The Origins and Early History of Rhetoric

Rhetoric did not originate at a single moment in history. Rather, it was an evolving, developing consciousness about the relationship between thought and expression.

—Richard Leo Enos

The history of rhetoric does not have a precise beginning point any more than the history of dance or painting. When human beings recognized in movement the capacity, not just for mobility, but also for expression, dance began. When pigments were employed to tell a story by producing images on a wall, painting began. When people found in symbols the capacity, not merely for communicating meaning, but also for accomplishing their goals, rhetoric began. Thus, though rhetoric's origin as the planned use of language to achieve goals cannot be known, its systematic presentation within a particular cultural tradition can be located historically.

The history of rhetoric in the Western tradition begins, as do several other histories or arts or disciplines, with that ancient cluster of highly inventive societies, the Greek city-states of the eighth through the third centuries BCE. Rhetoric scholar Richard Leo Enos points out that theories about the power of language were already present in the writings of Homer in the ninth century. In Homeric writing, Enos finds three functions of language: the "heuristic, eristic, and protreptic."[1]

Briefly, the heuristic function is a capacity for discovery, whether of facts, insights, or even of "self-awareness."[2] The eristic function of language draws our attention to "the inherent power of the language itself."[3] The eristic function identifies language's capacity to captivate, to motivate, or even to injure. Finally, the protreptic function of discourse expresses language's ability to " 'turn' or direct human thought...."[4] That is, words afforded human agents the possibility for persuading others to think as they thought. These instrumental functions of language were recognized centuries before they became the foundation for a systematic study of rhetoric.

In addition to these functions of language, anyone dependent upon words for their livelihood also recognized their dependence upon audiences. Certainly, concern for holding the audience's attention pre-dates the formal study of rhetoric. Literary scholar Brian Boyd writes, "Greek bards reciting or singing about their gods and heroes already belonged to a system of competing for attention." Thus, bards had to be innovators and inventors, wordsmiths willing to vary the pace, length, and manner of telling their stories to compete with other existing stories or to make a familiar story stand out as if being told for the first time. Boyd suggests that Homer experimented with the method of compression, or shortening the time in which critical actions took place in the war between Athens and Troy. "As in the Iliad, Homer again in the Odyssey prefers the intensity of compression to the slackness of mere sequence."[5] So, the resources of language were widely recognized and experimented with centuries before formal rhetorical studies appeared and took hold in the Greek city-states of the fifth century BCE. What conditions prepared the way for a more organized approach to rhetoric?

THE RISE OF RHETORIC

The origins of rhetoric may be traced to a Greek city on the island of Sicily in the fifth century BCE, and to a shadowy figure known as Empedocles (490–430). This poet, magician, physician, and orator was also legendary for his speaking ability, which he apparently employed to oppose powerful rulers of his time. The studies Empedocles was known for—poetry, magic, medicine, and oratory—reflect an ancient understanding of words and their power, which strikes modern readers as strange. The reasons for these connections, however, will be explored in this and the following chapter.

Rhetoric as a systematic discipline also originated in Sicily, in the city of Syracuse around 467 BCE. The tyrant Hieron had died, and disputes arose over which families were due land that he had seized. An orator named Corax offered training in judicial argument to citizens defending their claims in court. Corax also apparently played a role in directing Syracuse toward democratic reforms.[6]

Corax's approach to teaching public speaking was quickly adopted by others and was carried to Athens and other Greek city-states by professional teachers and practitioners of rhetoric known as Sophists. Many Sophists were attracted to the flourishing city of Athens, where they wrote speeches and provided courses in rhetoric for anyone able to pay their high fees. Athens' relatively open atmosphere and emerging democratic political system proved fertile ground for rhetoric's growth.

Athenian Democratic Reforms

Why did the Sophists find such a ready market for their rhetorical services at this particular time? Rhetoric's popularity in Greece had much to do with dramatic changes affecting several city-states, particularly Athens, in the sixth and fifth centuries. As historian of rhetoric John Poulakos writes, "when

the Sophists appeared on the horizon of the Hellenic city-states, they found themselves in the midst of an enormous cultural change: from aristocracy to democracy."

The statesman Solon (638–559 BCE) had implemented major political reforms in Athens, and leaders such as Cleisthenes, Ephialtes, and especially Pericles (495–429 BCE) fostered later democratic changes. Poulakos notes that these changes in the Greek political system "created the need for a new kind of education, an education consistent with the new politics of limited democracy."[7] The middle class grew in power as "family name, class origin, or property size" no longer dictated who could be involved in the courts and legislative assemblies.[8] Whereas aristocratic families with great wealth could still afford "to buy the training necessary for leadership in the Assembly, Council and courts," the new system "guaranteed a broader distribution of power across different backgrounds, occupations, and economic statuses than ever before."[9]

Athenian democracy was a remarkable political innovation. "For the first time in the recorded history of a complex society," writes Josiah Ober, "*all* native free-born males, irrespective of their ability, were political equals, with equal rights to debate and to determine state policy."[10] While women, slaves, and foreigners were conspicuously excluded from power, cracks were beginning to appear in the wall separating ruling elites and the general public. The distinction between the mass of ordinary citizens and the aristocracy in ancient Athens involved, among other things, the ability to make a persuasive speech. Thus, the Sophists' offer to teach rhetoric to anyone regardless of class appeared to many a means of gaining entrance to previously inaccessible arenas of power.

The Polis and Politics. As a larger number of men entered politics, the key factor in personal success and public influence was no longer class but speaking skill. Every free male citizen enjoyed the right of *isegoria*, a guarantee of the opportunity to speak freely in public assemblies. Democratic reforms "completed a process of democratization...allowing for, even requiring, Athenian males to develop the ability to listen, understand, and speak about deliberative and judicial affairs of the city."[11] Moreover, courts, the legislative assembly, and the numerous festivals and funerals that were central to life in the Greek city-state all depended on the capacity of citizens to speak before an audience.

The *polis* or independent city-state, more than anything else, defined what it meant to be Greek. The ancient Greeks, according to historian H.D.F. Kitto, had an "addiction to the independent polis—it was the polis, to the Greek mind, which marked the difference between the Greek and the barbarian: it was the polis which enabled him to live the full, intelligent and responsible life which he wished to live."[12]

With democratic reforms, the political life of the *polis* came to be managed by oratory and debate. Tyrants may have ruled other nations by "torture and the lash: the Greeks took their decisions by persuading and debate."[13] Under such circumstances, the need for rhetorical training was apparent to everyone. Apparent, perhaps, but not available to everyone. The effect of Athenian democratic reforms on women will be considered later in this chapter.

Education in Athens

The Sophists, then, offered Greek citizens—that is, free men—education in the arts of discourse, especially training in inventing arguments and presenting them in a persuasive manner to a large audience. Newly enfranchised citizens created a market for something not previously available in Greece, education in the effective public use of reason and speech.[14]

In most of what we think of as ancient Greece, education was divided into those studies that provided moral strength to the soul—mainly music and literature—and gymnastics that strengthened the body. Higher education in our contemporary sense, that is, advanced studies intended to sharpen the intellect, was virtually unknown. Boys began their schooling at around age seven, and typically had a music teacher, a writing and reading instructor (who also taught them numbers), and an athletic trainer. Because "the Athenian democracy functioned on the assumption that all male citizens were literate," most free males received this basic education. Education was focused on developing useful skills and cultivating traditional Greek values.[15]

For this reason, Jacqueline de Romilly writes that the Sophists introduced a "great novelty" into Athenian life by offering education to anyone who could afford it. Formal education was rather simple, and limited in its availability to a small portion of the populace. "There was nothing that even remotely resembled what we call further education in Athens" prior to the Sophists, she writes.[16]

Training in Rhetoric. Sophists "proudly advertised [their] ability to teach a young man 'the proper care of his personal affairs, so that he may best manage his own household, and also of the State's affairs, so as to become a real power in the city, both as a speaker and man of action.'"[17] Such advertising proved irresistible to many, and the Sophists grew in both wealth and influence. The new kind of education offered by the Sophists did not train one in a particular craft like masonry. Rather, rhetorical education provided students mastery of the skills of language necessary to participate in political life and succeed in financial ventures. The Sophists' education in rhetoric, then, opened a doorway to success and influence for many Greek citizens. Rhetoric took hold as a major aspect of culture and education, a position it maintained for much of subsequent Western history.[18]

The ability to speak persuasively had previously been viewed as a natural talent, or even as a gift from the gods. Actual training in rhetoric, however, gradually became the very foundation of Greek education, and was the principal sign of an educated and influential person. "The influence of the spoken word in fifth- or fourth-century Athens was extremely strong," writes H. D. Rankin, "and can hardly be overemphasized."[19]

Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong suggest that this was true in part because the Greeks assumed that "human deliberation and action are responsible for human destinies and can be shaped by thought and speech."[20] This assumption marks a profound change in thought, for it indicates that the Greek public gradually rejected the belief that destiny was shaped by the gods, and accepted in its place a new concept: The destiny of the individual and of the *polis* is formed by human

rationality and persuasive speech. Moreover, to the Greek mind speech was not simply a means of expression, but a force—an instrument of change.

Richard Enos notes that "ancient Greeks considered rhetoric to be a discipline, accepted it as part of their education and, particularly in those cities that were governed by democracies, saw it as practical for the workings of their communities."[21] Ironically, this art of rhetoric, so important to Greek civic life and education, was brought to Athens and other cities by foreign teachers known as Sophists. The activities, beliefs, and reputations of these intriguing rhetoricians deserve a closer look. But first, a brief description of how trials were conducted in ancient Athens will help us appreciate why personal skill in oratory was so crucial to an Athenian.

Courts and Assemblies in Athens

An Athenian trial consisted of two speeches—one of prosecution, the other of defense—and the jury of several hundred members did not deliberate but simply voted. Testimonial evidence had to be filed with the court preceding the trial, and was read aloud to the gathered citizen-jury. The time allowed for the all-important speeches was determined by the seriousness of the case being heard. The presiding judge's role was more that of a master of ceremonies and timekeeper than a legal expert. There were no attorneys in the modern sense of the term, nor even a highly developed legal code. A citizen had to speak for himself.

Beginning around 430, speechwriters or *logographers* like the Sophist Antiphon, could be hired to write a courtroom speech, albeit for a hefty fee. Interpretation of what laws there were was less significant than was the individual citizen's capacity to present a persuasive speech before a large audience. Skill in speaking was thus paramount in Athenian courts, for the most persuasive public speaker carried the day.

Decisions about Athenian policy were made by the Assembly, a body made up of citizens chosen by lot. Meeting perhaps forty times each year, the Assembly listened to speeches on a wide range of topics. The individual citizen had an unusually important role: "Any citizen who could gain and hold the attention of his fellows in the Assembly had a right to advise them on national policy." Of course, gaining and holding the attention of this several hundred-member body involved considerable rhetorical skill.[22]

THE SOPHISTS

Rhetoric as a systematic study, then, was developed by a group of orators, educators, writers, and advocates called Sophists, a name derived from the Greek word *sophos*, meaning wise or skilled.[23] Central to their course of study was rhetoric, the art or *techne* of *logos*, a complex term that could mean an argument, a reason, an account, or simply a word. The title *Sophistes* (pl. *Sophistae*) carried with it something of the modern meaning of professor—an authority, an expert, a teacher.

A Sophist specializing in speechwriting was called a *logographos*. Others were teachers who ran schools in which public speaking was taught along with other subjects. A third group were professional orators who gave speeches for

a fee, whether for entertainment or in a court or legislature. Of course, any particular Sophist might provide all three services—speechwriter, teacher, and professional speaker. Sophists earned a reputation for "extravagant displays of language" and for astonishing audiences with their "brilliant styles...colorful appearances and flamboyant personalities."[24] They were also known for their highly developed memories.

Many of the Sophists became both wealthy and famous in Greece, while at the same time they were despised by some advocates of traditional Greek social values for reasons we will consider shortly. But first we will explore how and what the Sophists taught their students.

The Sophists developed a distinctive style of teaching that proved highly successful. At the same time, they were controversial from the moment they appeared in Greece. Recent scholarship presents the Sophists as important intellectual figures who have received a somewhat unreservedly negative press.[25] Sophists were active in Athens and other Greek city-states from about the middle of the fifth century BCE until the end of the fourth century. Though there never were many Sophists active in Greece at any given time, they exercised influence on the development of rhetoric and even the course of Western culture vastly out of proportion with their numbers.[26] Important Sophists include Gorgias, Protagoras, Polus, Hippias, and Theodorus.

The Flourishing of Athens

Athens and other city-states were experiencing something of a renaissance at the time the Sophists appeared on the scene. Regarding the remarkable intellectual flourishing that characterized this era in ancient Greece, and that shaped subsequent European culture, Michael Gagarin writes: "The second half of the fifth century was a period of intellectual innovation throughout the Greek world, nowhere more so than in Athens. Poets, philosophers, medical writers and practitioners, religious reformers, historians, and others introduced new ways of thinking." He adds that "philosophy and oratory in particular thrived as Athens solidified its position as the intellectual and cultural capital of Greece."[27]

In fact, comparatively speaking, the study and practice of rhetoric had a greater influence on Athenian culture of the day than did now famous philosophers such as Plato. Gagarin notes that "Plato's influence on fourth-century Athenian culture was relatively slight, whereas oratory was central to the lives of most Athenian citizens, who regularly attended meetings of the courts or the Assembly in some capacity, even if they did not actively engage in legal or political affairs." The philosophically minded Plato, his teacher Socrates, and his band of unusual followers occupied something of a fringe position in Athens, while skilled public speakers were famous and admired. The *polis* of Athens in particular "afforded more opportunities to speak in public than did other Greek cities."[28]

The Sophists' Reputation

There has been much disagreement over the interests, character, and contributions of the Sophists. Though controversial even in their own day, recent scholarship has done much to dismantle their traditional treatment as merely itinerant speechwriters

or rhetorically gifted con artists. They are now often commended for their surprising insights into the power of words, the nature of symbols, and the important social role of persuasion.

The Sophists were social iconoclasts who questioned the foundational assumptions of Greek society. "Sophists loved to experiment with arguments," writes Gagarin, "and to challenge 'traditional ways of thinking,' and the more shocking the challenge, the better."[29] Sophists employed paradoxes to shock their audiences, and also to provoke debate and inquiry.[30]

To the average Athenian, some of the leading Sophists appeared to be eccentrics wrapped up in unproductive intellectual pursuits, sometimes flamboyant in dress and personal manner, and often followed by an entourage of their students. In his famous play *Clouds*, Aristophanes mocks the Sophists as endlessly debating ludicrous questions. The great playwright treats Socrates himself as a Sophist, though the philosopher neither presented speeches nor taught rhetoric.

What the Sophists Taught

The Sophists were, as we have noted, teachers of the art of verbal persuasion—rhetoric.[31] However, Sophists claimed to teach more than just speechmaking. Some professed to instruct their students in *areté*, a Greek term meaning virtue, excellence, and a capacity for success. *Areté* suggested all of the qualities that marked of "a natural leader."[32] Greeks doubted that *arête* could be taught, for virtue and excellence were considered gifts of birth or the results of upbringing. Such qualities certainly were not to be purchased from a professional teacher, and especially not from a foreigner.

The Greek term *demos*, often translated "the people," carried a meaning that is closer to "the masses." An elite group called the *gnorimoi* held a higher social status than did members of the ordinary *demos*. Nevertheless, a large number of daily decisions were left to the determination of this larger group. Among the qualities thought to distinguish the members of the elite were noble birth, wealth, education (*paideia*), and *areté*. Thus, for the Sophists to claim that they could teach a member of the *demos* the quality of *areté* was viewed not simply as questionable, but as socially disruptive. Education was itself a means of entering a higher social class, and so the Sophists represented a considerable threat to established Athenian order.[33]

Sophistry was more than the study of persuasive speaking, as important as this was. Because the Sophists taught rhetoric, careful management of one's resources, and some aspects of leadership, it is not surprising that many young men in ancient Greece saw sophistic education as the key to personal success.

But it was principally their command of persuasive discourse that brought the Sophists both fame and controversy. Sophists asserted that their costly courses of instruction would teach control of audiences through speech. In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, the famous Sophist after whom the dialogue is named asserts that his art is the study of "the greatest good and the source, not only of personal freedom for individuals, but also of mastery over others in one's country." Specifically, Gorgias defines rhetoric as "the ability to persuade with words judges in the courts, senators in the Senate, assemblymen in the Assembly, and men in any other meeting which

convenes for the public interest" (452). Poulakos underlines the practical nature of sophistical education by writing that it "concerned itself with rhetorical empowerment for specific, especially political and legal, purposes."[34] By what means, then, did the Sophists teach such a powerful art?

How the Sophists Taught

Learning to be an orator meant the training of a student's ability through instruction and hard study. Rhetorical El competence "is gained in three ways, through *physis*, natural ability, through *technē*, theoretical instruction, or through *askēsis* or *meletē*, practice."[35]

Sophists taught by the method of dialectic (*dialektike*), or inventing arguments for and against a proposition. This exercise taught students to argue either side of a case, and the Sophist Protagoras famously boasted he would teach his students to "make the worse case appear the better." In the dialectical method, speeches and arguments started from statements termed *endoxa*, or premises that were widely believed or taken to be highly probable. An argument might develop from a premise such as, "It is better to possess much virtue than much money." One student would create an argument based on this widely accepted claim. Another student would then challenge the argument on the basis of other widely accepted notions, and by exploring the opposite points from those advanced. Thus, in dialectic, argument met counterargument in a series of exchanges that, it was believed, would yield skill in debate as well as a better view of the truth. Because of their developed ability to argue either side of a case, the Sophists' students were powerful contestants in the popular debating contests of the day, and also highly successful advocates.

Dissoi Logoi The dialectical method was employed in part because the Sophists accepted the notion of *dissoi logoi*, or contradictory arguments. That is, Sophists believed that strong arguments could be produced for or against any claim. We will explore this idea of *dissoi logoi* in more detail shortly when we consider the famous Sophist, Protagoras.

Closely related to the idea of *dissoi logoi* is the Greek notion of *kairos*, a term meaning a favorable situation or opportune moment. *Kairos* refers originally to passing through a momentary opening before it closes, as a weaver passes a thread through the loom at just the right moment. Under the doctrine of *kairos*, the truth depended on a careful consideration of all factors surrounding an event, including time, opportunity, and circumstances. *Kairos* was also related to decorum or a concern for the words appropriate to the situation, the issue being debated, and the audience. Finally, because of the momentary nature of kairos, to achieve this quality in speech was a demonstration of one's quickness and skill with words.[36]

Facts were debatable, and could be ascertained only by allowing the clash of arguments to occur. The search for truth about a crime, for example, involved considering opposite points of view. Arguments were advanced about the time or place the crime occurred and the circumstances prompting the act. Truth was discovered, or perhaps created, in the decision finally reached by a jury hearing

the clash of antithetical claims and arguments.[37] Thus, the sophistic practice of rhetoric acknowledged the roles played both by *dissoi logoi* and by *kairos* in establishing the facts of a case or the truth of a claim.

The Sophists' teaching methods helped students to analyze cases, to think on their feet, to ask probing questions, to speak eloquently, and to pose counter-arguments to an opponent's case. In addition to the dialectical method, Sophists also compelled their students to memorize speeches, either famous ones or model speeches composed by the teacher. Students would compose their own speeches based on these models. This method was known as *epideixis*, a word describing a speech prepared for a formal occasion.

Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong provide the following glimpse of a group of students learning to write speeches under the guidance of a Sophist. "Speeches were generated out of common materials arranged with some spontaneity for the occasion and purpose at hand. To prepare for performance, small seminar-type groups of students working with an accomplished rhetorician would listen to and memorize speeches composed by their teacher and would practice composing and delivering speeches among themselves." Students practiced "the production of the whole monologues," as well as doing "closer work with topoi," or frequently used types of arguments. Finally, as already noted, Sophists involved their students in "generating arguments on contradictory propositions or *dissoi logoi*." Thus, "rhetorical training created a critical climate within which to question, analyze, and imagine differences in group thought and action."[38]

Why the Sophists Were Controversial

Many Athenians doubted the high-flown claims, doubted that the Sophists really understood justice, doubted that they could teach virtue or truth. Those who were unimpressed with incredible feats of verbal and mental agility saw the Sophists as merely opportunistic charlatans ready to prey on the unsuspecting and introduce into the public mind a debased understanding of truth. Plutarch wrote of the Sophists as men with "political shrewdness and practical sagacity." Plato called them simply "masters of the art of making clever speeches," and Xenophon reduced them to the level of "masters of fraud."

But, other assessments have been rendered more recently. One expert on ancient Greece, H.D. Rankin, has written that the Sophists "released their pupils from the inner need to conform with the traditional rules of the city-state so that they were freer in themselves to be active in their pursuit of success without remorse or conscience."[39] This freedom to pursue one's own goals ruthlessly, unrestrained by conventional mores, while exciting to the Sophists' pupils, caused alarm among the more traditional members of Athenian society.

Many Athenians greeted the Sophists and their art of rhetoric with great suspicion. Their ability to persuade with clever arguments, and their willingness to teach others to do the same, led some to see the Sophists as a dangerous element in Athens. Plato, who lived in the generation following the arrival of the first Sophists, encouraged such suspicion with his dialogues *Gorgias*, *Sophist*, and *Protagoras*.[40] Aristotle (384–322 BCE), Plato's student, commented on their empty arguments in *On Sophistical Refutations*.[41]

Sophists were so controversial in Athens and other city-states that their schools of rhetoric were regarded "as a public nuisance and worse."[42] Plato imagines a debate over the Sophists and what they taught in *Gorgias.* As we will see in the next chapter, Plato condemned rhetoric as "a knack of flattering with words," a criticism the art has never lived down. On the other hand, subsequent Western culture has come closer to following the Sophists' argumentative model as presented by Protagoras and Gorgias than the truth-seeking philosophy suggested by Plato.

What factors contributed to the popular feeling that the Sophists were "overpaid parasites"?[43] First, though it does not strike modern readers as a problem, the Sophists taught for pay. Some of the more famous Sophists, such as Hippias, Protagoras, and Gorgias, charged substantial fees for their services and became extremely wealthy. Being paid for teaching, and especially for teaching a student simply to speak persuasively, struck some Athenians as unethical and subversive. Exacting pay for instruction in something other than a trade like stonemasonry or shipbuilding was simply not done, and the practice seemed to encourage less than noble ideas about both education and work.

Andrew Ford notes that the Athenian bias against teaching for pay also stemmed from "an aristocratic feeling that...the professional teacher," that is, one accepting payment for teaching, "offered his services on the basis of who could pay and therefore would not base his associations on higher considerations such as character and personal loyalty."[44] In other words, aristocratic families sought to maintain exclusive access to education for their own children, and the Sophists threatened this system. Nevertheless, the fees charged by famous Sophists for a course in rhetoric remained out of the reach of most ordinary working Athenians.

Second, controversy surrounded the Sophists because most were foreigners, itinerants who traveled from city to city looking for work as teachers, entertainers, and speechwriters. People have perhaps always been suspicious of the rootless individual, the wanderer, and the foreigner. Sophistry was considered an exotic import to Athens, and all but a few of the leading Sophists were from outside of Athens.

The fact that they were from outside of the Hellenistic world and their habit of travel created a third concern. The Sophists had, as the saying goes, been around, and in their travels they noted that people believe rather different things in different places. Their cultural relativism contributed directly to Greek suspicion of these professional speechwriters and teachers of rhetoric.

Several leading Sophists had developed a view of truth as relative to places and cultures. As Jarratt notes, the Sophists "were skeptical about a divine source of knowledge or value...."[45] They knew what the Athenians believed, but also what the Spartans, Corinthians, and North Africans believed. More importantly, they knew that beliefs varied from place to place. The further one traveled from Athens, the more customs and beliefs varied. In some regions of the known world, for instance, it was the custom to burn the dead, or even to eat them, whereas in other locations such acts were capital crimes. Marriage customs, judicial procedures, and social relationships all varied dramatically from one locale to another.

Who could know, then, what was true in any absolute sense? A fourth source of controversy had to do with this uncertainty surrounding truth. According to Sophists like Gorgias and Protagoras, truth was not to be found in transcendent sources such as the gods. Rather, a momentary and practical truth emerged from a clash of arguments. Poulakos affirms that the Sophists believed "the world could always be recreated linguistically." Reality itself is a linguistic construction rather than an objective fact.[46] If truth and reality depend on who can speak the most persuasively, what becomes of justice, virtue, and social order? James Murphy and Richard Katula write that "knowledge was subjective and everything is precisely what the individual believes it to be." This meant that "each of us, not necessarily human beings in the collective, decides what something means to us."[47] Such a radical view of truth threatened Athenians steeped in Homeric virtues and traditional Greek piety.

Finally, the Sophists were controversial because they built a view of justice on the notion of social agreement or *nomos*. Sophists advocated *nomos* as the source of law in opposition to other sources such as *thesmos*, or law derived from the authority of kings; *physis*, or natural law; and transcendent Platonic *logos*.[48] The Sophists' belief in *nomos* was closely related to their rejection of transcendent truth and objective reality. Public law and public morality are matters of social agreements and local practice, not the dictates of a God or a king. This view of truth, some thought, undermined the moral foundations of Greek society.

Some historians attribute the Sophists' negative image to their enemies' portrayals of them. Ancient sources suggest that at least some of the Sophists were respectable public figures, expert politicians, and diplomats. Janet Sutton has written that "Many of the ancients . . . paint a brilliant picture of Protagoras, Lysias, Antiphon, Gorgias, and Thrasymacus as ambassadors and statesmen, as superb stylists of poetic expression and orators of civic discourse, and as practical educators and intimates of political leaders."[49] Thus, any portrayal of the Sophists must be shaped, as they would have approved, by contradictory claims.

TWO INFLUENTIAL SOPHISTS

Regardless of the controversy surrounding the Sophists, the art of rhetoric caught on in the Greek-speaking world of the fifth and fourth centuries. Sophists fomented a revolution in thought that even today influences ideas about education, politics, and rhetoric. The lives of individual Sophists illuminate their ideas in ways that a general survey cannot. This section offers a closer look at two of the most influential Sophists.

Gorgias

One of the greatest early teachers and practitioners of the art of rhetoric was Gorgias of Leontini, who is reputed to have lived from 485 to 380 BCE, more than one hundred years.[50] Gorgias was originally sent to Athens as an ambassador and had a tremendously successful career as a diplomat, teacher, skeptical philosopher,

and speaker. He is famous, among other things, for his three-part formulation of skeptical philosophy:

1. Nothing exists.
2. If anything did exist, we could not know it.
3. If we could know that something existed, we would not be able to communicate it to anyone else.

Gorgias was also known for his theory of rhetoric, which gained him both followers and critics in Athens. He is reputed to have studied rhetoric under Empedocles, whom Aristotle credited with having invented the art. Enos calls Gorgias "one of the most innovative theorists in Greek rhetoric."[51] Gorgias was active at about the same time as the most famous of all of the early Sophists, Protagoras (485–411), the subject of the following section.

Gorgias boasted of being able to persuade anyone of anything, and his powers of persuasion were legendary. He is said to have persuaded the Athenians to build a gold statue of him at Delphi, an honor unheard of for a foreigner, though some sources suggest that he paid for this statue. If the latter is the case, it illustrates the great wealth Gorgias accumulated as a Sophist. Gorgias was intrigued by the almost magical power persuasive words can exercise over the human mind.[52] He adhered to a philosophy of language and knowledge that suggested that the only reality we have access to "lies in the human psyche, and its malleability and susceptibility" to linguistic manipulation.[53]

What was Gorgias' opinion about the power of rhetoric? Rhetorical scholar Bruce Gronbeck holds that for Gorgias, persuasion (*peitho*) was "an art of deception, which works through the medium of language to massage the psyche."[54] Brian Vickers writes that Gorgias' "advocacy of rhetoric was based . . . on its ability to make men its slaves by persuasion, not force" (*Philebus* 58 a–b).

Rhetoric as Magic. But, how was this deception or enslavement accomplished? George Kennedy suggests that Gorgias considered a rhetor to be "a *psychagogos*, like a poet, a leader of souls through a kind of incantation."[55] The comparison to poetry may confuse modern readers until we recognize that Athenians considered poetry to be persuasive and public rather than private and subjective. Moreover, poetry was closely connected in Greek thought with religion, ritual, and the supernatural. It is true that poetry was for the Athenians "public discourse" and thus "primarily something to be performed in social or civic spaces. . . ."[56] But, it is also the case that poetry was thought to have supernatural origins and to be capable of moving the soul.

Effective rhetoric had a hypnotic effect on audiences captured by the orator's verbal spell. Jacqueline de Romilly, in her book, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, confirms this view when she connects Gorgias with early practitioners of magical incantations, such as Empedocles and Pythagoras.[57] Gorgias explored the power of *logos* to gain control over an audience's emotions. De Romilly refers to Gorgias as "a theoretician of the magic spell of words."[58]

In sum, it appears that rhetoric was for Gorgias verbal magic capable of exerting what one of his great critics, Plato, called an "almost supernatural"

influence on audiences. The emotions were central to Gorgias' conception of employing words to direct the will of an audience. "The masters of rhetoric," writes de Romilly, sought "to sway the emotions of the audience." This was the power of rhetoric, a magical word-force similar to incantations or poetry.[59] Jane Tompkins has noted in this regard that "the equation of language with power, characteristic of Greek at least from the time of Gorgias the rhetorician, explains the enormous energies devoted to the study of rhetoric in the ancient world."[60]

Gorgias' *Encomium* and Rhetorical Devices

Gorgias was particularly interested in the sounds of words, sounds which "when manipulated with skill, could captivate audiences."[61] If words do not represent an external reality, then perhaps their importance is as a means of creating a reality within human thought. Gorgias' experiments with sound (a reminder that he was principally a speaker rather than a writer) led to a florid, rhyming style that strikes modern readers as overdone. But, recall, he is developing a rhetorical incantation that hypnotizes audiences, not a tight, logical proof.

An example from a translation of Gorgias' *Encomium on Helen* reflects something of the effect Gorgias sought to achieve with sounds, as well as revealing Gorgias' association of rhetoric, magic, and poetry:

> All poetry I ordain and proclaim to composition in meter, the listeners of which are affected by passionate trepidation and compassionate perturbation and likewise tearful lamentation.... Inspired incantations are provocative of charm and revocative of harm.[62]

Gorgias intended this famous speech to demonstrate that the skilled rhetorician can prove any proposition. He reveals his skill by arguing the unlikely thesis that Helen cannot be blamed for deserting Menelaus and following Paris to Troy. As George Kennedy summarizes, Gorgias enumerated four possible reasons for Helen's action: "it was the will of the gods; she was taken by force; she was seduced by words; or she was overcome by love."[63] This hypnotic style adapted poetic devices to rhetoric, poetry itself being seen as a means of working magic.[64] De Romilly notes that in the *Encomium*, Gorgias argues that Helen "could not have resisted the power of *logos*," or persuasive words, which constitute a type of witchcraft or magic.[65]

As poetry was considered to be of divine origin in the ancient world, the relationship between beautiful words and supernatural power was a more natural one for Gorgias than it is for modern readers.[66] Gorgias believed that words worked their magic most powerfully by arousing emotions such as fear, pity, and longing.[67] Classical scholar G. M. A. Grube notes that Gorgias was especially fond of such rhetorical devices as:

> over-bold metaphors, *allegoria* or to say one thing and mean another, *hypallage* or the use of one word for another, *catachresis* or to use words by analogy, repetition of words, resumption of an argument, *parisosis* or the use of balanced clauses, *apostrophe* or addressing some person or divinity, and antithesis.[68]

Here is the opening of Gorgias' *Encomium*. Even in this single paragraph, we can see the famous Sophist employing a variety of rhetorical devices:

> What is becoming to a city is manpower, to a body beauty, to a soul wisdom, to an action virtue, to a speech truth, and the opposites of these are unbecoming. Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object should be honored with praise if praiseworthy and incur blame if unworthy, for it is an equal error and mistake to blame the praisable and to praise the blamable. It is the duty of one and the same man both to speak the needful rightly and the refute the unrightfully spoken. Thus it is right to refute those who rebuke Helen, a woman about whom the testimony of inspired poets has become univocal and unanimous as has the ill omen of her name, which has become a reminder of misfortunes.[69]

Style, linguistic ornament, and the sounds of spoken words have remained important aspects of rhetoric throughout its history. Shakespeare is probably the greatest master of the rhetorical figures in the English language. Contemporary orators such as John F. Kennedy also have revealed their knowledge of some of the ancient rhetorical figures. Kennedy, for example, employed *antimetabole*—the transposing of word order in parallel clauses—in a now famous line from his 1960 inaugural address:

> *Ask not what your country can do for you,*
> *rather ask what you can do for your country.*

A similar form of reversing, called *chiasmus*, takes its name from Greek letter X or *chi*. *Chiasmus* involves simply switching the order of elements in adjacent clauses, forming an X in the sentence. Thus, the statement of Jesus:

> Many who are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

Here is an example of the same device in Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*:

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

Such devices can be memorable and effective when well used, which is precisely why they were of interest to the Sophists. Speech was worthless if not effective, and the very idea of truth itself was closely tied to memory, to what could be recalled and envisioned.[70] If trite, used to excess or otherwise awkwardly employed, rhetorical devices can hinder a speech's impact by distracting the audience.

Gorgias himself was particularly fond of *antithesis*, a device still quite commonly used. *Antithesis*, as the name implies, involves placing opposed ideas near one another. Thus, a speaker might claim:

> My opponent proposes a war that would bring us dishonor; I advocate a peace that will bring us honor.

Here the notions of war and peace are opposed, as are the concepts of dishonor and honor. Gorgias employed this device widely in his own speaking.

But, Gorgias' interest in antithesis extended beyond his concern for style. Like some of the other Sophists, he held that "two antithetical statements can be made on each subject," and that truth emerged from a clash of fundamentally opposed