approach transformed its fundamental characteristic from effective language use to developing skills specific to the circumstances. That means, if other sophists were concerned with teaching the general skills of effective communication, Isocrates’s version contributed to the particular rhetorical skill to address the circumstances and needs of particular situations. Kathleen Welch, a historian, and critic of Isocrates, credits him for bringing a significant shift from spoken texts to written ones and also praises him for recognizing the rising importance of the literacy culture in classical Greece. Isocrates also

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created an exigency of education by emphasizing the need to teach and learn rhetoric in his “Against the Sophists:” “Formal training makes such men [men with the natural aptitude of learning and mastering rhetorical skills] more skillful and more resourceful in discovering the possibilities of a subject; for it teaches them to take from a readier source the topics which they otherwise hit upon in haphazard fashion” (74). However, Isocrates’ Academy of Rhetoric did not admit students from all classes. Rather it served only well-to-do families, highlighting how rhetoric was becoming tailored to specific conditions, including class distinctions. Of course, like other sophists, he utilized rhetoric as a profession to earn money and well-being. The money-making possibility provided by rhetorical teaching is another condition tied to its history. Therefore, Isocrates dedicated himself both as a student and a teacher of rhetoric establishing the first school of rhetoric in Athens. As stated above, the focus of his rhetoric and his school revolved around addressing the immediate practical problems that the students would encounter in their lives. He assisted them in studying these problems meticulously and finding practical solutions. Unlike Plato, who was concerned with the pursuit of the absolute truth, Isocrates was preoccupied with practical problems and practical solutions. In that sense, the rhetoric of classical Greece evolved out of the practicalities of the teachers and the students who taught and studied rhetoric.

Fourthly, the Greeks’ deep-seated passion for philosophical contemplation about the matters of virtues and good deeds can be traced back to the natural philosophers such as Empedocles down to sophists, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Rhetoric undeniably played a role in bringing this shift in the thought process of the intellectuals of the time. Rhetoric, in its essence, would have been a neutral tool, but Plato, in “Gorgias,” portrays it in a negative light. As Jostein Gaarder argues the natural philosophers who came before the sophists were concerned with the questions about the mysteries of the external world, such as the primordial element of nature, what is subject to change, and what is not. However, with the advent of rhetoric, people began to contemplate the most effective use of language and ways to influence others. This shift in focus meant that the rhetoric transitioned philosophical inquiries from the external world to the realm of the human mind.

The author of “Dissoi Logoi” recognizes this utility of rhetoric in various issues and ideas that cannot be classified as definitively true or false, good or bad (chapter 1) on matters of seemly and shameful (chapter 2), just and unjust (chapter 3), and truth and falsehood (chapter 4), on the question of whether wisdom and moral excellence are teachable (chapter 6). Among these, the last one is the teachability of wisdom and moral excellence, which appears to be the most critical exigence for developing rhetoric. This importance arises from the fact that many Greek philosophers were deeply concerned with virtuous qualities inherent in human beings, including concepts like ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘ethics’, ‘morality’ ‘virtue’, ‘wisdom’, ‘beauty’, ‘truth’, ‘courage’ and many others. These qualities were perceived as essential attributes of good human beings and good citizens. The central question posed by the author of “Dissoi Logoi” about rhetoric is how rhetoric can fulfill these ends, namely,

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cultivating virtuous qualities and improving individuals and society. The author argues:

I consider it a characteristic of the same man and of the same art to be able to converse in brief questions and answers, to know the truth of things, to plead one's cause correctly, to be able to speak in public, to have an understanding of argument skills, and to teach people about the nature of everything- both how everything is and how it came into being. ("Dissoi Logoi" 54)

Fifthly, another exigency for rhetoric lies in the Greek thinkers' recognition of the inherent power of language itself. They believed that it had the potential to be used for various purposes, either for good or ill. As Bizzell and Herzberg aptly highlight, "it was clear that language in which the Greek culture was deeply interested-was crucial to the exploration" (23). Gorgias appears to be acutely aware of the fact that language is imbued with emotional and cultural connotations. He explicitly states the multifaceted and manipulative nature of language in his "Encomium of Helen" as "speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body affects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture and pity" (45). Gorgias also argues that Helen was deceived by the manipulative power of rhetoric used by Troy: "she did, or by force reduced or by words seduced, or by love possessed" (45). This implies that people can argue about the cause of the Trojan War, with Gorgias making an argument, utilizing the power or 'magic' of language, to make his audience believe that Helen was innocent and merely a beautiful girl. Another interesting feature of Gorgias' writing is that he himself plays with language in such a way that his own text appears to be metarhetorical. We can notice it in the first section of the text itself:

What is becoming to a city is manpower, to a body beauty, to a soul wisdom, to an action virtue, to a speech truth, and the opposites of these are unbecoming. Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object should be honored with praise if praiseworthy and incur blame if unworthy, for it is an equal error and mistake blame the praisable and to praise the blamable. (44)

In that sense, rhetoric is also a tricky phenomenon. For instance, the author's rhetorical prowess above is vividly demonstrated in the rhetorical use of language. George A. Kennedy refers to them as 'Gorgianic figures' which includes features such as "contrasting thought (antithesis), often of equal length (parison); rhyme at the ends of clauses (homoeoteleuton); and a fondness for sound play of all sorts (paronomasia)" (20). These characteristics demonstrate the rhetorical power of artful expression inherent in the language.

Conclusion:

To wrap up, this paper has situated the origin of rhetoric as a discipline within a political-cultural milieu characterized by humanism, the emergence of democratic political

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culture, legal practices, the beginning of formal education, and the growing need for literacy. In doing so, it has sought to illustrate the interconnection between rhetoric and these political cultural contexts, arguing that rhetoric emerged in these specific circumstances which it simultaneously served as well. It concludes that rhetoric, as a serious discipline rooted in these conducive political-cultural atmospheres, played a pivotal role in the shift from the aristocracy to democracy in three different realms through three different ‘rhetorics’: legal or forensic rhetoric practiced in courtrooms for the purpose of judgment regarding the past actions; political or deliberative rhetoric, practiced in legislative assemblies for the formulation of policies for the future action; and ceremonial or epideictic rhetoric practiced in everyday life to strengthen shared beliefs about the present affairs and resolve practical issues. These three categories of rhetorical types, as developed by Aristotle, and the practices of those concepts, reflect the political-cultural imperatives from which rhetoric both emerged and served.

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