

EDWARD SCHIAPPA

*The Beginnings of
Rhetorical Theory in
Classical Greece*

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The Standard Account of Rhetoric's Beginnings

This book is an effort to revise the traditional accounts of the Older Sophists and early Greek theorizing about rhetorical theory. Before revising the standard account, I need first to describe it. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the claims that embody the standard account and to identify its key “facts” and assumptions. These claims are the focus of the remaining chapters in Part I of this book.

By “standard account” I mean the historical description of the origins of rhetorical theory that is found in the most prevalent sources on the subject, and that is so widely held as to turn up in the majority of secondary discussions of Greek rhetoric. I have no doubt that I have overgeneralized and oversimplified various scholars’ positions in the account that follows. It would be difficult to find a single scholar who would agree with every single claim identified. Nonetheless, I believe that the following is sufficiently grounded in the literature to be considered a fair approximation of the standard account.

One study reports that George A. Kennedy’s *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (1980) is the most commonly used secondary source in graduate courses on classical rhetorical theory (Enos 1989, 45–48). Combined with his earlier work, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (1963), and his more recent *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (1994), Kennedy’s texts have become the standard reference works

in English on early Greek rhetoric for classical scholarship and pedagogy from which other standard reference works differ only marginally. Accordingly, my analysis of the standard account focuses primarily—though not exclusively—on Kennedy's texts.¹

The "Invention" of Rhetoric and the Handbook Tradition

The basic facts of the standard account of the "invention" of the Art of Rhetoric are as follows: The overthrow of tyranny in Sicily around 467 B.C.E. and the resulting establishment of a democracy created a sudden demand for the teaching of rhetoric for citizens' use in the law-courts and in the assembly. Two Sicilians, Corax and Tisias, responded to this demand by "inventing" rhetorical theory through the introduction of the first written *Art of Rhetoric*. The primary theoretical contributions of Corax and Tisias were the identification of the parts of forensic speeches and the theory of the "argument from probability."

The story that credits Corax with the "invention" of rhetoric is widely accepted by historians of early rhetoric. Kennedy's version of the story is as follows:

In Syracuse in Sicily . . . democracy on the Athenian pattern was introduced suddenly in 467 B.C. Citizens found themselves involved in litigation over the ownership of property or other matters and forced to take up their own cases before the courts. Nowhere in Greece did the profession of lawyer, advocate, or patron at the bar exist. Need to speak in the democratic Syracusan assembly was less pressing, but opportunities for political leadership came to involve the skill of public speaking in a way not previously evident. A few clever Sicilians developed simple techniques (Greek *technē* means "art") for effective presentation and argumentation in the law courts and taught these to others for a price. (Kennedy 1980, 18–19)

Most modern scholarship tends to regard the story of Corax and Tisias inventing the art of rhetoric as questionable only with regard to details. Though in doubt about the cause and effect relationship between the rise of democracy and the teaching of rhetoric, M. I. Finley declares that "it is a fact that Corax of Syracuse and his pupil Tisias were the founders of the Greek art of rhetoric" (1968, 61). Friedrich Blass (1887, 1: 17–23), D. A. G. Hinks (1940), M. L. Clark (1957), D. C. Bryant (1968), W. K. C. Guthrie (1971), and James J.

1. As Michael Gagarin notes, Kennedy is "the most important contemporary scholar of Greek rhetoric writing in English" (1990, 23n).

Murphy (1972) have all written standard reference works or textbooks that accept the general validity of the Corax and Tisias legend.²

Kennedy categorizes the teachings of Corax and Tisias as part of a tradition he describes as "technical rhetoric." The most commonly held beliefs concerning fifth-century technical rhetoric can be distilled into a series of specific claims:

1. The Art of Rhetoric originates with Corax of Sicily around 467 B.C.E.
2. Corax was probably the teacher of Tisias, a fellow Sicilian.
3. Corax and/or Tisias authored the first *technē*, or book designated as an Art of Rhetoric.
4. Corax/Tisias may have been the first to define rhetoric, specifically as "the artificer of persuasion."³
5. An important contribution of Corax's and/or Tisias' handbook was the identification of the parts of forensic speeches. Though the specific number of parts differs from account to account (3, 4, 5, or 7), few scholars doubt that some practical system of division was introduced by Corax, Tisias, or both.
6. The primary theoretical contribution was their identification of the "argument from probability."
7. By the end of the fifth century B.C.E., written technical handbooks (*technai*) were commonly available to which people could turn to learn rhetoric (Kennedy 1980, 19).
8. Most early teaching of the Art of Rhetoric, including that of Corax and/or Tisias, concentrated on forensic rhetoric; that is, the successful pleading of one's case in a law-court. Since the Greek judicial system required individuals to defend themselves, rhetoric quickly became an attractive subject of study (Kennedy 1980, 19).

Though most scholars agree that the story is probably apocryphal, the following anecdote is often repeated in connection with early accounts of Corax and Tisias:

Tisias was a pupil of Corax who refused to pay for his instruction. Upon being dragged into court he argued that if he won the dispute he need not pay by that decision, if he lost, however, payment would be unjust since the art would be proved worthless. Corax replied by reversing the argument. The

2. For other textbooks that set forth the basic story as probably true, see Foss, Foss, and Trapp (1991, 1–2), Enos (1993), and Golden, Berquist, and Coleman (1993, 5). The influence of the Corax/Tisias legend is further illustrated by recent writings that retell the standard account, usually but not always taking it at face value: Jamieson (1988, 47); Billig (1987, 35); Vickers (1988, 6); Eagleton (1981); Stone (1988, 90); Welch (1990, 113–19).
3. See Kennedy (1963, 61); Cope (1855, 11–12); Vickers (1988, 6); Marrou (1956, 53).

court turned them both out with the epigram “a bad egg from a bad crow” (*korax*). (Kennedy 1963, 59)

Fiction or not, the very existence of the story is often cited as evidence that rhetoric and its early teachers often were not held in high esteem. The story also tends to reinforce the belief that Tisias was once a student of Corax, a point to which I return in chapter 3.

According to Kennedy, the defining characteristic of technical rhetoric was its emphasis on rhetorical handbooks. In addition to noting the emphasis on forensic rhetoric, argument from probability, and the proper organization of speeches (all noted above), Kennedy’s account identifies several other facets of the handbook tradition that can be rendered into specific claims.

9. At least some of the handbooks “included discussions of *style*, specifically of the various kinds of diction available to the orator and the forms of linguistic ornamentation which he could use” (Kennedy 1980, 20).

Aristotle’s lost work *Synagōgē Technōn*, or *Collection of the Arts*, was a summary of the rhetorical handbooks still extant in the mid-fourth century that “seems to have rendered the survival of the original [including fifth-century] handbooks superfluous. They ceased to be copied and preserved” (Kennedy 1980, 19). Accordingly, some scholars believe that:

10. No fifth-century rhetorical handbooks exist because Aristotle’s writings made them obsolete.

Sophistic and Philosophical Rhetoric

During the mid- to late fifth century, a competing approach to the purely technical teaching of rhetoric appeared through the teaching practices of the Older Sophists: Students learned rhetoric primarily through imitating exemplary speeches. Kennedy describes this method as the tradition of “Sophistic” rhetoric. The Sophists were mostly non-Athenian Greeks who could not participate directly in Athens’ politics, but who earned substantial amounts of money as itinerant orators and teachers of rhetoric. Because their teaching was theoretically modest and philosophically relativistic, and emphasized political success above all else, the Sophists motivated Plato and Aristotle to develop more *philosophical* treatments of rhetoric. Hence, according to Kennedy, three traditions of rhetorical theory are identifiable in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.: technical, Sophistic, and philosophical.

Though there is no overwhelming consensus regarding the Sophists, a number of claims can be identified as accepted in most historical accounts of the Sophists and “Sophistic” rhetoric.

11. Though specifically held doctrines may have varied, there was a commonly identified group of individuals in the fifth century known as the Sophists. The group included Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus, Thrasy-machus, Critias, and Antiphon.

12. The most important shared characteristic of the Sophists was that they all taught an Art of Rhetoric.

Eric A. Havelock claims that “of course they [the Sophists] taught rhetoric” (1957, 230). John Poulakos agrees: the Sophists “all taught rhetoric” (1995, 18). Rhetoric is one subject that all fifth-century Sophists “taught in common,” declares Guthrie in his acclaimed *History of Greek Philosophy* (1971, 44). Heinrich Gomperz virtually equates the Sophists with rhetoric in *Sophistik und Rhetorik*, suggesting, for example, that all of Protagoras’ teachings radiated from what he calls the “rhetorical center” (1912, 282). The teaching of rhetoric ran through the entire Sophistic movement “like a red thread,” according to Wilhelm Kroll (1940, 1043). These examples can be multiplied. Not only do almost all treatments of the early Sophists take for granted that rhetoric represented a distinct subject or discipline that the Sophists taught; many conclude that *all* aspects of Sophistic teaching had to do with rhetoric.

Believing that rhetoric must be concerned chiefly with the speaker’s ability to adapt to an audience’s beliefs, Sophistic teaching allegedly promoted a certain amount of catering to the appetites of different listeners. The result was an approach to rhetoric that favored a kind of situational ethics. Based on the perceived link between rhetorical instruction and relativism, a number of scholars contrast “rhetorical” pursuits with non-relativistic “philosophical” teachings. Douglas J. Stewart’s introduction to the fragments of Prodicus endorses the “prevailing opinion” that the “real interests” of all the Sophists were rhetorical and hence “their reported views and writings on special questions in science, history, or politics are normally taken as mere methodological devices and stances bound up with their prime goal of teaching their pupils cultural and political adroitness” (in Sprague 1972, 70–71). Kennedy once asserted that in the tracts of Sophists such as Gorgias, “the subject matter was apparently of only incidental importance — a fact which awakened the opposition of Socrates. The technique was the thing; the Sophist is purely rhetorician” (1959, 170). Bruce A. Kimball’s *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* exemplifies this tendency: “The Sophists thus attended more to devising persuasive techniques than to finding true arguments, and this amorality exacerbated the disintegration of the ethical tradition and led to their condemnation” (1986, 17).

Three specific claims can be adduced from such comments:

13. The rhetorical teachings of the Sophists were amoral: "Writers of such handbooks usually do not regard it as part of their task to tell an orator what cases he should or should not undertake or what should be the limits of his appeal to an audience; they do undertake to tell him how to present any case as effectively as possible" (Kennedy 1980, 22).

14. The Sophists were relativists who eschewed any positive notion of "truth" in favor of subjectivism. This claim is closely related to the next.

15. The Sophists were more concerned with teaching political success than pursuing "truth," *per se*.

Most of the specific contributions of individual Sophists have been interpreted through the "rhetorical" framework described above. So, for example, Protagoras has been described as the "father of debate" since he is credited with claiming that there are "two sides to every argument." He is also often considered a subjective relativist because he claimed that "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are; and of the things that are not, that they are not." Prodicus' interest in distinguishing the meaning of apparent synonyms is viewed as an early effort to correct language used by orators. Gorgias is most often remembered for his highly poetic style and his heavy use of what have come to be called "Gorgianic figures." In short, once the general premise is accepted that the Sophists were occupied chiefly with the teaching of rhetoric, the specific fragments and doctrines attributed to them are often understood as part and parcel of such rhetorical training. The "verdict" of much of posterity has wavered between Plato's outright condemnation of Sophistic rhetoric to Hegel's assignment of the Sophists to the status of a necessary foil for Plato's and Aristotle's reformed view of rhetoric—necessary because their views were excessively subjective and relativistic.

A relatively recent line of thought concerning Sophistic rhetoric requires mention at this point. One can find in the writings of Hegel (1914) and Friedrich Nietzsche (see Consigny 1994) the beginnings of a more positive assessment of the Sophists' contribution to the intellectual milieu of ancient Greece. Due, I think, to the efforts of George Grote (1851) more than Hegel or Nietzsche, a number of scholars in the past century have returned to the evidence concerning the Sophists and have provided a far more balanced and productive picture of their achievements than one finds in the dialogues of Plato—the primary source for the "traditional" pejorative account of the Sophists.⁴ The rehabilitating work of such scholars as Eugène Dupréel (1948), Mario Untersteiner (1954), George Kerferd (1981a, 1981b), and Jacqueline de Romilly

4. On Grote's importance to the positive recovery of the Sophists, see Kerferd (1981b, 8–9) and Schiappa (1991, 9–11).

(1988) has done much to restore the reputation of the Sophists to respectability and to challenge aspects of the standard account. Typically these scholars interpret the philosophy of the Sophists as part of Sophistic rhetorical theory, or vice versa. In most cases, though not all, contributions to Sophistic rhetoric and to Sophistic philosophy are understood as discrete; for example, William M. A. Grimaldi refers to "Sophists who engaged in philosophy and other disciplines as well as those who devoted themselves mostly to rhetoric" (1996, 27).

Consistent with such efforts to reassess the philosophical content of individual Sophists' surviving texts and fragments, a number of scholars have sought to reevaluate our understanding of Sophistic rhetoric. For the most part, these accounts accept the basic thrust of claims 11–15 above, but reverse the traditional normative evaluation. The scholars I will refer to as Neosophistic rhetorical theorists accept the traditional account that a specific group of Sophists taught a relativistic rhetorical theory, but suggest that such a theory was and is justified and appropriate.

A number of scholars—primarily within English and communication departments—have encouraged a return to the study of Sophistic rhetorical theory as a valuable source of insight into contemporary rhetorical theory and practice.⁵ Neosophistic scholars obviously do not accept the wildest claims of the Sophists' critics, such as Hegel's assertion that the Sophists led to the moral decay and downfall of ancient Greece. But for the most part the claims identified above are only modified or recontextualized.

John Poulakos may be the most prolific contemporary scholar writing about Sophistic rhetoric. In an important essay, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric" (1983c), Poulakos specifically embraces the traditional list of seven "Older Sophists" and attempts to describe a definition of rhetoric common to the group. I therefore think it is fair to assume that he would subscribe to claims 11 and 12 above. In a series of essays, Poulakos has described Sophistic theory and practice in terms that resonate with certain tenets of existentialism and postmodernism. Accordingly, if claims 13–15 above were translated into such a vocabulary, I believe that he and other Neosophists would assent to them.

Plato and Rhetoric

In virtually all historical accounts of Greek rhetorical theory, Sophistic rhetoric is viewed as leading to Plato's philosophical critique. The standard

5. In English see Consigny (1996), Crowley (1989), Jarratt (1991), McComiskey (1993, 1994), Moss (1982), Neel (1988), and Vitanza (1997); in comparative literature see Mailloux (1995); in communication see John Poulakos (1983c, 1984, 1987, 1995).

account generally paints Sophistic rhetoric as in need of correction; “Because of its newness, it [rhetoric] tended to overdo experiments in argument and style. Not only did it easily seem vulgar or tasteless, it could seem to treat the truth with indifference and to make the worse seem the better cause. Reaction was predictable, and that reaction produced what may conveniently be termed ‘philosophical’ rhetoric” (Kennedy 1980, 41).⁶

Neosophistic scholars would generally agree that Plato attacked Sophistic rhetoric in order to constrain its influence; they differ from tradition both in their assessments of the value of the Sophistic rhetoric that Plato condemned and in the evaluation of Plato’s account of rhetoric. Despite the Neosophists’ alternative normative assessments, I believe that the claims identified below are shared by traditionalists and revisionists.

Plato’s most thorough discussion of rhetoric is found in two dialogues. The *Gorgias* dates to the 380s B.C.E. and is considered an early dialogue, while the *Phaedrus* dates some decades later and is commonly regarded as representing a more balanced and mature view of rhetoric. The details concerning Plato’s treatments of rhetoric are best dealt with elsewhere. For the moment, the following two claims are sufficient to note as those commonly shared by most accounts of early Greek rhetoric:

16. Plato’s philosophical rhetorical theory was formulated primarily in response to fifth-century Sophistic rhetorical theory.

17. Plato’s philosophical rhetorical theory can be distinguished from Sophistic rhetorical theory by its commitment to truth—even when truth conflicts with political success.

The above set of seventeen claims provides a useful starting point for providing an alternative account of the origins of Greek rhetorical theory. Despite the popularity of the standard account, I believe that it is flawed on every point.

Method and Organization

This book is informed by several theoretical beliefs that may be usefully identified at the outset. The first is that the original words of ancient theorists, the *ipsissima verba*, should be given priority over accounts of those theorists by later writers. The most important practical implication of such a belief is that Plato and Aristotle, in particular, are not considered wholly reliable guides to the status of the Greek theorizing about discourse that took place prior to them. The second belief is that one important and useful way to

6. More recent work suggesting Plato was reacting appropriately to the Sophists’ rhetorical excesses includes Golden, Berquist, and Coleman (1993, 13–28).

approach intellectual history is by attending to the key terms—in some instances the technical vocabulary—found in various theorists’ texts. The most telling example of the importance of this belief (in fact, the example that motivated this whole book) is the philological evidence supporting the claim that the Greek word for rhetoric (*rhētorikē*) originates in the early fourth century B.C.E., and thus it is somewhat anachronistic to talk of “theories of rhetoric” prior to that time. A more careful charting of the development of the technical vocabulary of Greek rhetorical theory provides, I believe, a very different picture of that theorizing—and especially the role of the Older Sophists in that theorizing—than the portrait that has been dominant for many years.

My interest in the precise vocabulary used in the fifth and fourth centuries follows the traditions of classical philology spiced with the insights of two twentieth-century writers: Thomas S. Kuhn and Michel Foucault. Historian and philosopher of science Kuhn argues that to comprehend the history of past theories one must understand the technical vocabulary of such theories: “To understand some body of past scientific belief, the historian must acquire a lexicon that here and there differs systematically from the one current in his [or her] own day. Only by using that older lexicon can he or she accurately render certain of the statements that are basic to the science under scrutiny” (1989, 9). Influenced by such philosophers of language as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Willard V. O. Quine, Kuhn contends that “To possess a lexicon, a structured vocabulary, is to have access to the varied set of worlds which that lexicon can be used to describe. Different lexicons—those of different cultures or different historical periods, for example—give access to different sets of possible worlds, largely but never entirely overlapping” (1989, 11). Kuhn suggests that one of the defining characteristics of a scientific revolution is that “the set of objects or situations” that scientists produce discourse *about*—that to which their terminology refers or “attaches”—changes (1987, 19). In short, in a paradigm shift, one “terministic screen” is replaced with another: “What characterizes revolutions is, thus, change in several of the taxonomic categories *prerequisite* to scientific descriptions and generalizations” (1987, 20, emphasis added). My argument is that the introduction of the term *rhētorikē* signals a revolution of sorts in the way discourse education was thought about. Although Kuhn is talking about the history of the physical sciences, the applicability of his insights is illustrated by classicist Eric A. Havelock’s work. Havelock contends that when we superimpose a later-developed conceptual vocabulary upon the texts of the fifth century, we distort “the story of early Greek thought by presenting it as an intellectual game dealing with problems already given and present to the mind, rather than as a groping after a new language in which the existence of such problems will slowly emerge” (1983,

57). Thomas Cole applies this insight to the study of Greek rhetorical theory when he argues that the origin of rhetorical theory is when a metalanguage is introduced for the study of discourse—including the introduction of the term *rhētorikē* (1991a). Foucault brings to the table a concern for the ideological work to which specialized vocabularies are put (1972). As I argue in chapter 2, the act of naming matters because we never describe phenomena neutrally. Our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors are influenced by the language we have to make sense of the world. When that language changes, so do we.

The third key belief is that classical Greece underwent a transition from a predominantly oral culture to a culture in which literacy became increasingly widespread and, consequently, became an important social and intellectual resource. Both the form and the content of the texts we now regard as pertinent to the history of theorizing about discourse contributed to and were a product of a changing intellectual milieu (Cole 1991a; Robb 1994; Thomas and Webb 1994). I argue in several chapters that follow that recognition of greater “book-oriented” literacy during the fifth and fourth century and of attendant changes in modes of expression is helpful to understanding certain aspects of classical Greek rhetorical theory and practice.

The usefulness of these theoretical beliefs cannot be proven in advance, but can be demonstrated only through their use. In an earlier book, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric*, I utilized these beliefs to provide an improved understanding of Protagoras’ contributions to early Greek theorizing. In the chapters that follow, I turn to the status of the distinct discipline of rhetoric and to the contributions of such figures as Gorgias, Isocrates, and Aristotle.

Part I of this book is an effort to justify revisiting the question of the origins of Greek rhetorical theory and calling into question the seventeen points summarized above. The next chapter is a sustained argument for why the issue of the dating of the Greek word *rhētorikē* should matter to historians interested in the origins of rhetorical theory. Chapter 3 calls into doubt the standard story of the origins of rhetoric; namely, that the discipline began when two Sicilians initiated “technical rhetoric” by publishing a technical handbook of rhetoric to assist participants in a new democracy. Chapter 4 calls into question the usefulness of the construct “Sophistic rhetoric.” Chapter 5 identifies the problems with the belief that Plato and Aristotle formulated a “philosophical rhetoric” and that their predecessors did not.

An alternative approach to the relevant texts of the fifth and fourth century is illustrated in Parts II and III. A recurring theme developed here is that fifth-century texts ought to be considered “predisciplinary.” That is, such texts were produced at a time when categories that we take for granted—most signifi-

cantly, “Rhetoric” and “Philosophy”—were far from clearly recognized, accepted, or influential to the theorizing of the period. Part II consists of studies of three texts by Gorgias of Leontini. Chapter 6, “Gorgias’ Composition Style,” challenges the long-held negative verdict on the merits of Gorgias’ style and argues that a more positive assessment is warranted. Chapter 7, “Reconsidering Gorgias’ *Helen*,” contends that most previous studies of Gorgias’ text impose inappropriate disciplinary expectations on the text. Chapter 8, “Rhetoric and Philosophy in *On Not Being*,” offers a critical assessment of how “being” ought to be understood in Gorgias’ infamous argument.

Part III consists of three case studies of fourth-century efforts to “discipline” discourse through, in part, the introduction and development of a technical vocabulary. Chapter 9, “Early Use of the Terms *Rhētoresia* and *Rhēto-reuein*,” examines the use of the precise terms for “oratory” and “to orate” and concludes that the terms emerged much later than is typically assumed and have a wide range of meanings that are underappreciated. Chapter 10 explores Isocrates’ *philosophia* and challenges the way in which Isocrates is traditionally placed as a pivotal figure in the history of rhetoric while being all but ignored by historians of philosophy. Chapter 11 provides Aristotle’s descriptions of the genre of epideictic as a prototypical example of what is meant in this book as the disciplining of discourse.

It is my hope that this book will provide encouragement to other scholars to explore these very old texts in new ways.⁷ The arguments offered here are intended to suggest a new direction for the historical study of early Greek rhetorical theory. By taking seriously the changing technical vocabulary of fifth and fourth-century thinkers, the resulting picture of the development of rhetorical theory will vary considerably from the standard account.

In some of the chapters I discuss historiographical issues of ideology and social construction. It is my belief that a more self-reflexive stance than is usually found in classics research not only produces better scholarship and more interesting reading; it is also more intellectually honest. But I leave it to the reader to decide the merits of this belief—a belief I regard as the single most important claim advanced in this book.

7. See, for example, such work as Arthurs (1994), Cassin (1995, 411–13), Jacob (1996), Lu (1998), Major (1996), Papillon (1995, 1996), and Timmerman (1993, 1998).