

Re-canonizing Rhetoric: The Secret *in* and *of* Discourse

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Introduction

In keeping with the theme of the 2022 ASHR preconference (Rhetoric *in motu*) the canonical narrative of rhetorical theory’s foundation is in motion, specifically around the question of where and when we begin rhetoric’s story. Some classical scholars have proposed to revise Aristotle at the root by replacing his antistrophic definition of rhetoric (i.e., as the “counterpart” of dialectic) with an alloiostrophic rhetoric more attentive to the otherness, difference, and diversity that have gone unnoticed in the ancient Greek context.¹ Others rhetoricians continue work on the rhetorical tradition that begins with Plato, Aristotle, and the sophists with renewed attention to the Greeks’ misogyny and xenophobia.² Still more recommend a wholesale rejection of the Greek rhetorical tradition that begins in the 4th century BCE³, the adoption of new historiographies that refuse to ground rhetoric in ancient Greek or Roman concepts at all⁴ or making “monstrous” and transformative inclusions that render rhetoric unrecognizable to the white and cis-gender versions that have come before.⁵

This presentation offers the secret as common ground between these different approaches to rhetorical theory’s alleged foundation in ancient Greece. To that end, I introduce the distinction between secrets *in* and secrets *of* discourse. Rhetoric is concerned with the secret *in* discourse when rhetoricians attend to what its canon has concealed, such as the Greeks’ well-documented acts of exclusionary violence. By comparison, the secret *of* discourse describes how rhetoric’s conceptual evolution has made it progressively more unrecognizable to its former versions, turning away from earlier foundations to favor what is urgent, timely, and unignorable. In practice, the secret *in* discourse illustrates how the philosophical invention of rhetoric effaces the women, resident aliens, and enslaved peoples who are subtly written “in” as hidden figures. Conversely, the secret *of* discourse is demonstrated by the conceptual evolution of metaphor from Aristotle to Cicero, who encodes a novel form of linguistic violence into his theory of trope. Rather than thinking of this hegemonic ground as concealed, the secret theorized in this presentation describes how White and western biases have always lurked in plain sight.

¹ (Sutton and Mifsud 2015)

² (Jarratt and Ong 1995, Ballif 2001, Sutton and Mifsud 2015)

³ (Baugh-Harris and Wanzer Serrano 2018; Law and Corrigan 2018)

⁴ (Lipson and Binkley 2004, Pittman 2006)

⁵ (Flores 2018)

Rhetoric's Secret *in* Discourse

The secret *in* discourse describes a relationship to an object hidden within a granular archive. It invites historical and terminological excavation because something remains concealed within an established canon. One example is Schiappa's (1992) argument that Plato invented *rhêtorikê*, which allegedly reveals that the sophists were never truly rhetoricians. However, this invention also conceals other secrets because Plato names rhetoric to cover up the craft's other originators. By this understanding, the foreign-born sophists, disenfranchised women, and the enslaved peoples of ancient Greece give rise to the secret *in* discourse: what is hidden in an original context or the subtle resonances of rhetoric's received meaning.

Part of what is so absurd about the claim that Plato was the first to invent "rhetoric" is that there are so many traces of sophistry in his own discourse. There is palpable continuity between Plato's thought and sophistic antecedents (Derrida 1981, 79). Plato's dialogues enact *prosopopoeia*, "the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave," by speaking in the character of his deceased teacher, Socrates (Foley 2010, 394). Plato also mimics sophistic disputation; his dialogues are often bouts of argumentative grappling that divide opponents' claims into irreconcilable opposites (*diaeresis*). The first appearance of *rhêtorikê* in the *Gorgias* draws upon rhetorical resemblances, drawing competing analogies between cookery/rhetoric and medicine/justice. Rhetoric's naming in the *Gorgias* is, finally, an instance of *paralepsis*, a rhetorical trope that names a topic to negate or dismiss it (Fahnestock 1993, 268). Plato's philosophy/rhetoric distinction *is* persuasion, a secret *in* rhetoric's canonical Greek discourse.

However, if the sophist is ontologically an 'outsider' to the polis, it is also contradictory to label philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as "insiders." For instance, Socrates is overtly an outsider to the Athenian polis, the most famous case being his trial and death in the *Apology* (Dubois 2008, 153-169). The *Phaedrus*, Plato's early dialogue about rhetoric, also transpires outside of Athens following a speech by the sophist Lysias. Like the sophists, he teaches his craft beyond city limits. Aristotle was also an outsider who fled to Lesbos in 348 BCE after Plato's death because he was widely suspected to be a Macedonian spy. Later, in 335 BCE, he established his school, the *Lyceum*, outside Athens under the protection of Antipater, who was a known Macedonian agent (Chroust 1967, 40; Richmond 1998, 3). Although Plato and Aristotle are not the only sources of rhetoric's gatekeeping exclusions, their status as outsiders is

a secret that undermines a strict separation between those celebrated as philosophers and those dismissed as rhetoricians.

Calls to attend to women sophists in the classical tradition draw attention to a second secret *in* discourse: Plato's grounding of reason and rhetoric in hetero-patriarchal norms.⁶ Ancient speeches on Helen of Troy either depicted her as a secretive seductress who deliberately absconded with Paris or denied that she possessed any agency (Ballif 2001, 87). Plato makes women a secret *in* rhetoric's ancient history because he and Socrates openly appropriated their intellectual contributions. Tell-tale references to midwifery give away his ruse: In *Theaetetus*, Plato accounts for Socrates's dialectical method as a *maieutikê technê*, a form of midwifery practiced on men instead of women to "supervise the labor of their minds, not their bodies" (150b). Although he claims to have originated the idea because he was the son of a midwife, he all but admits that his midwifery metaphor is indebted to the sophist Aspasia in the *Menexenus*. A student of Gorgias, partner to Pericles, and a practitioner of midwifery (*maieutikê*), Aspasia led couples "through a series of analogous questions, leading each to an embarrassed *aporia*, an admission of dissatisfaction with his or her spouse" (Jarratt and Ong 1995, 15). Plato does not just dramatically understate Aspasia's importance; his dialogues leave her idea hidden in plain sight.

A third (though certainly not final) way to locate rhetoric's secret *in* discourse relates to Greek institutions of slavery. According to Page DuBois, "slavery enters into the very definitions of life, death, and human beings' relationship to the gods" (Dubois 2008, 27). One example may be gathered from *On Rhetoric*, where Aristotle seizes upon terms like *epideictic*. The term allegedly originates with Korax and Tisias, who reference epideictic as the invention of the enslaved peoples of ancient Syracuse. By this account, *epideictic* was a mode of gestural language, a "proto-rhetorical dancing" used to silently communicate messages among enslaved persons when the tyrants Hieron and Gelon prohibited their speech (Farenga 1979, 1040). However, Aristotle claims epideictic as his own and fashions it as one of his three 'original' rhetorical genres. As Victor Vitanza (1997) explains, "rhetoric arose out of tyranny only to return (us all, ironically) back to tyranny" (326).

⁶ As Susan Jarratt states, "there can be no doubt that material reality for women in Greek antiquity was oppressive, and that, relatively speaking, the first sophists were privileged by their gender, if not through full citizenship" (Jarratt 1991, 63).

Metaphor and the Secret of Discourse

On the other hand, scholars who either abandon or reinvent the history of rhetoric are attentive to the secret of discourse. Rhetoric's historiography reveals the secret of discourse when rhetoric tropes upon its previous versions to transform its existing foundation. It is *of* discourse because it arises from the repetition of the same signifier several times. This secret's meaning is not buried but belated, like an "a-ha!" that comes with the benefit of hindsight. As a way of understanding rhetoric's canon, it means foundational knowledge arises as a *retroactive* (or after-the-fact) encounter. To illustrate the secret of discourse, I examine how metaphor evolves from the Greek to the Roman context and how the later theorization of this trope (and its counterpart, catachresis) supported the interests of imperial conquest.

In the 4th-century Greek context, metaphor (the combination of *meta-* or "over" and *pherein* or "to carry") had a uniquely rhetorical purpose and function. In contrast, the term catachresis (the combination of *kata*, or "down" and *khresthai*, or "use"), which signifies an incorrect meaning or "misuse," is likely a post-Aristotelian addition to the classical canon. Metaphor alone appears as a rhetorical term of art in *On Rhetoric*; catachresis does not. Ernesto Grassi (1980) recalls that the word *metapherein* "originally signified a concrete activity, that of carrying an object from one place to another." (94). The conceptual distinction between metaphor and catachresis is often attributed to Cicero's *De Oratore*, written approximately 270 years following Aristotle's death, and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, written approximately 140 years after *De Oratore* (Parker 1999, 66-68). Here, seemingly older Greek terms are paired with Latin names: *translatio* for metaphor and *abusio* for catachresis (62).⁷ Cicero's distinction between *translatio* and *abusio* trades on the idea that language cannot name all things in the world. When proper nouns for objects, ideas, peoples, and territories exist, *translatio* substitutes one name for another. Other times, however, no such name exists. This is how *translatio* becomes *abusio* – or catachresis – the trope of forcible misnaming. Unlike *translatio*, *abusio* stems from the presumption that the subject-to-be-named is *a priori* nameless, and a title must be imposed upon them due to inherent deficiency. *Abusio* is rhetoric *as* violence. Cicero invents a name for a trope for which there is none, which he forcibly adds back to rhetoric's Greek history in both Latin and Greek.

⁷ Cicero's *Orator* (46 BCE) is a distinct text from *De Oratore* (55 BCE) although both address rhetoric. Both *De Oratore* and *Orator* feature tropes absent from Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, including catachresis, hyperallege, and metonymy (*Orator* 1.92.373).

This transformation occurs in three stages: First, *translatio* widens the scope of *metaphor*. According to Cicero, *translatio* is “the replacement of one expression by another” (Grassi 95). Whereas *translatio* operates across distinct vernaculars, Aristotle’s *metapherein* is only theorized as a transfer of meaning in Greek, binding it to one linguistic context. The re-naming of metaphor as *translatio* substitutes a new term (*translatio*) for an older one (*metapherein*) in a new language, enacting the rhetorical displacement it theorizes.

Second, Cicero divides metaphor into two new tropes: *translatio* and *abusio*. According to Patricia Parker (1999), the following passage from *de Oratore*, widely cited during the Middle Ages, definitively establishes the opposition between these two terms by attributing the deficiencies of low culture to catachresis/*abusio* and the surpluses of high culture to metaphor/*translatio* (66).

Metaphor [*modus transferendi verbi*] ... sprang from necessity [*necessitas*] due to the pressure of poverty and deficiency [*inopia ... angustias*], but it has been subsequently made popular by its agreeable and entertaining quality. For just as clothes were first invented to protect us against cold and afterwards began to be used for the sake of adornment [*ad ornatum*] and dignity as well, so the metaphorical employment of words [*verbi translatio*] was begun because of poverty [*inopiae*], but was brought into common use for the sake of entertainment [*delectationis*]. (Cicero 1942, 3.38.155)

Whereas Aristotle reserves only metaphor to describe transfers of meaning, Cicero suggests that not all transfers of meaning are identical. Those that go by the name metaphor/*translatio* are agreeable, entertaining, and delight the senses. By comparison, catachresis/*abusio* assaults the senses because it emerges from base qualities like necessity, poverty, and deficiency.

Finally, *translatio* and *abusio* retroactively re-arrange the established historical sequence by which the tropes first emerged. Beginning with *De Oratore*, Cicero (1942) devises catachresis/*abusio* well after the fact of Aristotle’s theorizing. He also argues that catachresis constitutes the ground of Aristotelian metaphor as a belatedly discovered antecedent. As Parker explains, this is Cicero’s “little historical progress narrative” in which *translatio*, the elevated and appealing form of linguistic adornment, must start as catachresis/*abusio*.⁸ In effect, Cicero

⁸ “Metaphor, in other words, begins in this little progress narrative as catachresis - as a transfer necessitated first by the lack of a sufficient supply of proper terms” (66). Cicero (1939) affirms this progression in *Orator* when writing that “Aristotle ... classifies ... all [rhetorical tropes, including hyperallege and metonymy] under metaphor and includes also the misuse of terms, which they call κατάχρησις or ‘catachresis’ ... from the point of view of classification Aristotle does better in calling them all metaphors” (1.27.94).

finds catachresis to be foundational *despite* acknowledging that Aristotle would not have recognized this term as a trope on the same level as metaphor.

What is the secret *of* discourse that Cicero added to rhetoric's canon? Cicero transforms metaphor into a vehicle of conquest and displacement. Rhetoric did not describe the effect of the sophist's speech upon the *polis*. Instead, rhetoric became a form of authorized linguistic violence that took people, language, and territory as things to be named. In the *Orator* Cicero's (1939) examples of *translatio*/metaphor and *abusio*/catachresis invoke this primitive state of being with names like "dread Africa" and by reference to persons dispossessed of their homelands ("I am bereft of citadel and town") (1.27.93). Cicero's vision of rhetoric is predicated upon having emerged from a "primitive stage of society." (Garnsey 1996, 38-43; Bankston 2012).

To describe the transformation of tropes from Greece to Rome as the secret *of* discourse is not an admission that Cicero has the last word on rhetoric. On the contrary, Cicero's displacement of metaphor is helpful to the extent that it establishes the possibility of inverting figure and ground. It is less that Cicero authoritatively defines metaphor once and for all than an illustration of how he puts metaphor into a metaphorical relationship with its former self, creating a new meaning for rhetoric that is only available upon reception.

Toward Secret Histories of Rhetoric

This presentation offers several implications for scholars committed to teaching rhetoric's ancient Greek and Roman canon but who are distressed by the durable forms of oppression it ensconces. Reading for the secret would expand upon rhetoric's canon by drawing attention to the destructive effects of uncritically reproducing rhetoric's White Mythology. In keeping with Law and Corrigan's (2018) assertions about "white-speak," attending to the secret can be a practice of *making* secret, refusing outright the ancient history and terminology that function as tacit support for White supremacy by relegating them to hiddenness. As argued here, I would also *expose* the secret, this being understood as the subtending Whiteness and neutrality of rhetoric's canon. To read Greek and Roman teachings on rhetoric for the secret *in* discourse would blow the whistle on their historical harms, constitutive exclusions, and buried secrets. As the secret *of* discourse, reading would expose rhetoric's canon as itself vulnerable to signifying transformation, in defiance of the longstanding dominion that non-sophists like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero have wielded over it.

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