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Commentary on Palmer

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I would like, first of all, to congratulate Terri Palmer for her outstanding synthesis of the complex interconnections between Logic and Rhetoric in their non-linear development from the Classical period to the Renaissance. In my view, Terri Palmer's analysis succinctly points out at least two significant issues to be considered; namely, the unstable nature of the relation between Logic and Rhetoric, owing to the absence of a totalizing and fixed definition of either term, and the still-not-adequately resolved correlation among thought, language, and empirical reality.

Despite the shifting of sub-categories among the rubrics of Logic, Dialectic and Rhetoric which occurs in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, two fundamental tendencies persist throughout the evolutionary process. These are: (1) the relegation of Rhetoric, however it may be defined or subdivided, to a subordinate or secondary position with respect to Logic—which is visualized as a self-sufficient and self-regulating activity that is seemingly autonomous of and impervious to rhetorical intrusion, and (2) the belief that knowledge or truth is accessible only through or is constructed by Logic.

This is evident in Ms. Palmer's conclusion with respect to Peter Ramus' separation of Reason and Speech—the latter being an egregiously inferior activity since it seems to be language disconnected from predications with respect to reality and universal truth. It appears to be Bacon's view as well (though in his case Rhetoric is somewhat disguised) since the primary role of the rational part of the mind is the production or discovery of truths—which are then communicated by rhetorical means. Again, in both instances, it would appear that the mind is capable of rational performance independent of language—much to the dismay of Saussureans and Derrideans alike.

If my working hypothesis is reasonable, Ms. Palmer's concern about the presuppositions of knowledge in a given period, should be extended to cover the entire sweep of history and not merely confine itself to the Bacon era. It is not entirely convincing that Bacon, indeed, concedes to Rhetoric the capacity to discover truths of the same order as those formulated by pure Logic. By incorporating Rhetoric into the logical arts, as opposed to saying acknowledging that all rhetorical enunciations contain a logical component whose assertions may have an existence independent of or in contradiction to the dictates of syllogistic Logic, Bacon seems to be retaining the secondary status of Rhetoric, rather than elevating it to the same ontological order as that of Logic. I think that this disproportional relationship (i.e. in favour of Logic) can be traced from Aristotle to Bacon. By this I mean to say that, in considering the techniques for the presentation of logical, ethical or emotional appeals, Aristotelian Rhetoric does not concede autonomy to those same techniques. Rhetoric is posited as a vehicle for the transmission of probable or axiomatic truths generated by Dialectic or Logic. The Rhetoric of Cicero, while it does separate style, memory and delivery and appears to stand alone, has in fact the function of presenting convincing arguments, which are presumably convincing by the force of their rationality.

The medievalists cited appear to collapse Logic, Dialectic and Rhetoric—similarly according preeminence to the
logical construction of arguments, even though these may also be deployed for the purpose of persuading the listener of the rationality of theological premises—a logical oxymoron.

Wilson's Renaissance Rhetoric, irrespective of whether or not it is a replica of Aristotle's, contains a preponderance of Logic in the categories of invention and arrangement of arguments. These same arguments function as the substance to which style, memory and delivery are applied—like so much latex. It must be pointed out that the products of invention and disposition would be less ornate or even less persuasive were they to be presented without the accompaniment of the three rhetorical features mentioned here; but, presumably, they would not necessarily be less logical. Conversely, Wilson's style, memory and delivery, without logically contrived and arranged arguments would not be at all functional.

This then brings us to Ramus who, as Terri Palmer has demonstrated, does separate Rhetoric from Logic—for all intents and purposes, removing from the former all the deliberative or rationalizing agencies and leaving us with style and delivery, in a word Speech. In such a schema, however, Speech appears as an empty receptacle, without argument or declaration of fact, words without referents, form without substance. Evidently, in his battle to liberate Rhetoric, Ramus has won a pyrrhic victory of sorts.

Bacon also appears to accord considerable value to Rhetoric, not only by assigning to it a category of its own (ie. Art of Elocution), apparently on a par with the three other logical arts, but also by suggesting that the implicit Rhetoric in the Arts of Invention, Judgment and Memory provides an indispensable foundation for the rational. However, as Ms. Palmer herself has mentioned, for Bacon, rhetorical considerations are always secondary or subservient to the accomplishments of Reason.

It is true that Ramus and Bacon are driven to segregate Rhetoric—seen as elocution, use of figures and tropes, effective delivery of a specific message—and they manage to isolate these key elements from rational or logical contaminants. However, either by disallowing ontological or epistemological status to Rhetoric as Speech (Ramus) or by removing inquiry, analysis and memory from Rhetoric's active archive (Bacon), each thinker allows himself to be influenced (perhaps with anxiety) by the prejudices of an age which privileges Reason and Logic as the defining humanistic qualities and as the only faculties which permit discernment of truth, and distinction between good and evil.

In a sense, the isolation of Rhetoric from all strictly syllogistic or dialectical function is a step in the right direction. But, it is arguable that Bacon achieves a truly modern and relevant theory of communication art. Still holding him and Ramus back is the prevailing interpretation of language as transparency or window through which truth and reality are perceived and encoded in logical (i.e. scientifically valid) statements of fact. It would appear that, until there is a consensus that knowledge or truths that do not necessarily withstand the "close reading" of syllogistic scrutiny can exist, and until there is agreement that language—whether literal or figurative—constructs realities as reliable or valuable as those produced by Logic, the models of Rhetoric are likely to remain unpersuasive.

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