

The Demiurge of Words

by Benjamin Syn

Abstract

While traditional rhetorical theory places that ethos is situated in a rhetor and pathos in an audience, research suggests both—like logos—are cached within the text itself, which alone is rhetorical. Much of this scholarship stems from sophistic rhetorical theory from John Poulakos, Richard Katula and James Murphy. However, it is John Ward's theory of rhetoric as magic that explains how the text can create the illusion of authority and cast a spell on those perceiving it. Ultimately this only works so long as the audience accepts the subjective rhetoric as objective reality. Thus, all of this profoundly impacts the teaching of writing specifically and the art, practice, and study of human communication in general.

Traditional rhetorical theory posits that each of the three Aristotelian appeals, or *pisteis*, exist in three separate locations: pathos within the audience, logos within the message, and ethos within the rhetor; however, just as logos resides within the text itself, pathos too is crafted by the text. As such, logic and organization are within the words themselves, and so is any emotional reaction elicited by the audience. Therefore, the rhetorical energy that powers the logos also fuels the pathos. While these two appeals are within the text, I am going to forward that *arête* and ethos equally exist within a text and consequently are wholly constructed by the text itself—even perhaps despite the rhetor. In addition, I am going to propose that the seemingly fixed and universal concept of history is also crafted within a text. Finally, I will highlight that all these attributes are rhetorical and that rhetoric itself is magic.

Throughout history, there has been this seemingly omnipresent binary between what is innate and what is learned. For example, Homer in the eighth century BC advocated that legendary individuals, like Achilles, were born with *arête*, and the council who ruled Athens at the time of Solon in the sixth century BC advocated their right to rule by their intrinsic greatness, the *arête* of their birth (Williams 24, 64). Twentieth-century classicist Werner Jaeger explains in his *The Ideals of Greek Culture* that “the root of the word [*arête*] is the same as *aristos*, the word which shows superlative ability and superiority, and *aristos* was constantly used in the plural to denote the nobility” (5). However, by the fourth century BC, the sophists (paid teachers of philosophy and rhetoric) saw *arête* as something that they could teach others rather than something that a person was born with (Williams 26). Dividing these two views is whether *arête* is innate—something that is “defined by lineage as well as deeds” (Williams 24)—or something learnable as the sophists proposed (26). Thus, while Plato equated “virtue with knowledge” and that knowledge is *a priori*, “that is, knowledge is independent of experience and that therefore can be obtained only through ratiocination” (Williams 27, 35), the sophists’ argument is obviously more pragmatic: If a person is born with *arête*, then there is no purpose in offering instruction in it.

There is a similar distinction between Plato and Aristotle regarding the intrinsic or crafted nature of ethos: Plato advocates that ethos is something fundamentally within a person, while

Aristotle promotes the idea “that it is the speech itself, not the speaker’s reputation, that creates credibility” (Johnson 99, 101). For Plato, a person either has ethos or does not, but from Aristotle’s perspective, the rhetor’s ethos is located within the medium, which is crafted by the rhetor! Therefore, ethos is formed through language. As Cicero explains, “When you write you create an identity for yourself. Using only words—no make-up, no costumes, no scenery, no music—you have to present yourself to an audience and get its attention and confidence” (qtd. in Johnson 112), so instead of being born with credibility, authors create credibility through their writing.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge advocates that “every man is either a Platonist or an Aristotelian” (qtd. in Katula and Murphy 28). If Plato and Homer are correct, then the best that teachers can hope for is to hone the innate *arête* and ethos that is already within their students and then help these students convey their personal greatness through their writing. However, if Aristotle and the sophists are right, then these qualities are something that teachers can instruct their students in—and as a result, have these students create these attributes through their writing. As the past can perhaps only be understood by recreating it, this rebuilt history could be utilized for modern advantage. The past is but a memory while the future is unknowable until it actually occurs; therefore, the problem with time, (i.e.: *Chronos*) is that the only moment that truly exists is the infinite present. Richard Katula and James Murphy explain, “People see past events differently, according to their interests and their recollections, and decisions about policies that will shape the future can only be based on what is ‘probably’ the best course of action” (26). Thus, the historic past is a distant memory that is only recalled through subjective interpretations, while the unknowable future lies beyond our scope; instead of actually being able to revisit history, we must interpret it based on the limited information available here in the present.

Furthermore, the more ancient the historic world, the more it becomes a time of myth and legend: “In such a world, Zeus can change into a swan and back again; the gods are called immortal and yet can be wounded, as they are in *The Iliad*, by a sharp blade; and men can become women, as in the case of the prophet Tiresias, and then can change back into a man” (Williams 52). From our contemporary perspective it is most easy to believe that all of this is metaphorical exaggeration, as Eric Havelock suggests, rather than an objective view of reality—since the past (like the future) is most probably very similar to the present; however, the past is forever trapped in a temporal prison that ever grows further away. As such, since this history can only be recreated through language, why not recreate a past of infinite possibility, of magic?

When we read about Plato or Homer, Aristotle or the sophists, we try to conjure up these ghosts of the past, summoning them to answer our questions. William A. Covino advocates, “History is a memory spell, an attempt to invoke and consort with the ‘demonics’ and ‘angelics’ of events that are continually receding” (53). However, these ghosts, demons, or angels, are no more than a pallid construction of these actual individuals, a spectral reflection haunting a book. All we can now know of the dead is wholly based upon how they are fabricated in our memory and within the text. However, this reconstruction is not limited to merely persons but also to places and things—all rebuilt within words. These aren’t knowable in any contemporary sense. A person can visit a library, even the great Library of Congress, but none alive today can truly experience the grandeur of arguably the greatest library ever, the Library of Alexandria. It is gone and only fragments of its existence remain. Like Plato and his student Aristotle, the storyteller Homer and the teaching sophists, the Library of Alexandria is forever trapped in a distant past only accessible through language.

Resurrecting the dead and rebuilding lost civilizations sounds like magic... mostly because it is *magic*. All of rhetoric is magic. In her book *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, Jacqueline De Romilly forwards the connection between these two concepts: “*apate* or ‘illusion,’ is the aim of rhetoric; it is also the aim of magic” (qtd. in Ward 58). This may seem an odd notion; however, John Ward in his article “Magic and Rhetoric from Antiquity to the Renaissance” highlights that Plato himself advocated this connection: “All arts of illusion are ‘*goeteia*’ [sorcery], including rhetoric, Plato argues in the *Republic*” (58). Furthering this idea, Everett Lee Hunt explains that one of Plato’s principles of rhetoric is “The speaker’s ability to *enchant the soul*” (qtd. in Katula and Murphy 31, emphasis added). Richard Ohmann advances this argument, saying, “among pre-literate peoples, apparently, skilled rhetoric approximated to magic; certainly, it was an expression of charisma on a plane with heroic deeds” (17). Much of the literature advocates that there are several fundamental connections between rhetoric and magic.

To understand how rhetoric is magic, magic should be carefully defined: “The use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge; sorcery, witchcraft. Also: this practice as a subject of study” (“magic, n.”). How akin this is to rhetoric. In rhetoric, there are systematic activities that seem almost ritualistic, such as the eliciting of emotion via pathos and the appearance of authority via ethos. Influencing the course of events is the essence of Kairos. Manipulation of the natural world, while most often a pejorative of rhetoric is perhaps an apt encapsulation of finding the available means of persuasion. Rhetoric is an obscure, perhaps seemingly secret body of knowledge used by rhetoricians, the name for those who study and practice rhetoric—much like a magician is one who studies and practices magic.

Under the spell of rhetoric, rhetoricians bid their audience in a course of action. Ohmann explains, “The practical rhetorician—the orator—seeks to impel his audience from apathy to action or from old opinion to new, by appealing to will, emotion, and reason” (17). The passage shows that rhetors enchant their audiences into seizing a *kairotic* opportunity or changing their beliefs. Much as John Poulakos advocates, rhetors must perceive a future version of their audience that they then summon forth through language and conjure into reality: “By exploiting people’s proclivity to perceive themselves in the future and their readiness to thrust themselves into unknown regions, the rhetorician tells them what they could be, brings out in them futuristic versions of themselves” (43). Thus, this magic is achieved by reshaping the actual audience into their potential selves.

Let’s look at a specific example of rhetorical magic: an apology. In an episode of the television series *Community*, Annie Edison (played by Alison Brie) enquires, “You think that’s what an apology is? A spell you cast on another person to make them forgive you?” (“Digital Exploration of Interior Design”), to which the answer is *yes*. An apology is a rhetorical device—and thus a magical device—that we cast on others that we have hurt to make them feel better and so that they will forgive us. An apology is a pathos appeal at a specific moment (what rhetoricians call a *kairotic* moment), and when it succeeds, an apology works wonders on those that we have wronged.

Although the rhetorician as magician is able to perform the most amazing feats (such as earn forgiveness from someone wronged), these feats are only effective so long as the audience allows it. Audiences control what rhetorical opportunities are possible: “Gorgias strongly implies that the strategy of a legal defense depends largely on the speaker’s audience” (Poulakos 41). This passage shows how fundamental the audience is to any persuasion. James Raymond highlights how persuasion works, “provided the audience at hand is willing to grant it” (144). Thus, while any level

of *arête*, ethos, or history can be created within language, it will only work—i.e.: be persuasive—so long as the audience receiving this rhetorical medium accepts it, and something that goes only a little bit against an audience's beliefs is far easier to sell than something grossly against these same beliefs. For example, in an episode of the television series *The Big Bang Theory*, Stuart (played by Kevin Sussman) says, "It's a little wrong to say a tomato is a vegetable; it's very wrong to say it's a suspension bridge" ("The Hofstadter Isotope"). Therefore, The Reagan administration's argument that tomato ketchup is a vegetable is far more likely to be persuasive than trying to sell the American people that ketchup is the Brooklyn Bridge. If the argument is within the scope of acceptability than this is the sole limit on the rhetor's ability to recreate *arête*, ethos, and history.

The reason that *arête*, ethos, and even history can be created through language is because of the subjective nature of reality. We cannot wholly know one's innate virtue, because we cannot wholly know a person's authority and credibility, and because we cannot wholly know what really happened in an instance past. Protagoras is right that "man is the measure of all things." We, as humanity, in a discourse between rhetor and audience, decide what is real. Gorgias advances this notion: "that we do not experience reality directly, only through *the words we use to call reality into existence*" (Katula and Murphy 39, emphasis added). Together, through our common language, we conjure reality. Through rhetoric, each of us can shape these words to transform ourselves, resurrect the past, and make magic.

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