

ENGL 4670
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FORMAL PAPER 1

Minimum length: 3-4 pages (a *minimum* requirement; you may always write *more*)
Due: Thu, 25 Sep.

Review

In order to provide a framework for this assignment, I'll begin with a short review what we've done during the first few weeks of class. So, what *exactly* have we been doing? We have begun (1) to delineate some basic uses of the word *rhetoric* and (2) to examine some implications of these different uses:

"Rhetoric" as an *Essential Aspect of Political Discourse*: We already knew, before stepping foot into this class, that the word *rhetoric* is typically used in our culture to characterize certain political uses of language (often in a critical, if not disparaging way, e.g., "The President did not offer a substantial plan, only rhetoric"). No one would be surprised, then, that our first reading would be a pair of speeches by a US President. However, as we began to focus attention on public funeral and memorial speeches, we were introduced to the thesis that "rhetoric" may refer to an *essential* aspect of political language, that is, the use of language to shape or reshape *the identity of the polity*. This thesis was first developed by the French classicist Nicole Loraux in her account of the role of Pericles' Funeral Oration in establishing classical Athens's self-image; and we saw that Garry Wills borrowed Loraux's thesis to help describe Lincoln's reshaping of America's self-image after the Civil War; in addition, Stow used this thesis to argue that contemporary American society has become narrowly patriotic. A common point of these readings, then, is that the idea of rhetoric is useful in examining the ways in which a polity acquires its self-image, its self-understanding. In this sense, one may say that "rhetoric" is *essential* to politics since it is the means by which the polity establishes its identity.

"Rhetoric" as the Use of Language to Deal with Problems: Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" introduced us to the thesis that "rhetoric" is the use of language to deal with certain kinds of problems, or exigencies: "The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change" (4).

"Rhetoric" as a the Shaping of Desire/Expectation: Kenneth Burke's early writings will introduce us to a very broad conception of rhetoric, that is, rhetoric as the use of language to shape the desires or expectations of an audience, including the audience of literary works. We will also see that some rhetoric scholars, like W. S. Howell, object to this broad conception of rhetoric, believing that the term *rhetoric* should be reserved for real political problems, not the imaginary works of literature.

"Rhetoric" as the Effect, or Force that Language Can Exert: Look ahead a little into the semester, when we turn to the writings of the ancient Greek Sophists, Gorgias's *Helen* in particular, we will find "rhetoric" associated with the idea that language can be used not only to communicate meaning but, in addition, to effect, or exert force on others.

"Rhetoric" as a Mode of "Intellectual Training" or Education: When we read about Gorgias and the other Sophists, the French classicist Jacqueline de Romilly will show us that the Sophists' teachings blazed two paths: in addition to Gorgias' emphasis on the force of language, the other path, associated with Protagoras, connects "rhetoric" to a theory of argument, or what de Romilly calls at one point "one of the surest ways of achieving honest and rigorous thinking" (89).

Instructions

Exploratory Papers: Please regard these formal-paper assignments as opportunities to *explore* aspects of "rhetoric" that spark your interest as we read and discuss the texts. As I outlined in the syllabus, you may use each of these assignments to write on different matters or you may use the assignments to develop a

particular line of inquiry over several or all of the papers. Some of you may not feel quite ready to formulate your own exploration; or, you might just need a few suggestions to help you get started. What follows, then, are a few topics. As you'll see, I've placed these topics in three broad categories that correspond to three basic jobs of work of rhetoric scholars: (A) practical applications, (B) historical scholarship, and (C) rhetorical theory.

(A) Practical Applications (“Rhetorical Criticism”)

1. Bitzer’s Theory as Analytical/Critical Lens: In spite of important critiques of his approach to rhetoric, Bitzer’s “situational” theory continues to be used to examine a remarkable range of texts, from Martin Luther’s sermons to Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and from photojournalistic coverage of Hurricane Katrina to Planned Parenthood t-shirts, website design, and the use of Twitter by Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign:

Neil R. Leroux, “The Rhetor’s Perceived Situation: Luther’s *Invocavit* Sermons,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1998): 49-80. *JSTOR*.

John H. Patton, “A Transforming Response: Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, no. 1 (2004): 53-65. *Communication and Mass Media Complete*.

Paul Booth, and Amber Davisson, “Visualizing the Rhetorical Situation of Hurricane Katrina: Photography, Popular Culture, and Meaning in Images,” *American Communication Journal* 10, no. 1 (2008). *Communication and Mass Media Complete*.

Crystal Lane Swift, “‘I Had an Abortion.’: The Rhetorical Situation of a Planned Parenthood T-Shirt,” *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 8, no. 1 (2007): 57-63. *Communication and Mass Media Complete*.

Lin Canchu, “Organizational Website Design as a Rhetorical Situation,” *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 50, no. 1 (2007): 35-44. *Communication and Mass Media Complete*.

Janet Johnson, “Twitter Bites and Romney: Examining the Rhetorical Situation of the 2012 Presidential Election in 140 Characters,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 2, no. 3/4 (2012): 54-64. *Communication and Mass Media Complete*.

Select any “text” that interests you and, like the studies listed above, explore the extent to which Bitzer’s theory helps you elucidate it.

2. Classical Influence in Contemporary Funeral/Memorial Speeches: In his analysis of the Gettysburg Address, Garry Wills identified a set of “themes” that mark the classic funeral speech (59-60), beginning with Pericles’ Funeral Oration. To what extent do we find these themes in a more recent public memorial speech, for example, President Clinton’s “Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Bombing Victims in Oklahoma City” or President Bush’s “Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service”? A very good source of American speeches is the website “American Rhetoric” (www.americanrhetoric.com), which includes a section on the “rhetoric of 9/11,” as well as other memorial addresses throughout American history.

(B) History-Oriented Topics

1. The Influence of Linguistic Anthropology on Bitzer: An odd aspect of “The Rhetorical Situation” is that Lloyd Bitzer refers to only *one* other work, a work of anthropology originally published forty-five years earlier, Bronislaw Malinowski’s “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages” (1923). How does a knowledge of Malinowski’s essay help us better understand Bitzer’s approach to rhetoric?
2. The Greek Revival in Nineteenth-Century America: The first half of Garry Wills’s “Oratory of the Greek Revival” refers to several important nineteenth-century American writers influenced by ancient Greek oratory and rhetorical theory, including Ralph Waldo Emerson. Select a writer from this period (e.g., Emerson) and explore the influence of classical rhetoric on a piece by that writer.
3. Aspasia Funeral Speech as Parody: During our discussion of Plato’s *Menexenus*, I emphasized Socrates’ ironic tone in the dialogue’s opening section and repeated the suggestion of some classicists

that this tone should lead us to read Aspasia's funeral oration as a parody. If you agree that Aspasia's purported speech is a parody, what does this parody target; that is, what could Plato be encouraging us to think about by presenting us with such a parody?

4. Aspasia's Role in the History of Rhetoric: As I mentioned during the discussion of the *Menexenus*, several rhetorical scholars have argued that the male-dominated rhetorical canon should be expanded to include the writings of more women, including Aspasia's funeral oration from the *Menexenus*. Other scholars, though, have voiced reservations about the funeral oration because of the possibility that Plato wrote it as a parody. Use this assignment to become familiar with this disagreement and, perhaps, to add to the discussion. Interestingly this exchange took place not among classicists but, instead, specialists in the teaching of English composition (in chronological order):

Cheryl Glenn, "Sex, Lies, and Manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric," *College Composition and Communication* 45, no. 2 (1994): 180-99. *JSTOR*.

Xin Liu Gale, "Historical Studies and Postmodernism: Rereading Aspasia of Miletus," *College English* 62, no. 3 (2000): 361-86. *JSTOR*.

Cheryl Glenn, "Truth, Lies, and Method: Revisiting Feminist Historiography," *College English* 62, no. 3 (2000): 387-89. *JSTOR*.

Susan C. Jarratt, "Rhetoric and Feminism: Together Again," *College English* 62, no. 3 (2000): 390-93. *JSTOR*.

Hui Wu, "A Comment on 'Historical Studies and Postmodernism: Rereading Aspasia of Miletus,'" *College English* 63, no. 1 (2000): 102-05. *JSTOR*.

(C) Theory-Oriented Topics

1. The Question of Scope: As we saw during the first couple of weeks of the semester, a central issue in the theory of rhetoric concerns its proper scope. On the one hand, our society typically uses the word *rhetoric* to comment on certain political uses of language. Yet, while reading the H-Rhetor discussion on President Clinton's public speeches on the Oklahoma City bombing, we saw some rhetoric scholars consider the question of whether it is useful to extend the definition of rhetoric to include the bombing, itself. Based on our readings so far, address the question of rhetoric's proper range; that is, Are there good reasons to regard acts of violence (like bombings) as "rhetorical"?
2. The Relationship of Rhetoric and Situation: Five years after the publication of Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation," Richard E. Vatz published an influential critique, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6 (1973): 154-61. *JSTOR*. The main objection raised by Vatz is that any rhetorical utterance is *not* determined by its situation inasmuch as rhetorical utterances help to determine, or shape situations. In other words, Vatz's critique raises the general question of how we should understand *the relationship between rhetoric and situation*. After reading Vatz's article, you may be interested in writing a paper showing why you agree or disagree with his critique of Bitzer's theory.
3. Another Question of Rhetoric's Proper Scope: When we read the exchange between Kenneth Burke and W. S. Howell, we will be introduced to a long-standing problem in the history of rhetoric and the history of literature: Should the idea of rhetoric be applied to literature? You may be interested in writing a paper that examines Burke's position, or Howell's position, or both.