

Dr. Andrew Joseph Pegoda

Professor: Dr. Mark Hannah

ENG 551: Classical Rhetoric

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### Rhetorical Journeys and Concluding Thoughts

DO YOU AGREE WITH THE AUTHOR'S POSITION? DO YOU SEE ANY PROBLEMS BASED ON YOUR READING OF THE PRIMARY SOURCES?

Thomas B. Farrell's "Practicing the Arts of Rhetoric: Tradition and Invention" (1991) is interested in revisiting the theories and praxes of classical rhetoric, particularly Aristotelian texts, and then considering change over time, all while focusing on affect (i.e., emotion) and public political rituals. He, in part, argues that "rhetoric in the classical sense provides an important inventional capacity for the conventions, emotions, and cognitions necessary for us to affiliate in a community of civil life" (191).

When it comes to offering an evaluation of whether I agree with Farrell's positions, I am reminded of Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy's 2014 article in *Radical Pedagogy*. While they specifically write thinking about social justice classes (Feminist Theory, for instance), their ideas have important broader applications. Specifically, they argue that garnering appreciations and working toward understandings should be favored when one is grappling with unfamiliar material. Thus, I offer that due to my unfamiliarity with classical rhetoric until mere weeks ago, I am not in a position to agree or disagree with Farrell's positions. Additionally, Farrell's jargon-heavy writing style also makes it challenging to parse "Practicing the Arts of Rhetoric." I cannot offer a comprehensive evaluation of the author's work when a determination of what he even

says is difficult-to-impossible. In one otherwise especially clear section about public speeches by Vaclav Havel and Phillip Jenninger, Farrell writes, “Even in cases where disputation seems to have been ‘resolved,’ what happens is more fittingly encompassed by Burke’s ‘barnyard scramble’ metaphor” (207). The article does not explain this metaphor, does not have an explanatory footnote or a footnote with information that would allow for further reading or source verification, and does not provide a first name for Burke. (A Google search does not lead to any answers either. And certainly, part of the issue could be that on-going conversations specific to Burke’s original audience would have made any additional information about Burke’s metaphor redundant.) Another unclear or packed sentence reads, “Instead of presupposing the appropriate as an *a priori* validity claim in advance of speech, *rhetoric practice enacts the norms of propriety collaboratively with interested collective others*” (200, emphasis in original).

Farrell’s section about Havel and Jenninger deserves some further comments. For one thing, like Plato and Cicero, for example, Farrell is very interested in all things to do with public speeches. On a different note, Farrell explains that these men delivered important speeches with very different approaches and very different outcomes. Farrell says—but without sufficient supporting evidence in the form of extended quotations from primary texts—that the (mis)understandings of the historical moment at hand impacted how audiences received these speeches. Upon becoming Czech president, Havel offered a vision that distanced the past and embraced a future of change and opportunity—a kind of encomium that brings Isocrates’s “Evagoras” to mind and its explanations of what a good man (person) does and looks like, what is praiseworthy and its offerings of encouragement. Jenninger, in contrast, took a “it’s your fault; it’s your fault, too” approach when addressing his audience about the Holocaust and had to resign his post the following morning because people were so outraged.

While Farrell's article does not grapple with what it means for something to be *true*, we can extrapolate some of his thoughts about *truth*. In particular, he accepts the speeches by Havel and Jenninger as simply being true. He accepts the reactions to these speeches as being without question true, too. (And we should note that a person's reactions are always true and valid, but reactions might not match more credible or established evidence or a more philosophical definition of any larger truth[s].) Farrell also takes a very confident tone, such that he assumes his own arguments are, without question, *true* and accurate. Thus, Farrell's "Practicing the Art of Rhetoric" suggests that he does not see rhetoric or life with the nuance embraced by those we call Sophists. For example, Gorgias's "Encomium of Helen" shows a truth that demands careful study, study that makes judgments about what to accept and what to reject, study that even embraces themes that might challenge mores and cause discomfort, study that sees complications, and study that appreciates differences. This encomium recognizes a truth that is relative—and by implication, more inclusive. One of Farrell's concluding comments—"Rhetoric, as I have tried to express it here, is more than the practice; it is the entire process of forming, expressing, and judging public thought in real life"—suggests a view that *truth* is absolute and that allows no room for the relative. Such a view is similar to Plato who uses fictional versions of historical individuals in *Gorgias* to suggest that truth and knowledge is to be recovered or remembered, not produced and not part of a journey and not something that occurs on complicated post-structuralists spectrums.

HOW DO YOU SEE RHETORICAL THEORY WORKING TODAY?

*Today* is an elusive and fascinating and ephemeral concept, especially given that the course examples of contemporary rhetoric emerged decades ago: Farrell's work comes from

1991, and Robert Hariman's work comes from February 1986—making it six months older than me. In contrast to both the proto-rhetoricians and the first rhetoricians over two millennia ago, Farrell's work does suggest a broadened rhetoric—one interested in speech, but one also interested in other cultural texts—as his analysis includes mentions of film and oil painting in the context of rhetorical texts. Additionally, whereas Farrell's predecessors centered on a rhetoric more focused on delivery techniques for the public speaker of forensic or ceremonial rhetoric, for example, Farrell shows extended interest in what comes after such public speeches and uses specialized trajectories to offer thoughts. Said differently, in contrast to the praxis focus of classical rhetoric, contemporary rhetoric is more theoretical, if we use Farrell as a kind of stand-in for contemporary rhetoric.

When thinking about contemporary rhetoric and *today*, I am also reminded of Vershawn Ashanti Young's "Straight Black Queer: Obama, Code-Switching, and the Gender Anxiety of African American Men" (2014). This fascinating and well-written article uses rhetoric theory to offer understandings of how people react to Barack Obama's public behavior. Young's arguments are also informed by feminist theory, queer theory, and linguistics. More particularly, Young offers a contemporary rhetoric that also builds from close understandings of concepts such as *intersectionality* and *positionality*, concepts that were unavailable to Farrell.

Furthermore, when thinking about rhetorical theory in 2022, the main place I see it operating is in the instruction of writing. I have taken and taught numerous writing classes at the college level. Additionally, my students always complete regular writing and speaking assignments. Because of this class in rhetoric, I have finally established some long-needed neural networks. I finally understand some of the historical backdrops as to the *whys* and *hows* of how we communicate and teach as we do. Additionally, I recognize that what I read and hear in my

daily life is also a manifestation of rhetorical praxis and such texts can be further understood and studied following general guidelines of rhetorical analysis.

WHAT DO YOU THINK RHETORIC IS? SHOULD BE?

“What do you think rhetoric is” is really two questions. Rhetoric is an academic discipline. (Rhetoric as an academic discipline is, in varying ways, associated with Communication Studies, with Speech Communication, with Composition Studies, and with English Studies. Occasionally, Rhetoric is its own department.) When the term started, I offered the following working definition of *rhetoric*: *rhetoric* is the study of meanings and powers as shaped by intersectionalities and positionalities and as shaped by contexts, histories, and mediums. I stand by this definition when thinking about the academic field called Rhetoric—both in terms of what it is and what it should be.

Rhetoric is also a kind of synonym for communication—including but not limited to any kind of writing but especially speech. Rhetoric helps us see and hear what texts communicate, even as some communication happens in the unconscious realm. (*Texts* encompassing anything that and anyone who can be analyzed). Thus, we find rhetoric—communication—when listening to a politician speak or when reading the lyrics of a song, but we also find rhetoric—communication—when walking into a room or driving down the street.

WHAT WILL YOU TAKE AWAY FROM THIS CLASS?

The way my education has worked out, Rhetorical Traditions: Classical Rhetorics has been my first exposure to work by the sophists, by Isocrates, by Plato, by Aristotle, and by Cicero. And for that, I am grateful. A takeaway is that my commitment to and desire to become a

student again after over four years as just the professor was a good choice—learning is fun and learning is important. There is always more to learn. The reading material, just being so different from my typical library materials and lacking in knowledge of ancient history, has been challenging at times. This challenge has reminded me in a very personal way that learning is and should be challenging and gives me insights as to how my own students feel taking their first gender studies, religious studies, or film studies class. A takeaway will also be fond memories of long discussion board posts and exchanges with others, as well as how educational and how valuable it is to receive extended, thoughtful feedback (thank you).

While already mentioned above, another takeaway is an understanding of how our basic frameworks for speaking and writing have deep and important roots in Ancient Greece and in Ancient Rome. I appreciate that speaking, very effective high-stakes public speaking, was vital in their society and in ways we cannot possibly understand today. Although, I do not currently have strong cravings to learn more about classical rhetoric, I do have a stronger desire than ever to learn more about modern and contemporary rhetoric and learn why people have said my own work makes me an academic rhetorician.

Collectively, before this class *rhetoric* is something I have long heard about—I probably first heard the word in 2004 when enrolling in Composition & Rhetoric I and then heard it mentioned again in 2007 in the upper-division class, Advanced Writing. During and after my time getting my doctorate in History, I heard *rhetoric* on occasion and often specifically engaged in rhetorical analysis and work using my concepts of “the rhetoric of implied inclusion”/“the rhetoric of implied exclusion.” Because of this class, I now understand that any kind of speech is a kind of rhetoric, too. But, most importantly, I finally have an up-close, firsthand, tangible

experience engaging with the academic and historical discourse that is Rhetoric. *Rhetoric*, as an academic discipline, is 'real' and has meaning to me it did not previously have.

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