Choosing Between Isocrates and Aristotle:
Disciplinary Assumptions and Pedagogical Implications

Ekaterina Haskins
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, USA

This essay examines several disciplinary and pedagogical assumptions behind Aristotle's centrality in the 'classical rhetorical canon' and calls for a reconsideration of the established hierarchal relation of Aristotle to Isocrates.

Introduction
I was invited to speak at the Revisionist Classical Rhetorics symposium as someone implicated in "reconfiguring the established hierarchical relation of Aristotle to Isocrates." Despite several recent attempts to revivify Isocrates as a classical figure worthy of attention, his name still appears as a footnote to Plato and Aristotle in most disciplinary histories of philosophy and rhetoric.1 In Logos and Power in Isocrates and Aristotle, I argued that Isocrates and Aristotle ought to be regarded as opponents in a debate over the scope, resources and ends of rhetorical education. In what follows, I call into question some of the assumptions behind Aristotle's centrality in the classical canon and ponder the implications of challenging his centrality for the practice of teaching histories of rhetorical theory and, more broadly, for the models of teaching and studying rhetoric as an art in the twenty-first century.

Disciplinary Assumption
Aristotle's central position in traditional accounts of the classical rhetorical canon depends upon a set of interlocking assumptions about Classical Greek rhetoric in particular and rhetoric in general:

Address correspondence to Ekaterina Haskins, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 19 Wadrow Ctr., Troy, NY 12180, USA. E-mail: haskins@rpi.edu
1) Classical Greek rhetoric is a single, monolithic paradigm.
2) Aristotle's articulation of techne rhetorike transcends its historical context.
3) Theory is superior to practice.
4) Rhetoric is concerned with persuasion.
5) Techne rhetorike is a neutral instrument.

1. Classical Greek Rhetoric is viewed as a single, monolithic paradigm, rather than as an arena of competing conceptualizations and pedagogies. This view, although it has been effectively challenged by recent scholarship, still enjoys currency, whether we consider cultural conservatives' invocation of the "canon" as a positive model of liberal education or cultural radicals' denunciation of the elitism, sexism, and racism of that canon. "Dead Greeks," whether as models or as targets, have become convenient stereotypes in a contemporary culture war. Needless to say, either position is guilty of de-historicizing the so-called canon.

However, this homogenized, historically impoverished image occasionally plagues historians of rhetoric as well. One of the most recent examples is an edited volume Rhetoric before and beyond the Greeks. Several authors in this volume appear to take for granted a certain cultural and theoretical homogeneity of Classical Greek approaches to rhetoric, referred to sometimes interchangeably, as "agonistic," "Athenian," and "Aristotelian" (see Sullivan 2005, 107). This identification of Greek rhetoric with Aristotle's formulation of it seems to stem from a belief that whatever came before The Art of Rhetoric, however polemical and conflicted, found a neat resolution in Aristotle's judicious and systematic treatment of the subject. This position regards the history of rhetoric as an evolution from less articulate and less methodological explanations of the power of language to Aristotle's mature art, in which Platonic strictures on rhetoric and sophistic reliance on doxa are reconciled. Furthermore, such authorities as Eric Havelock and Walter Ong lend weight to an explanation of this evolution in terms of the transition from orality to literacy. Aristotle's insistence on definition and categorization in all areas of knowledge, on this view, is a classic case study of a literate rationality at work. While I agree that Aristotle was a great "systematizer," I also see his intellectual project as a way to discipline and often subvert the thinking of his predecessors. That he turned many of the thinkers whose arguments he assimilates into "lispers Aristotelians" (Chermiss xii-xiv) does not mean that his endeavor was merely encyclopedic. By putting Isocrates and Aristotle side by side, I have previously attempted to show that much of what Aristotle had to say about rhetoric was an implicit reaction to Isocrates. Whether or not I have dislodged Aristotle's Rhetoric from its position of dominance in the minds of contemporary students, I hope to have presented some good reasons for questioning Aristotle's Rhetoric as the pinnacle of evolution of rhetorical thought in Ancient Greece. Indeed, if I were to propose one adjustment to the ways we teach classical rhetoric, it would be a requirement to attend to the contestation among the various "schools of thought" within the "canon," alongside the recovery of "muted" voices of the politically and culturally disenfranchised.

2. Aristotle's articulation of techne rhetorike transcends its historical context and therefore can be mapped onto other historical periods and cultures—an assumption paradigmatically expressed half a century ago by Donald Bryant's essay "Rhetoric: its Functions and Its Scope" and restated recently by George Kennedy's Comparative Rhetoric. In an effort to uphold rhetoric's disciplinary identity and ethical integrity in a historical situation when advertising and propagandists were rapidly becoming major forms of public address, Bryant appeals to Aristotle's definition of the art and argues that Aristotle's main points can be easily updated with more recent material. For example, Bryant adds "informative" to the range of rhetorical discourse to defend the vital role of rhetorical training for experts in specialized fields (or their spokespersons). Bryant also appeals to Aristotle's "truth owes its defect to its own advocates" line in order to separate good rhetoric, presumably taught at American speech departments, from its perversions, practiced by certain political campaign managers and advertising firms.

Kennedy's argument is more ambitious: he proposes to go beyond the Greco-Roman canon (the historical-cultural context in which the principles of rhetoric were developed most fully) to examine the rhetorical nature of communication in non-Western cultures as well as among some social animals. While Kennedy advocates an expansion of our conception of the rhetorical, he simultaneously imports Aristotelian categories to describe and explain patterns of symbolic behavior. In his view, stage exhibit patterns of deliberative rhetoric, female chimpanzees engage in "a kind of gentle judicial rhetoric," and crows practice epideictic rhetoric when they assemble to "renew their crowness" (18-21). Aristotle's rhetoric naturalized, indeed.

To be sure, one can argue that Aristotle himself was responsible for attempting to turn the cultural and historical particularity of Athenian rhetoric into a set of atemporal premises. This, in fact, was his method in all areas of inquiry, as he relied on endoxa, "the
received opinions of the many and the wise, to articulate the principles of theoretical sciences, moral philosophy, and the techniques of poetics and rhetoric. His treatment of endoxa reveals that Aristotle relied upon them not because he valued them as popular wisdom of a culture, but because he could distill from them propositions that, in his view, reflected the ability of humanity as a whole accurately to perceive the world of phenomena. Aristotle's epistemological optimism, his faith in the human ability to see the world as it is, is warranted by his own cultural beliefs about the process of vision, transparency of language, and the cyclical nature of history (see Haskins' "Endoxa"). It is therefore useful to "re-historicize" Aristotle's approach to rhetoric to show how the great philosopher's methods were in themselves historically contingent.

3. Theory/practice binary, in which theory occupies a privileged position, is another assumption that buttresses Aristotle's centralilty. Just as the transition from the oral state of mind to the literate gives rise to abstract thinking, formal theory is presumed to occupy a higher plane of existence than the discourse this theory presumably organizes and explains. Friedrich Solmsen's 1914 essay "The Aristotelian Tradition in Ancient Rhetoric" is the locus classicus of the dichotomy between Aristotle's "theory" and Isocrates' "practice," and as such it underwrites the privileged position of Aristotle's systematization of rhetorical proofs, commonplaces, and genres as a rationale for the analysis of practice. Isocrates' corpus, viewed from this vantage point, is but a series of models of speechmaking (or speechwriting), akin to the teaching of shoe-making by dressing up in front of students representative examples of various styles of shoes (according to Aristotle's own analogy in the Sophistical Refutations).

Later, some scholars have come to Isocrates' rescue by proposing that his writings, despite his insistence on not profaning an "ordered art," contain both prescriptive and paradigmatic elements, in other words, both precepts and examples. Isocrates, then, is an implicit, rather than explicit, theorist. This, of course, is better than counting Isocrates as a mere practitioner who supplied Aristotle with handy examples for his treatise (and Aristotle does indeed put Isocrates on display as a literary stylist, especially in the third book of the Rhetoric). Still, the implicit theory position does not carry us far enough, I believe, because it does not delve into the respective attitudes of Isocrates and Aristotle towards the culture of imitative performance—Isocrates does not simply profess eloquence by example, but furnishes an early model of a political identity constructed and sustained through literary performance. Isocrates' performative model rests upon an understanding of language that Kenneth Burke would call "dramaticism"—language is a continuous and repetitive action that shapes both individual and collective identities, that constitutes speakers' political authority and calls audiences into being. To train oneself in all the genres in which "logos expresses itself," to immerse oneself in a variety of culturally significant speech, is for Isocrates a way to become an active member of a political community. Performance implicates the speaker (or writer) in a relationship with an audience, and the speaker's reputation is intimately tied to this audience's approval or disapproval. The audience's response is not simply a matter of agreement or disagreement with the statements about the past or future, or judgments about the rhetorician's ability to use words (as Aristotle's Rhetoric would have it), rather, it either ratifies or invalidates one's very position within the political sphere. In Josiah Ober's words, elite rhetors in fourth-century Athens were engaged in "a highwire act with no net" (104).

Aristotle does not embrace this performative approach to citizenship. Following in Plato's steps, he disengages the conditions of virtue and citizenship from the context of democratic independence and performative contingency. Thanks to Plato, the term mimesis, associated with training in verbal and bodily excellence, acquired a derogatory connotation of unreflective mimickry, of "monkey see monkey do." Impersonation of someone else's speaking style is tantamount to taking on that person's character, and if performance is enacted in front of an audience, the audience, too, becomes emotionally involved in the image created by the performer. To Plato, this scenario exhibits the epistemological and political dangers inherent in imitative pedagogy: not only does it replace truth with simulacra; it also creates social chaos by confusing people about their proper roles in the political hierarchy. Plato's attack on the poetic tradition was absorbed by Aristotle who approved of imitative training only at an early stage of education (for, as he put in the Politics 1338b4, education is to be in habits before it is in reason). In his model of paideia, Aristotle acknowledges the impact of imitation on the moral habituation of the young (providing that imitation follows proper models), but insists that performance is not becoming to a gentleman once he reaches adulthood. Aristotle envisions leisure pursuits and a life of learning (mimesis) as more appropriate pastimes for educated aristocrats (at least in his ideal state). The highest form of leisure pursuits is theoria, a life of contemplation, to which practical arts of politics and ethics and productive arts of poetics and rhetoric are subordinated. Whereas today many refer to
Rhetoric is a theory, he cells it a techne, an art that occupies he lowest rung of philosophically legitimate pursuits. It is a techne precisely because it should not, in his view, be confused with substantive ethics and ethics, the domains of deliberation supposedly unfettered by discursive practices of a democratic form. Therefore, the tripartite rhetorical division of theor/praixi/techne permits Aristotle to regard rhetoric as a kind of systematic knowledge (rather than just a "knack") without granting it too much, intellectual, political or moral legitimacy.

Rhetoric is concerned with persuasion. This assumption is perhaps the most pervasive, if not challenged, in contemporary discussions of the subject, and it can be traced to Aristotle's formulations of rhetoric as "seeing the existing means of persuasion in each case" (Rhetoric 1.1.14) or a "faculty of observing the possible means of persuasion in each case" (Rhetoric 1.2.1). Although it may appear that hypothetically rhetorical can be applied to a limitless number of situations in which the lack of certainty calls for a symbolic intervention, Aristotle reduces the number to three, represented by generic forms of deliberative, forensic, and epidemic occasions.

This gesture, while seemingly reflecting the historical scope of public speaking in Athenian public culture, is an imposition of procedural rules upon speakers and audiences. Speakers select their means of persuasion to influence judgments about a fixed list of possible propositions. Likewise, audiences exercise judgment is fairly limited. In other words, persuasion is not a means of generating knowledge about politics and culture; rather, it is an agency of influencing the opinions and actions of those who don't know better than those who do. As such, it works as an appendage to substantive intellectual pursuits (of scientists, political theorists, and legislators).

Cirumscribing the domain of the rhetorical in this way allows Aristotle to insulate loftier forms of deliberation, exercised by persons who possess practical wisdom, from the pedestrian rationality of the polis. This, I have argued, is a reaction to Isocrates, who describes gow as a guide in both public deliberation and private reasoning. By suppling the terms phronem and lógo, Isocrates refuses to separate these conditions of thought and knowledge from the culturally stretched verbal means of articulating this knowledge. Perhaps most important, Isocrates proposes that logos constitutes a social community out of division, rather than simply rationalize the already existing or political relationships. It is Isocrates who offers us a classical antecedent of the concept of identification, championed by Kenneth Burke more than half a century ago.

The neutrality of techne rhetoric, its value as an instrument that can be used for both good and ill, is an article of faith in many rhetoric and communication classrooms. Aristotle indicates this neutrality by using the term dunamis, capacity or faculty, in his definition of rhetoric. In Aristotle's conceptual vocabulary, dunamis is an opposite of energia, "activity." Conceptualized as a potentiality, rather than actuality, rhetorical capacity is useful insofar as the political agent has to confront those who are unlike him—never to address his equals. Rhetoric is not a discourse that is useful for constructing intersubjective bonds among like-minded aristocrats and philosophers. If we take into account, following George Kennedy, that The Art of Rhetoric is the most Athenian of his works, and that in the Politeia democracy is a corrupt form of government, then we can begin to understand the reason why rhetoric is a dunamis.

To be sure, some scholars have tried to re-theorize Aristotle's formulation of rhetoric in order to avoid the charge of instrumentality associated with the term dunamis. Eugene Garver in particular, in his book Aristotle: the Art of Character and For the Sake of Argument, has reinterpreted Aristotle's rhetoric along the lines of internal ends. He proposes to treat rhetoric not as a dunamis, but as an energia, an activity that is intrinsically good and that, practiced well for its own sake. However, Garver ends up, as it were, drawing a magic circle around rhetoric within which it can be practiced as an intrinsically noble art, and his paradigmatic case study—the Warren Court's deliberation in the case of Brown v. Board of Education—illuminates just how far above the fray rhetorical acts must remain in order to qualify as acts of moral reasoning.

Pedagogical Implications

Rethinking the teaching and application of "dead Greek" is more difficult than criticizing long-held assumptions, because pedagogy is where our historical revisionism hits the bumpy road of contemporary educational practice, with its political, institutional and curricular constraints. As someone with "skin in the game," I certainly do not propose that we abandon the so-called canon altogether. Nor do I wish to banish Plato and Aristotle from it in favor of other figures. Indeed, I would call for adding more items to the Plato and Aristotle reading lists, if we are to understand what's driving their conceptualization of rhetoric, we need to read more than the Gorgias and the Phaedrus.
ato and the Art of Rhetoric for Aristotle. This said, we do need to alle
lange the perception of homogeneity and historical transcendence 
presenting the rhetorical tradition to our students. A potentially 
useful approach would be to consider the canonical texts alongside 
other as voices in a cultural debate that is situated in time and 
place, rather than as points of interest on a historical trajectory from 
Aristotle to the "historical proper." In addition, it may be useful to ask how these canonical texts may 
be assimilated (or subverted) existing genres and symbolic practices 
the historical context in which they were produced. My contrastive 
study of Isocrates and Aristotle (and to some extent, Isocrates and 
Isocrates) is an effort to show how these authors' attempts to carve out 
their intellectual and political space implicated them in 
various types of rhetorical engagement with their cultural resources and compen-
sors. This kind of interpretive historical work accents the performa-
ence rhetoric of canonical texts, an approach that looks at ways in 
which these works implied or constructed their authors, audiences, 
and opponents.

Addressing the next related point, about the presumption of theory 
underlying historical context, I'd like to distinguish between tran-
sitional appeal, on the one hand, and relevance, on the other. 
Recent historical value implies that such value is inherently 
correlated to traces of discourse. This kind of claim, of course, is a thinly 
guised conservative appeal to tradition. By contrast, relevance is 
notion that contains a situation-specific content—relevance to whom 
don't understand. By introducing undergraduate and graduate 
students to ancient texts we do not presume their self-sufficiency as 
'those of Western civilization. We bear the burden of proof. Per-
haps, I find Richard Rorty's notion of "irony" as a mode of historical 
unreasonness rather appealing: someone who practices irony is "the 
art of person who, of his or her own beliefs 
that their central beliefs and desires refer back something beyond the reach of time and place" (ix).
I think it is fair to say that many revisionist historians frame their 
claims as politically interesting arguments, rather than mere 
assertions in "historical reconstruction." A number of my colleagues 
rhetoric and classics, including myself, are involved in what may 
called the "diversification" of the rhetorical canon because we are 
motivated to cultural, racial, and gender diversity as a contemporary 
more the less. The more we look to exam-
ple, the less we may see that we want to see and the more 
weakness of the historical context. I have been involved in a 
couple of projects in which I offered a "re-reading" of texts where 
authorship was either unknown or attributed by later sources. 
Recently, for example, I contributed to a volume on "classical rhetorics 
and rhetoricians," which, according to its editors, "gives special 
attention to the contributions of women to ancient rhetoric." I wrote 
an entry on "Pythagorean Women," a title that united several figures 
from late 6th century BCE to 3rd century CE. Because the fragments 
attributed to these figures were compiled by later sources, the claims 
were often subtle points about the role of female writers. There were 
several recurring terms in those fragments that on their face could 
have been used to posit an alternative theory of rhetoric—for instance, 
the master term harmonia. Imagine what you could do with this term 
if you decided to interpret it as a center of ancient Greek women's 
rhetorical theory! It would be very attractive to posit it as an antithesis of 
agon, or disoi logos. One could build up an entire theory of women's 
"rician rhetoric that runs parallel to men's mainstream belligerent, 
aggressive rhetoric. Doing so, however, would risk essentializing both 
the so-called mainstream classical rhetoric and its alternative, let 
alone naturalizing masculine and feminine discursive agency. My 
point is that, while we do need to go back to seek out authors and 
gender that became absorbed or subverted by the "canon" we ought 
to exercise caution when extrapolating "theory" from instances of dis-
course. Indeed, by doing so we only ratified the assumption of "theory" 
as superior to "practice."

Revising the last two assumptions—that rhetoric is concerned with 
revelation and that it is a neutral instrument—is consequential not 
only for teaching classical rhetorical tradition but for rhetorical edu-
cation in general. Perhaps to teachers of rhetoric it is self-evident that 
rhetoric is not (or, rather, should not be considered) a mere arsenal 
of persuasive means that can be deployed when "knowledge" of substan-
tive facts is needed. Nor is the rhetoric of "historical reconstruction" 
required to express the innermost self in a three-page essay. With 
accent on persuasion, the assumption is that there is something that precedes it—thought, empirical research, orphancy, 
or what have you. Rhetoric enters the scene when all the intellectual 
and ethical heavy lifting has been finished and it's time now for a press 
conference. With accent on neutrality, the assumption is that it is this 
preceding process—of thinking, researching, or communicating with 
spirits—that is responsible for the outcome of rhetorical transaction, 
providing that the agent of discourse displayed the requisite persuas-
ive skills. As a consequence, rhetoric as an art is both exempted from 
more responsibility and relegated to the subversive position of an 
instrument at the disposal of substantive fields of knowledge.
Haskins

In contemporary institutions of higher learning, rhetoric as a discipline occupies precisely this peripheral spot. At the introductory level, it is not even labeled "rhetoric" but goes under the names of "public speaking," "first-year composition," or "elements of debate." My first teaching job as a graduate student was in the department of "Rhetoric" at the University of Iowa. At the time, however, a Ph.D. in "rhetorical studies" was offered in the department of Communication Studies, located in a newer and better equipped building. Rhetoric, by contrast, resided in the basement level of a grim-looking English-Philosophy Building, and was flooded whenever the Iowa River overflowed in spring. I am sure we can tell many similar personal anecdotes about the "habitation of rhetoric," to use the phrase of our distinguished colleague Michael Leff.

Yet it was perhaps this inauspicious setting that compelled me to present Isocrates' vision of rhetorical education as a precursor of the discursive turn in contemporary arts and sciences and as a reminder that logos constitutes our personal and communal identities, not simply serves us. Unlike Aristotle's taxonomy of persuasive techniques, Isocrates does not offer us a template that can be easily detached from its cultural context. On the contrary, Isocrates shows that it is by studying and critically imitating our own culture's discursive diversity we can become persons of practical wisdom.

Notes

For recent works in English see, for example, Terry Papillon; Takis Pouliakos; Takis Pouliakos and David Depew; Robert G. Sullivan ("Edon/Idee in Isocrates"); and Yom Lee Tsoi. One must also mention a new two-volume translation of Isocrates' extant works by Merkedy and Tsoi (volume 1) and Papillon (volume 2), published by the University of Texas Press.

See articles by Rannoul, Papillon, and Sullivan ("Edon/Idee in Isocrates").

For a more elaborate version of this argument, see chapter 2 in my Logos and Power in Isocrates and Aristotle.

See David Depew's "The Inscription of Isocrates into Aristotle's Practical Philosophy" for a cogent explanation of Aristotle's hierarchical subordination of paideia to rhetoric and of rhetoric to justice.

A good example of scholarship in this vein is Andrea Netticola's study Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy.

References


