

THE ROLE OF RHETORIC IN FOSTERING PEACE AND HARMONY

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This paper traces the origins of rhetoric, its scope, function, current nature and purpose. The term rhetoric is often assigned negative connotation and yet its elements like propositions and arguments of elocution can and should be used to elevate harmony and combat conflict in the volatile 21st century. Ancient rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian acknowledged the redeeming qualities of oratory skills. Classical rhetoricians assumed that everyone knew that language, motives and society could not be separated. This paper gleans applicable rhetorical conventions as presented by Cicero in *De Oratore*.

Keywords: Rhetoric, elocution, challenges, Cicero

Introduction

According to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (2002), rhetoric is the art of expressive speech or discourse specifically, (a) the study of principles and rules of composition formulated by ancient critics (as Aristotle and Quintilian) and interpreted by classic scholars for application to discourse in the vernacular. (b) the art or practice of writing or speaking as means of communication or persuasion often with special concern for literary effect. Eloquence is also listed under the preview of rhetoric as artificial elegance of language: discourse without conviction or earnest feeling. Verbosity is presented as Bombast. Rhetoric is further presented as persuasion or moving power.

From Winterowd's (1975) point of view, rhetoric is the global art that develops theories concerning, and studies the manifestations of, all human discourse. Winterowd's definition introduces rhetoric to all manner of human discourse. In other words, there is no written, spoken or even symbolic discourse that can occur without rhetoric.

Origins of Rhetoric

The recorded origins of rhetoric are undisputed. According to Young, Becker, and Pike (1970), the word rhetoric can be traced back ultimately to the simple assertion I say (eirn in Greek) Almost anything related to the act of saying something to someone – in speech or in writing – can conceivably fall within the domain of rhetoric as a field of study: phonetics, grammar, the process of cognition, language acquisition, perception, penmanship, social relations, persuasive strategies, stylistics, logic, and so on... from the

time of the Greek rhetoricians who developed the art over two thousand years ago, men have successively defined and redefined rhetoric, at times narrowing it to little more than the art of dazzling an opponent in an argument by verbal elaboration (hence the pejorative phrase "mere rhetoric"), at times broadening it to include discovering truth through the art of dialectic, that is, through the exchange of rigorously logical arguments" (p. 1).

The phrase "mere rhetoric" can be attributed especially to politicians and at times their clever maneuvering of words to suit their ambitious dialogue whether it contains the truth or not. So, yes, rhetoric can be misused with negative consequences but this paper will dwell on the positive use and application of rhetoric.

Rhetoric can be traced to Plato and his times. For Plato (cited in Young et al., 1970) "rhetoric was not mere verbal expertise, the art of linguistic cosmetology: it was the expression of truth, which had power because it appealed to man's rationality. Rhetoric, for him, was closely related to philosophy" (p. 2).

Drawing from the classical tradition, in 399 BC when Socrates appeared before the Athenian court that later sentenced him to death, he began his defense with these words: "How you O Athenians have been affected by my accusers, I cannot tell, but I know that they almost make me forget who I was – so persuasively did they speak, and yet they have hardly uttered a word of truth. But of the many falsehoods told by them, there was one which quite amazed me – I mean when they said that you should be upon your guard and not allow yourselves to be deceived by the force of my eloquence. To say this, when they were certain to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and proved



myself to be anything but a great speaker, did indeed appear to be most shameless - unless by the force of eloquence, they mean the force of truth; for if such is their meaning, I admit that I am eloquent.”

The treatise continues but as part of Plato’s apology it reveals two extremes between which the art of rhetoric fluctuated during its development. “At times, rhetorical theory emphasized thought, truth, wisdom – the content of the discourse and the character of the man. At other times it emphasized eloquence and form that is language and the techniques of effective presentation” (cited in Young et al., 1970, p. 2). This apparent dual role of rhetoric is still applicable in our times and appears to dominate issues related to truth and lies plus the artful use of words.

The Scope of Rhetoric

The scope of rhetoric refers to its domain. This section attempts to answer what is or should be included under rhetoric as an area. In book 1 of Cicero’s *De Oratore*, Antonius (one of the characters) as presented in Watson (1970) suggests that

effective speaking is primarily a matter of natural aptitude, although it can be improved with practice. This basic suggestion lies at the heart of rhetoric. Are good speakers born or made? Do good speakers have a natural flare that just need polishing or are they schooled in this art? On this argument, Crassus (opponent) concedes that natural talent is essential for the highest accomplishment. (p. xii) However, these assertions do not exclude those without natural talent in this area.

In book II of *De Oratore*, Antonius’ constant practice with the invitation of good models is seen (Watson, 1970). The art of imitation has been used both in writing and speaking. Many instructors rely on beautiful passages that are shared with students after which they are urged to imitate the same style. The same is true with creative writing where instructees are normally introduced to well written poems after which they attempt to come up with their own copying or imitating the same style. Practice can enhance the talents of a mediocre writer or speaker to a higher realm. Thus, discarding other deserving works in favor of natural raw talent might not work so well with rhetoric.

Functions of Rhetoric

The functions of rhetoric are numerous but one of the accepted functions is to move the audience through persuasion. Persuasion is easily accomplished once one’s emotions have been moved. To that end, Antonius in book two of *De Oratore* posits that “emotions must be felt by the speaker if they are to be felt by the audience (Watson, 1970, p. xiii). Many speakers, including preachers are able to successfully move their audience by appealing to their emotions. That is why testimonies work so well since they force the audience to put themselves in the shoes of the speaker. In this way speakers can foster both peace and harmony if they approach a topic with the two virtues in mind.

Style is elevated in rhetoric. On style, Cicero (in Watson, 1970) believes that natural talent is paramount. What is natural can be polished, unlike beginning with what is not there. In delivery he (Cicero) hold for a nice balance between natural, vocal and personal endowment improved through training. The key word is balance. Cicero supports Antonius on the importance of natural talent; but this alone is not adequate without some training. The attainment of eloquence deserves proper attention and training.

Moving emotions is not the sole purpose of rhetoric; however, it is worth noting that a good speaker has the potential of changing the world. A well written paper, read by an audience can also change their perception on a given topic; thus the assertion that rhetoric can foster peace and harmony.

Current Nature of Rhetoric

Apart from acquiring the prejudicial property of being referred to as “mere rhetoric”, the term rhetoric and its inherent nature has not changed much over time. It still encompasses the art of persuasion, delivery, style and eloquence. The nature of rhetoric is such that it embraces both oral and written forms. Both mediums need rhetoric to thrive and both of them also need training.

Areas like linguistics have also embraced rhetoric. Currently speech communication and the writing of compositions are other areas that have included rhetoric as a section to be covered. Speech communication, since it deals with the art of persuasion has a big chunk covered by rhetoric. Composition writing or writing skills also has a whole section

to do with rhetoric. This makes sense since writing also deals with the study of audiences and tailoring ones writing to suit their expectations. Thus, a conscious effort can be made by the speaker or writer to use their skill in fostering peace and harmony.

Current Purpose of Rhetoric

The current purpose of rhetoric depends on the aim of the rhetor. There are those who use it for the purpose of dazzling an audience; however, such practices were deemed inappropriate by ancient rhetoricians. In book III of *De Oratore*, Cicero (in Watson, 1970) comments: “The oratory must not seem too contrived, too “fine”. It is well for the speaker to be praised with such remarks as “very well” or “excellent” but he should be bothered to hear “beautifully” come too often” (p. xiv). Rhetoric does not foster excess. The overuse of hyperbolic words does not necessarily make for a good speech. Thus, in learning the art of rhetoric, the purpose of both the instructor and instructee is not to acquire an elevated style that appears unnatural and contrived. The purpose should be to communicate effectively and succinctly instead of dazzling the audience. Truth, when spoken with adequate illustrations is just good enough and far more effective.

Antonius (Cicero’s character) emphasizes that talent is paramount by arguing that “although there are techniques to stimulate recall, natural endowment is the prime requisite” (p. xiii). As stated earlier, it is easier to build from natural talent than to start from scratch. Even currently, rhetoricians strive to draw from what exists in the students to cultivate and nurture but there needs to be ability and desire on the part of the learner. In such situations, the rhetorician has and retains the power to use rhetoric for peace and harmony rather than conflict.

Elocution as a Tool to Combat Conflict

Elocution is defined by Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as “the art or style of speaking clearly and effectively especially in public” (Hornby, 1995). Eloquence is described by the same source as “the skillful use of expressive language, especially to impress or persuade an audience.” The world would be an ideal place if this powerful tool was used to combat rather than propagate conflict. An eloquent speaker, capable of swaying the audience can use a well arranged and prepared speech to foster peace instead of conflict.

Eloquence is normally evidenced in the delivery. Delivery, Crassus (*de Oratore*) in Watson (1970) says, has the style and supreme power in oratory. Without effective delivery, a brilliant man cannot impress listeners whereas a mediocre person who speaks well can exert influence. Having the knowledge without the ability to express it is lame and without merit. The power of elocution is thus proven over intellectual excellence without the ability to express one’s self.

In style, Cicero (in Watson 1970) favoured what most of us would consider overly embellished and excessive studied diction. The more emphasis put on a word the more effective it will be. However, it is worth noting as earlier mentioned that exaggeration comes across as painfully contrived, embarrassing and at times humorous at the expense of the speaker.

Cicero (in Watson, 1970) developed the theory that “the emotion must be felt by the speaker before it can be generated in the listener” (p. xviii). The emotional feeling of a speaker in any successful speech can be mirrored in the reaction of the listeners. The audience can even weep with a speaker but only if they are convinced that the emotion is coming from the heart and is genuine. This is rarely true, though; an audience can remain skeptical when faced by an emotional speaker; depending on the known reputation or credibility of the speaker.

A well-known advice in speech classes seems to have originated from Cicero (in Watson, 1970), who through his character Antonius suggests that “the strongest arguments be put at the beginning or end of the speech” (p. xiii). Once the points are laid out, the conclusion should give the powerful arguments. In an attempt to create peace, the advantages of a peaceful settlement should be expressed at the end.

Golden and Corbett (1990) have condensed the art of elocution in memorable words below:

It is a great exertion of the human powers. It is the art of being persuasive and commanding; the art, not of pleasing the fancy merely, but of speaking both to the understanding and to the heart; of interesting the hearers in such a degree, as to seize and carry them along with us; and to leave them with a deep and strong impression of what they have heard. How many talents, natural and acquired must concur for carrying this to perfection? A strong lively

and warm imagination; quick sensibility of heart, joined with solid judgment, good sense and presence of mind: all improved by great and long attention to style and composition; and supported also by the exterior, yet important qualifications of a graceful manner, a presence not ungainly, and a full tunable voice.

The above description might appear untenable but some of the qualities would still make for a great speaker with eloquence.

Cicero and Quintilian on the Redeeming Qualities of Oratory Skills

Both Cicero and Quintilian are rhetoricians whose works have been viewed and treated with awe. It was Aristotle's conception of rhetoric modified and developed by the Roman rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian that shaped the great tradition of Western rhetoric. This tradition treated rhetoric as the art of popular (as opposed to scientific and philosophical) argument. At the heart of the theory, as it was elaborated by the Romans, were the five arts of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. (Young, Becker, & Pike, 1970, pp 3-4)

The above mentioned arts under rhetoric can be manipulated negatively but can also be used quite effectively in fostering peace and harmony. The same blocks can be applied to invent peace strategies rather than combat. The peace strategies could include dialogue instead of armed conflict.

M. Fabius Quintilian (35-95 AD) was both a Roman lawyer and educator. In his institutes of oratory (93 AD), Quintilian described the ideal training of the citizen orator from birth through retirement. He defined the orator as "the good man speaking well." He was eclectic and flexible, drawing from Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, and Cicero and also integrating his own teaching experiences into traditional theory... (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1991, p. 5). Quintilian brings up the issue of goodness as it relates to an orator. Speakers were and are still expected to be honest in their presentations. Thus it appears contradictory to talk of a false orator. If we were to stick to the Roman original definition of a rhetorician then very little falsehood would be traced in relation to a rhetorician. An honest and 'good' speaker would foster peace and harmony instead of conflict.

Cicero (in Watson, 1970), on the other hand advocates ornamentation of language but only tastefully. He mentions in *De Oratore*, Book III that A Speech then, is to be made becoming in its kind, with a sort of complexion and substance of its own; for that it be weighty, agreeable, savoring of erudition and liberal knowledge, worthy of admiration, polished having feeling and passion in it, as far as is required, are qualities not confined to particular members but are apparent in the whole body; but that it be, as it were, strewed with flowers of language and thought, is a property which ought not to be equally diffused throughout the whole speech, but at such intervals, that as in the arrangement of ornaments, there may be certain remarkable and luminous objects disposed here and there. (pp. 219-220)

The Close Link between Language, Motives and Society

Rhetoric requires language whether in the spoken or written form. The audience in any given situation are members of the society at large or specifically the motive of a rhetorician has direct impact on both the language choice and the society. Thus, the three; language, motives and society are closely connected.

Wardhaugh (1992) points out that "studies ... show that the varieties of language that speakers use reflect such matters as their regional, social, or ethnic origin and possibly even their sex; and other studies ... shows that particular ways of speaking, choices of words, and even rules for conversing are determined by certain social requirements" (pp. 10 – 11). Obviously, sociolinguistics come to play on matters dealing with rhetoric. In the study of a given audience, their linguistic, social, economic and even religious background is considered. The expectations of a society must be met if the rhetorician is to be successful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, peace and harmony can be obtained through a careful study of the society, the language, the norms and taboos. Rhetoric can indeed be used to foster peace and harmony through thorough preparation and a prior knowledge of the sociolinguistic background of the target audience.

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