

How Did Rhetoric Acquire the Reputation
of Being the Art of Flim-Flam?

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Despite its long and illustrious history as a keystone discipline in the curricula of the schools of the Western world, rhetoric conjures up unsavory images and connotations in the minds of many people. That unsavory reputation is reflected in such familiar expressions as "Beware of his rhetoric" and "We can discount the mere rhetoric of that statement." If the practitioner of rhetoric is not actually ostracized from our society, he or she is certainly suspect and is often classified surreptitiously with such other esteemed citizens of the community as the quack, the swindler, the huckster, and the prestidigitator. Usually at the first meeting of my graduate seminar on rhetoric, I have the students spend fifteen or twenty minutes writing out what they know about rhetoric. Invariably, no matter what else they say about rhetoric, they confess that they are aware of the bad press that rhetoric has had in our society and that they themselves are skittish about it. I once had a student who confessed in a spasm of candor, "I took this course because I wanted to find out whether rhetoric was really as bad as I had always heard it was." Nor have editors, reporters, broadcasters, and columnists, who in a very real sense are themselves practicing rhetoricians, done much to rehabilitate the reputation of rhetoric. In fact, most of them will use the word rhetoric in a distinctly derogatory sense.

How did rhetoric acquire its prevailing reputation as the art of flim-flam? As a notorious United States Senator used to say, "Where there's smoke, there's fire." Aristotle, who once talked about signs as being one of the bases of probable arguments, would have applauded the aptness of that bit of folk wisdom-- although he probably would have deplored the analogy that the crusading Senator

based on that maxim. But Aristotle would have conceded that if a particular activity is regarded suspiciously by a great many people, there must be a reason-- there must be a cause, to use the more likely Aristotelian term--for that suspicion. One cause that Aristotle might have assigned for that effect was the bad-mouthing that rhetoric got from his own teacher, Socrates/^{Plato}.

Anybody who has studied the history of rhetoric knows that it almost got sabotaged right at its inception in fifth-century Athens. Schools of rhetoric in that society became threatening rivals of the reigning schools of philosophies. Certainly the most influential opponent of the schools of rhetoric was Socrates, the guru of the Academy in Athens. We discover the grounds for Socrates's antipathy for rhetoric primarily through the two dialogues of Plato bearing the titles of Gorgias and Phaedrus. It is revealing to examine Socrates's objections to rhetoric because although contemporary opponents of rhetoric do not voice their objections to the discipline in Socrates's terms, much of the modern suspicion of rhetoric is ultimately grounded on the Socratic strictures.

In the Gorgias, Socrates denies that rhetoric can be considered an art at all. It is rather a knack, a contrived skill acquired through experience or practice. Along with such other skills as cookery, cosmetics, and sophistic argument, rhetoric could be classified as a species of flattery. One translator of the Greek word kolakeia, which is often rendered as the English word flattery, probably gives us a more accurate sense of Socrates's animus against rhetoric by translating the term as pandering.[∇] Just as cookery panders to one of the corporal human appetites, so rhetoric, with its tendency to gratify its listeners rather than to improve them intellectually or spiritually, panders to their lower appetites. This notion that rhetoric appeals to people's appetite for pleasure nourishes a good deal of the suspicion against rhetoric that persists today. It is part and parcel with all those puritanical objections down through the ages to people's indulgence in the concupiscent pleasures of the theater, the dance-hall,

and the music concert.

Maybe a more fundamental objection that Socrates had to rhetoric is the one he expressed in the Phaedrus: that rhetoric was concerned not such much with what was true as with what was merely probable or believable. Indeed, rhetoricians based their arguments not on what was verifiably true or even factual but on what seemed to be probable or plausible. For Socrates, who believed that a true art should be based on solid knowledge, rhetoric, which was content with the merely probable, led people to make crucial decisions on the basis of opinion--and worst of all on the opinion of the many rather than on the rational conclusions of the one. For Socrates, the lover of wisdom, it was not fitting for a rational animal to be guided by the opinions of fallible creatures.

At the end of the Phaedrus, Socrates presented his blueprint for a respectable art of rhetoric, but the conditions that he laid down for this ideal art were so unrealistic that no one could meet his standards. Just as Socrates never succeeded in banishing poetry from any society, let alone from his utopian republic, so he failed at banishing rhetoric from the Athenian society or from any other community in the classical world. Isocrates flourished as a teacher of rhetoric (he was the Dale Carnegie of his day), and Aristotle went on to write his Rhetoric, which was the fountainhead of all subsequent classical rhetorics. But Socrates's legacy was to create a durable suspicion in people's minds about the legitimacy of rhetorical theory and practice. All subsequent objections to rhetoric are epitomized in the view that rhetoric is a shoddy art practiced by shoddy people for shoddy purposes.

Later developments in rhetoric tended to reinforce the impression that rhetoric was a shoddy art. The grandiloquent orations of the later sophists created the impression that the ideal to strive for was not substance of thought but precious verbosity--the "sound and fury signifying nothing"

that Shakespeare was referring to in Macbeth. This admiration for the glitter of the form rather than for the solidity of the matter led to the establishment of those schools of rhetoric that concentrated on the development of the student's stylistic virtuosity. The full-blown rhetoric that had come down from Aristotle dealt with the five canons of the art: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. But the word-mongering rhetors of the sophistic schools singled out style from the canon and concentrated the efforts of their pupils on the acquisition of verbal finesse. When the cultivation of style became not just the predominant, but the exclusive, concern of the schools of rhetoric, the way was opened to the development of empty bombast. And indeed one of the derogatory connotations that rhetoric has for many people today is the notion of discourse characterized by pretentious words and arty structures.

It is amazing how the stereotypes that exist in the public mind about such mountebanks as the con man, the impostor, the double-dealer, the seducer all imply the person who uses words facilely and cleverly. An image is conjured up in the public mind of the word-magician who spellbinds his victims with his abracadabra and then joyously fleeces his entranced dupes. I suppose there lurks in everyone's sub-conscious an almost archetypal apprehension of the mesmerizing power of scintillating words. After all, the first seducer with words was the serpent in the Garden of Eden. So those schools of rhetoric that trained their students in the manipulation of the enchanting powers of language unwittingly contributed to the suspicions that arose in people's minds about the glib rhetoricians.

But it was not just that the rhetorician duped his victims by means of his skill in handling the language. There was also the suspicion that the rhetorician was somehow corrupted by the power that his verbal skill gave him. If one learns all the tricks to be used in persuading people, one ultimately cannot resist the temptation to use that power to subdue or agitate others.

"Power corrupts," Lord Acton once said, "and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The hedge against the corruptive potential of word-power is, of course, virtue, but even when they are virtuous, skilled orators have to struggle constantly against the contrary tensions between their moral disposition and their aggressive ambitions. The force that wins out in this struggle determines whether rhetorical skills are used for good or for evil purposes.

Because of the belief that virtue was the safeguard against the unscrupulous uses of the power that rhetoric gave the orator over audiences, some teachers of rhetoric assumed responsibility not only for the intellectual formation of their pupils but also for their ethical training. There is a hint of that double obligation in Plato's Gorgias. The major thesis of that Platonic dialogue is that "doing wrong is worse than suffering wrong" (473, p. 59) and, as a consequence, "the supreme object of a man's efforts in public and private life must be the reality, rather than the appearance, of goodness" (527, p. 148).

But Quintilian was the chief advocate among the classical rhetoricians of the need of an orthodox moral disposition in the orator. He adopted Marcus Cato's definition of the ideal orator as being "a good man skilled in speaking" (vir bonus dicendi peritus, XII, i, 1, p. 355). "If the powers of eloquence," he goes on to say, "serve only to lend arms to crime, there can be nothing more pernicious than eloquence to public and private welfare alike." Firmly believing that vice was antithetical to the formation of intellectual excellence, he preached not only "that the ideal orator should be a good man" but also "that no man can be an orator unless he is a good man" (nisi virum bonum, XII, i, 3, p. 357). Although virtue could be acquired partly by obeying the dictates of one's natural impulses, virtue still had to be perfected by instruction. The orator," he said, "must above all things devote his attention to the formation of moral character and must acquire a complete knowledge of all that is just and honorable" (XII, ii, 1, pp. 381, 383). "For without this knowledge," he

went on to say, "no one can be either a good man or skilled in speaking." The notion that one cannot be a consummate artist unless one is a morally good person has been much debated down through the ages, but because Quintilian espoused that notion so unequivocally, his rhetoric text was enthusiastically adopted by the schoolmasters in English and American schools. Until well into the twentieth century, most English and American schools were church-related, and the schoolmasters were for the most part ministers of Christian churches. It was reassuring to these schoolmasters to have such an esteemed rhetorician sanction the official school policy whereby their teachers were responsible for both the intellectual and the moral formation of their pupils.

Rather surprisingly, Saint Augustine did not feel that moral rectitude was absolutely essential if the preacher was to be effective in influencing the attitudes and the actions of his congregation. In the Fourth Book of De Doctrina Christiana, Augustine's contribution to rhetoric, he did acknowledge that "the life of the speaker has greater weight in determining whether he is obediently heard than any grandness of eloquence." But he went on to say that "he who speaks wisely and eloquently, but lives wickedly, may benefit many students." In his view, the word of God was so potent that it could exert its saving properties despite the flawed moral disposition of the one who preached the word.

The fact that rhetoric, throughout most of its history, had the stamp of approval of the established authorities in the schools, the churches, and even in the government assured its protected status in society and helped to allay the suspicions of it that many people had. In societies where a policy of separation of church and state is not decreed by constitutional law, the schools can legally assume responsibility for cultivating the moral character of those who will later exert their political leadership through oratory or through published writings. But in our society, where the moral formation

of the children in our state-supported schools is reserved by constitutional law for the church and the family, how can we prevent the cultivation of budding demagogues? Maybe we cannot really prevent that sprouting. Maybe we have to rely on whatever natural inclination there is in people to ethical conduct. But maybe our safety lies in the providence of the democratic masses. Our electoral system and our system of checks and balances allow us to throw the rascals out. We are all aware that a surprising number of high government officials went to jail over the Watergate affair.

But what about the rhetoricians themselves? Did they offer any defense against the charges levelled against their craft or any safeguards against the seductions of unscrupulous demagogues? Gorgias, a participant in the Platonic dialogue of the same name, attempted to exculpate teachers whose pupils abused the skills they had acquired through training in the schools. Resorting to an analogy, Gorgias said that if a trained boxer or fencer struck his parents or some other relation or friend, "it does not follow that the teachers are criminal or the art which they teach culpable and wicked; the fault rests with those who do not make proper use of it" (*Gorgias*, 456-7, p. 35). Likewise, if an orator abused the power which the art of rhetoric conferred on him, we should not blame the teacher. "His instruction," Gorgias said, "was given to be employed for good ends, and if the pupil uses it for the opposite, it is he, not the man who taught him, who deserves detestation and banishment and death."

It is questionable whether the public would repeatedly excuse the teacher whose pupils regularly abused their acquired skills. That kind of tolerance of a mentor for the sins of his charges is no more to be expected than that the alumni are going to tolerate the coach whose teams keep coming up with losing seasons. Normally, we expect the teacher to inculcate in the students a sense of responsibility along with the skill.

But did any of the rhetoricians preach that the art itself provided

safeguards against the irresponsible uses of it? It is clear from the first three chapters of Book I of his *Rhetoric* that Aristotle is fully aware of the charges of shoddiness that his former mentor Socrates brought against the art of rhetoric. Not only is he intent on showing that rhetoric is not just a knack that can be acquired through trial-and-error experience, but he is also intent on counteracting the charge made by his mentor that rhetoric is fundamentally training in the art of pandering. To clear teachers and rhetoric itself of blame for the misuse of the oratorical skills inculcated into the students, Aristotle also resorts to an analogical argument, the one about the doctor who uses his medical knowledge for evil purposes. He makes much the same point with his analogy as Gorgias did: "the same charge can be brought against all good things." "Rightly employed," he said, "they work the greatest blessings; and wrongly employed, they work the utmost harm."

Aristotle is not content, however, to rest his defense of rhetoric on such a flimsy argument. He wants a more solid grounding for his defense of the art of rhetoric. He finds that more solid grounding, I think, in his doctrine of the ethical appeal.

It is well known to those who have studied the history of rhetoric that Aristotle originated the notion that in the persuasive process, the orator relies on three different classes of arguments or "proofs": the rational appeal (*logos*) the emotional appeal (*pathos*), and the ethical appeal (*ethos*). This is not the place for me to give even a brief summary of Aristotle's disquisition on all three of those appeals. What is pertinent here, however, is a brief review of his highly original notions about the ethical appeal.

Aristotle says in the very first chapter of the *Rhetoric*,

The character of the speaker [*ethos*] is a cause of persuasion when the speech is so uttered as to make him worthy of belief; for as a rule we trust men of probity more, and more quickly, about things in general, while on points outside the realm of exact knowledge, where opinion is divided, we trust them absolutely. This trust, however, should be created by the speech itself, and not left to depend upon an antecedent impression that the speaker is this or that kind of man. (Bk. I, chap. 1, pp. 8-9)

There are two things to note about what Aristotle says in that quotation. First of all, Aristotle designated those occasions or circumstances where we are likely to rely on the ethos of the speaker or writer. Whereas in discussions of things in particular we tend to make our judgments on the basis of the facts, in discussions of things in general, we tend to rely more on the character of the person making the pronouncements. And in cases where the exact truth cannot be ascertained, we rely exclusively on the character of the person making the pronouncements. The other thing to note about the quotation is that Aristotle insists that our trust in the character of the speaker should be elicited by what is said in the speech rather than by the antecedent reputation of the speaker. Aristotle certainly recognized that the antecedent reputation of the speaker frequently disposes an audience to trust the speaker, but he emphasizes here that the speech itself is the ultimate determinant of the audience's trust because, realist as he is, he is aware that sometimes reputedly brilliant people say very foolish things.

In the same passage in which this quotation appeared, Aristotle went on to say that the ethos of the speaker is probably the "most potent of all the means of persuasion." That judgment puts a very high premium indeed on the ethical appeal, but here again Aristotle shows himself to be the supreme realist. He recognizes that even the most skillfully managed appeals to reason and to emotion could fall on deaf ears if the audience mistrusted the speaker.

What must the speaker do in the speech to ensure that this most potent of the persuasive appeals will function at its highest level of efficiency? Aristotle maintains that an audience's trust will be elicited if they perceive from what is said in the speech that the speaker is a person of "intelligence, character, and good will" (Book II, chap. 1, pp. 91-92). Intelligence, character, and good will are the words that the translator uses to approximate what is

comprehended in the relatively precise Greek words, phronēsis, aretē, and eunoia. Since a good deal of the built-in safeguards that Aristotle proposes against the irresponsible uses of the power of rhetoric is implicit in these constituents of the ethical appeal, I will spend a moment explaining the meaning of these precise Greek words.

The Greek word eunoia could almost literally be translated as "good thoughts" but is more accurately translated by the basic meaning of our Latin-derived word benevolence--"wishing well to." A speaker or writer will convey an impression of eunoia if he or she projects the image of someone genuinely concerned about the welfare of others.

The word aretē is one of the words that the Athenian Greeks used in the sense of our word virtue, but its more general sense was "goodness or excellence" of any kind. This is the word embedded in our word aristocracy--literally, "rule by the best people." The speaker or writer creates an impression of being possessed of aretē if he or she comes across to the audience as a morally good person, especially as a person of honesty and integrity.

Phronēsis is the most pregnant word in the triad that constitutes the Aristotelian ethos. Lane Cooper translates the word as "intelligence," but the phrase "practical wisdom" or the word prudence comes closer to catching the Greek sense of the word. Phronēsis is the intellectual virtue that guides a person in making judicious decisions or choices in the practical affairs of everyday life. In common parlance, the phrase "a person of common-sense" would connote what is implicit in the Greek word phronimos--literally, "a man characteristically displaying phronesis."

I have taken the trouble to elucidate the import of the three constituents of the ethical appeal because a clear understanding of the terms might help us to see that Aristotle is not totally indifferent, as he has sometimes been accused of being, to the moral dimensions of the rhetorical act. There is ample

evidence in the Rhetoric itself that Aristotle regards rhetoric as being, at worst, an amoral art. But he is sensitive to the suspicions of his contemporaries about the ostensible immorality of the rhetorical act. In the very first chapter of his book, he points out that rhetoric, like dialectic, can be used to argue on both sides of a question--"not," he hastens to add, "with a view to putting both sides into practice--we must not advocate evil--but in order that no aspect of the case may escape us and that if our opponent makes unfair use of the arguments, we may be able in turn to refute them" (Book I, chap. 1, p. 6). There is here a clear condemnation of the use of rhetoric for evil purposes, but many people find that in other parts of the Rhetoric, Aristotle seems to be ambivalent about the means that can be used to effect persuasion. But it seems to me that the safeguard built right into the art of rhetoric is Aristotle's insistence that the speaker must establish and maintain in every speech an ethical stance.

If speakers or writers manifest a deficiency in any one or all of the constituents of the Aristotelian ethos, they will diminish, if not entirely destroy, their credibility and consequently their effectiveness with the audience. The crucial condition, of course, is that they must manifest, or the audience must detect, the deficiency. Clever speakers and writers might be able to conceal their malevolence or their moral depravity or their stupidity for a considerable period of time--and historically some of them have succeeded extravagantly. But maybe our ultimate protection against the duplicity of the clever rascal rests in that fact of life best expressed by Abraham Lincoln: "You may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can't fool all of the people all the time." And once charlatans reveal who they really are and what their true intentions are, their ethos is destroyed, and their effectiveness as persuaders is forever nullified. We all could cite an example or two from life or from legend of the knave who was finally exposed and permanently silenced.

"Yes," you say, "but what about the ones who got away?" Well, they will just have to be counted among the ineluctable hazards of life. Fortunately, the really dangerous scoundrels seldom or never escape eventual exposure. Occasionally, the nickel-and-dime mountebanks go to their graves with an unbroken record of successful scams, but even when they succeed, the damage suffered by their victims is usually slight.

If, as I have been arguing, Aristotle fitted the legacy of his rhetorical formulations with its own set of built-in safeguards, how did rhetoric fare in successive ages and cultures? Did it continue to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous aspersions? Or did the built-in safeguards rehabilitate its shaky fortunes and its shady reputation?

As that legacy was inherited and developed by the Roman rhetoricians, it seemed to be improved. Both Cicero and Quintilian made rhetoric the keystone discipline in a liberal-arts curriculum, and that humane kind of education tended to produce more responsible, more altruistic, practitioners of the craft. And we have already seen that Quintilian further rectified rhetoric's course by insisting that the teacher of rhetoric be responsible for the moral formation of his pupils as well as for their intellectual cultivation. The Roman respect for law also tended to keep rhetoricians on the strait and narrow path and made the penalties of malfeasance much more certain and severe than they had been. Still, as we learn from Cicero's rhetoric texts and from his real-life orations, the senate chambers and the courtrooms of ancient Rome were perilous places indeed, and autocratic emperors, who could order a summary decapitation with the flick of an eyebrow, often inhibited crusading orators from speaking the truth or the whole truth.

The practice of declamation, however, which the Romans had inherited from the rhetors of the Second Sophistic period, set rhetoric off in a direction that did not enhance its reputation. Requiring students to compose pro and con speeches for mock-court trials, called controversiae, or mock-political situations,

suasoriae, established the tradition of the debate, which has persisted in the educational system of the Western world right down to the present day. But these practices also aroused suspicions about rhetorical training in the schools. The demand that students work up a case for the two sides of an issue elicited the same kind of objections about indifference to the truth that Socrates had once levelled against rhetoricians in his Gorgias and Phaedrus.

Does the reputation of rhetoric improve when it moves into the medieval period? From one point of view, it does improve, for rhetoric became a part of the trivium in the undergraduate curriculum of the medieval universities. It is well known, however, that although it occupied a privileged position in the curriculum, along with grammar and logic, rhetoric was overshadowed by logic. The main contributions that rhetoric made to university education in the Middle Ages were two new forms of persuasive discourse: the art of preaching (ars praedicandi) and the art of letter-writing (ars dictaminis). Both of these arts were of special value to clerics, who constituted the largest segment of the student population of the universities at the time. Because rhetorical skills were largely used to conduct ecclesiastical affairs, a good deal of the stigma that had existed in the public's mind about rhetoric disappeared. After all, if the preacher was dispensing instruction or guidance based on the Word of God as that was revealed in the Scriptures, the congregation was not likely to regard the preacher as a flim-flam artist. The ethos of the speaker was established almost as an automatic concomitant of ordination to the priestly ranks, and the message he transmitted to his listeners was certified by the authority of the Church that dispensed the canonical interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. Undoubtedly, there were rascally abbots and monks and friars in those days, but Christ's promise to his disciples, in the very last words of Matthew's gospel, "I am with you always, to the end of time" (Matt. 28:20), seemed to assure the laity that even fraudulent clerics could not seriously jeopardize the mission that Christ had delegated to

to his followers: "Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples" (Matt. 28:19).

Two of the interests that the medieval Church of the Western World appropriated from the Roman Empire were the interest in law and the interest in civil administration. The clerical interest in law manifested itself in the formulation of the Church's canon law, and the clerical interest in civil administration manifested itself in the episcopal supervision of the widely scattered branches of the universal or "catholic" Church, with its center in Rome. The dispensation of the rulings of canon law and the execution of the managerial aspects of the Church's affairs was exercised, to a great extent, through the medium of the written letter. Even in Aristotle's time, persuasive discourse appeared in both the spoken and the written forms, but in the Middle Ages, when the province of Holy Mother the Church extended beyond the boundaries of a single state or country, much of its business had to be conducted through the formal letter. So there was great demand for secretaries who could compose those letters, and the medieval schools responded to that demand by setting up courses in which the strategies of classical rhetoric were applied to letter-writing. Even though most of those letters were written by clerics, we are not to suppose that none of those letter-writers were flim-flam sharpies. But these clerical sharpies seem not to have been prominent enough or prevalent enough to have given the rhetoric of letter-writing a bad name in the Middle Ages. Moreover, since these business letters were usually read in the quiet of one's study and were detached, sometimes by thousands of miles, from the person who wrote them, readers were less susceptible to being bamboozled by the artifices of the letter-writer.

The art of preaching and the art of letter-writing continued to be a prominent part of rhetorical training in the Renaissance schools. Preaching, of course, was confined to the province of the clergy, but letter-writing extended its purview to include the diplomatic affairs of state and the

monetary transactions of merchants and bankers. Since the writers of the epistles that dealt with secular matters lacked the authoritative aura that usually attended ecclesiastical letters, those writers had to be more skilled at effecting persuasion. At the same time, they were likely to be less scrupulous than the clerical scribes in the means they used to effect persuasion. Professional letter-writers set up shop to serve those who could not write at all or who could not write well enough to succeed at what they were after. And those who could not afford to hire a professional letter-writer bought one of the formulary handbooks of letter-writing and wrote their letters, as it were, by the numbers. These and other circumstances of the time opened the gates to abuses of the epistolary art, with the result that the reputation of rhetoric was once again tarnished.

The invention of printing, of course, considerably extended the range and even the effectiveness of the rhetorician's communications. Father Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan have told us, in a number of books and articles, about the consequences of Gutenberg's new technology. One of the consequences was that the printed book made possible the transmission of an author's message to a much larger and more dispersed audience. An orator could deliver a common message to a large number of listeners, but those listeners had to be physically present within ear-range when the speech was orally enunciated; but the printed book could deliver a uniform text to readers thousands of miles beyond the range of the author's voice and ultimately to readers who lived hundreds of years after the author died. In a manuscript culture, a handwritten letter could deliver the author's message to readers who existed outside the space and time dimension of the author, but if more than one copy of that message was produced, the likelihood was that the text, in its various copies, would no longer be uniform. In our time, of course, carbon paper and the xerox machine have made it possible for several uniform copies of a typed or handwritten text to be produced, but as early as the last quarter of the

fifteenth century, the invention of movable type provided the technology by which multiple copies of a uniform text could be produced, and once the technology for producing paper cheaply was invented, hundreds of people could afford to buy a handy, durable copy of the uniform text.

The electronic revolution of our age has immeasurably extended the range and the effectiveness of the rhetorician's efforts at communication. In the first stage of the electronic revolution, the new technologies for delivering a message to distant places made use of the medium of sound--the telegraph, the telephone, and the radio. Then we got the wonderful inventions that for the first time in the history of the world made possible the preservation of the sounds of the actual words uttered by a speaker--the vinyl record and later the tape-recorder. Since the end of World War II, there has been a veritable explosion of new electronic devices for transmitting messages--the teletype machine, the television set, the video-tape recorder, and finally the computer, which has in turn spawned maybe the most marvelous of all the verbal machines, the word-processor. It is too early now to tell just how extensively the word-processor will revolutionize the writing process and product, but the door is wide open now for some Quintilian to come along and compose the definitive rhetoric for this wondrous facilitator.

The exercise of rhetoric is now more pervasive and dominant in our society than it has ever been, and now the rhetorician's message can reach every nook and corner of the global village. The potential of the rhetorician's craft for good or for evil is awesome. The effectiveness of the dominant rhetoricians in our society, the Madison Avenue designers of ad copy, is a pertinent example of the persuasive potential of the spoken and the written word. I do not perceive that the reputation of rhetoric as the art of flim-flam has faded in our time. There are lots of people--maybe the majority of them--who are not aware that rhetoric is the craft behind all those ubiquitous advertising messages that constantly bombard their consciousness, but those who are aware of rhetoric,

even vaguely, tend to be skittish in its presence. For them, rhetoric is a dirty word.

Rhetoric got off to a bad start. Socrates, one of the most prestigious and influential teachers of fifth-century Athens, bad-mouthed rhetoric while it was a flourishing enterprise in his society, and Aristotle, who tried to rescue rhetoric's reputation, increased rather than diminished people's suspicions of it because of his ambivalent pronouncements. Aristotle's defense of rhetoric on the score of its ethical posture was based primarily on the proposition that rhetoric, like any other art, was an amoral pursuit, but through his Rhetoric, he tended to undermine that premise by suggesting that certain strategies or arguments used to defend a certain position could be flip-flopped to attack the same position. Even modern students of the Rhetoric sometimes find it hard to defend Aristotle against the charge of doublespeaking.

The sophistic emphasis on the stylistic elegance of a discourse did not serve rhetoric's reputation well either. The common epithet "mere rhetoric" stems primarily, I think, from this emphasis on style rather than on substance. And of course down through the ages, rhetoric's name has been badly tarnished by demagogues who used their eloquence to deceive people. Gorgias's argument that the teacher cannot be blamed for what their pupils do with the skills that he helped them acquire has never been very convincing for many people. They are more convinced by the old adage that something is to be judged by the company it keeps.

Why rhetoric has always been judged in relation to its evil practitioners rather than its noble practitioners has always puzzled me. I am aware, of course, that scoundrels usually get more coverage by the media than saints do, but I am still puzzled that rhetoric rarely gets judged on the records of those practitioners who used their verbal skills to benefit society. It is safe to assert that there have been more beneficial writers and speakers than there have been destructive writers and speakers. Some of the most glorious

literature of a nation is recorded in the discourses of its citizens who used words to change the attitudes or affect the actions of their fellow citizens. Each of us could nominate our own favorite utterances if we were asked to do so. Two examples that come readily to my own mind are a written piece and a spoken piece composed by the same man in our own time: Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and "I Have a Dream." Why do we not associate rhetoric with noble utterances like those rather than with Mein Kampf? Noble utterances make us proud to be a part of the human race. They send tingles racing up and down our spine, and they often put a lump in our throat. They certainly make us stand up straighter and dauntlessly face what we have to face.

Still, you should not forget that this defense of rhetoric is being dispensed by a rhetorician. What assurance have you that this rhetorician is any more trustworthy than other flim-flam artists you have known? Maybe all of you should check your wallet or your handbag before you leave the hall. What I will say finally on this score is that if you had learned well the lessons that rhetoric has to teach, you would be able to discriminate the deceiver from the truth-sayer. You would know now whether to run me out of town on a rail or to hail me with thunderous applause.

NOTES

¹ Plato, Gorgias, trans. W. Hamilton, Penguin Classics (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1960), sec. 463, p. 44.

² Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1961). References to this text will be made parenthetically by Book, chapter, and section.

³ Saint Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Doctrine), trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), Book IV, chap. xxvii, section 59, p. 164.

⁴ The Rhetoric of Aristotle, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932), Book I, chap. 1, p. 7. All subsequent quotations will be documented parenthetically with reference to this translation.