

Overlapping methodologies? Rhetoric, English Studies, and the social world

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the overlaps of English studies with studies of Political Rhetoric. It outlines current UK-based research agendas in ‘Rhetorical Political Analysis’. It proposes a shared agenda focused on speech and argument as social action, and informed by the idea of ‘Rhetorical Citizenship’, the right to participate fully in disputation.

I am sure I am not the only academic who experiences discomfort when asked – at University functions, social events, and even conferences – ‘What’s your field? What do you do?’. At best the question invites answers which feel inadequate to all concerned; at worst it requires us to tie our thinking to a discipline, a method, or an object of study in a way we’d prefer to resist. For me, an added problem is that the most accurate answer I could give is ‘Rhetoric’. The word is horribly misunderstood, and in the UK where there are no Departments of Rhetoric it is not recognized as a discipline. That this is so – that the art once thought essential to any free republic, which educated Shakespeare and which Erskine May (rather pompously) called an ‘honour and ornament to our history’ and ‘one of the proud results of our free constitution’ – is not widely taught in schools and universities today ought to spark at least a pause for concern.¹

When I say I am a ‘rhetorician’ I do not mean that I write speeches or am good at delivering them. I don’t and I am not. Nor do I mean that I specialize in studying communication which is manipulative, mendacious, or ‘mere’ words. The tricks and techniques of the books in the Business section at airports, or the pretences of ‘Neuro Linguistic Programming’, are as distant from Rhetoric as inspirational calendars are from Philosophy. But I also do not mean what the word invokes for many of my colleagues in English: tropes and schemes. Viewed as such – accompanied by those long lists of terms from anaphora, anastrophe, and asyndeton to syllepsis, synoeciosis, and zeugma – Rhetoric appears to be primarily an

¹ For more on early modern education, see Quentin Skinner, *Forensic Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

example of language. But there is more in the garden of eloquence than what Henry Peacham cultivated. *Elocutio* was only one of the five canons of rhetoric, the first of which was *inventio*, the art of finding, selecting, and adapting arguments with a view to making something happen. Rhetoric is then an instance of social action. It is a means for orienting oneself in and towards contingent, collective, sociopolitical contexts, of analysing and understanding them, and of trying to act within and upon them through the use of discourse.

In this respect, rhetoricians such as myself study arguments – not the refined kind we learn to make in Philosophy class but the kinds (in all their variety and sometimes tangled wildness) that are found taking place in politics. Rhetoric, as Aristotle said, is ‘the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion’.² Those of us who study Rhetoric study the means of which rhetoricians, in given cases, availed themselves. That includes argumentative appeals made to audiences’ emotions, to their understanding of ethical character, and to their reason, be it scientific or rooted in what is thought to be (or what is being claimed and made to be) common sense. Understanding these requires examining all the activities that went into finding and choosing those arguments, how they have been organized into an instance of discourse, given ornament, staged, and performed (and with what effects).

I think that all of this is worth studying for ‘its own sake’. I find ‘speechmaking’ anthropologically and aesthetically interesting. I believe that we need historians and critics of the rhetorical arts just as we need them for painting, film, and novels – people who record and understand the development and spread of techniques, trends, and styles, and who look out for and perhaps encourage new movements while critically assessing the conditions of production and dissemination. It is easy to dismiss the crudity, absurdity, and mendacity of the rhetoric of, say, Donald Trump. But that’s neither analysis or explanation. To understand what Trumpism is (or was), how it came to be, and how it has affected British as well as American politics, requires recognition of the fact that it was a way of making arguments, of naming problems and proposing remedies, adapted to the outlooks and experiences of various constituencies of people in the celebrity and entertainment-driven digital culture of their declining Republic. What is called Populism today is a product – a symptom of and a response to – the state of rhetorical culture at this moment when the means of communication are being fundamentally transformed, and with them the conditions of political action, and in which the ossified and conviction-less formulas of ‘normal’ politics cannot but fail to win trust and consent. In attending to that culture, what I and my colleagues call Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) makes Rhetoric both an object of study and a means of explaining what is happening in contemporary politics, of assessing it, and working out some of what might be done about it.

RPA is also a way of studying what I call ‘political theory in the wild’. By that I mean what happens to political ideas (about, say, justice and sovereignty, leadership and power, equality and fairness) outside of the confines of the seminar and library and in the messy, conflictual, and contingent world of politics. There, ideas are reinvented or reapplied on the fly in the context of political battle, the heat and pressure of which can transform them entirely. Sometimes ideas and ideologies take hold of or ‘grip’ politicians, political activists, and citizens reshaping what or how we think about political issues and phenomena. That is to say, ideas are parts of political events. Taking form as writing, but especially as speech and performance, they are one of the material forces with which people make their own history – though not always ideas, or in circumstances, of their own choosing. To understand,

² Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. by George A. Kennedy, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 12.

evaluate, and analyse any of that we have to look at how those ideas were expressed and how others were persuaded to adopt them.

The rhetorical tradition of thinking is, of course, not the only one to theorize or analyse language in the world. Speech-Act theories, Poststructuralism, and post-Marxism have given us general and philosophically rich ways of understanding language and the conditions of possibility/impossibility of speech acts. In Linguistics, the methods associated with Critical Discourse Analysis, for example, provide tools and techniques for the rigorous study of the syntax of political language. RPA is informed by these and other theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of language. But it constitutes as its object of study something broader than the sentence or the trope yet not so grand as the entire system of *difference* or the rhetoricity of Language as such.

RPA studies what Lloyd Bitzer called ‘rhetorical situations’, the conjunction of a political problem or dispute with a decision, a likely fragmented audience to be addressed (the kinds of things they expect, understand, already think) and the time, place, and technology for doing so.³ That is to say, RPA isn’t so much concerned with people talking about politics but with people doing something in politics at a particular moment. It is interested in how discursive argumentative action in those situations came about, took the form it took, and had whatever effects it had. It is interested in what that tells us about politics and about rhetoric. Rhetoric has never been just a set of winning tricks. To be good at it, said Cicero, one has to, ‘master everything that is relevant to the practices of citizens and the ways humans behave: all that is connected with normal life, the functioning of the State, our social order, as well as the way people usually think, human nature and character’.⁴ The opposite is also true. Analysing rhetorical situations is a way to understanding how citizens behave, how a state and social order function, and how it bears on human nature and character. Rhetoric is simultaneously and paradoxically a way of thinking about situations, of orienting oneself within them, finding the potentialities of what can be done through discourse (and what cannot), *and* a method for analysing what has been done. In that analysis, the rhetorician is not inclined to see communication as the ‘representation’ of mental states or indeed of anything else. Communication is something people do to others (sometimes to themselves). It is material action taking place in determinate circumstances, invoking and reworking social rules, habits, and technologies.

There is a lot of work in both Language and Literature that is immensely valuable to this kind of Rhetoric research. I am thinking of historical work on the material contexts of the production and dissemination of speech and writing, the spread of cultures of literacy, oratory, and eloquence. Christopher Reid’s work on Parliamentary oratory is exemplary here but so too is a wide range of research on Renaissance rhetorics.⁵ I am also thinking of Critical Linguistics, and of the cultural studies approach to ideology, culture, and language which is part of a shared heritage. But there are some differences between what RPA is doing and related work in English Studies. What these reduce to – to simplify somewhat and as alluded to already – is the fact that colleagues in the latter tend to see political speech and writing as an example of language, whereas I and my colleagues see the language as an instance of political action. That might not make much difference

³ Lloyd Bitzer, ‘The Rhetorical Situation’, in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory*, ed. by J. Lucaites et al. (London: Guilford Press, 1999), pp. 217–26.

⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator [De Oratore]*, trans. by James M. May and Jakob Wisse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 141.

⁵ Christopher Reid, *Imprison’d Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons 1760-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

at the level of analysing a particular text. But it does make a difference at a more general level of theory and critique.

I am not familiar with everything that happens in English but my sense is that often when a political approach is taken, or a politically informed theory applied, it is done so in order to say something about a text. Theory is used to help break open what is happening within a work. That's a fine thing to do. But it is different from using theories to work out how such texts fit with what is going on alongside them – how the text, or how writing and speaking as dimensions of social practice, may in certain moments or within certain configurations be politically significant. The thing is, from a Political Studies perspective, literary works are not usually of themselves very politically significant. That's not to say that they aren't political or significant, and there are political conjunctures (pre-Independence Ireland for instance) where novels, poems, and plays have particular political power. But that was a feature of the conjuncture as a whole and not only of writing (and speeches, pamphlets, and dramatic symbolic actions were just as important). On the whole, especially in British Politics and especially today, the texts that most effectively intervene into political situations are not novels or poems but speeches, policy-briefs, slogans, op-ed columns, memes, and You Tube videos, all of which may be informed by Literature and practices of literacy but in ways that only a more general social theory and method can help us to understand.

Some examples of RPA might help here. One such would be work by Judi Atkins and I which has looked at the uses of quotation and anecdotes in British political speech. We didn't look at just one speech – we looked at one hundred years of British Party leaders' speeches to their Party conference.⁶ We were interested in how the use of these in argument changed over time, the different kinds of things quoted and the political ideas communicated through the use of certain kinds of representative story. We found that quotations from literary sources and from the Bible decreased while quotations from 'ordinary' people, and the use of stories about politicians meeting ordinary people, all increased markedly in the nineteen-nineties. We argued that this showed important things about how political culture has changed but also about instability within political ideologies and some of the emerging contradictions attendant on notions of 'the people' or 'the nation'. James Martin, in a wide body of work, has combined rhetoric with psychoanalysis and studied appeals to pathos as orchestrations of affect, developing a subtle way of comprehending the unsettling dark pleasures, as well as the pains, of hateful speech.⁷ Others have looked at the rhetorical strategies, styles, and performances that give definition to particular protest movements or to individual orators, and at the place of rhetoric in policy-making.⁸ A recent special issue of *Politics* contains rhetorical investigations of Britishness, social media algorithms disputation, anti-trafficking rhetoric, disputation, and hermeneutics.⁹ A growing body of research combines Rhetoric with Sociology, Media

⁶ Judi Atkins and Alan Finlayson, "... A 40-year-old black man made the point to me": Anecdotes, Everyday Knowledge and the Performance of Leadership in British Politics', *Political Studies*, 61.1 (2013), 161–77.

⁷ James Martin, 'Capturing Desire: Rhetorical Strategies and the Affectivity of Discourse', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18 (2016), 143–60; James Martin, *Psycho-Politics of Speech: Uncivil Discourse and the Excess of Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁸ See, for example, A. Crines, T. Heppell, and P. Dorey, *The Political Rhetoric and Oratory of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Sophia Hatzisavvidou, 'Disputatious Rhetoric and Political Change: The Case of the Greek Anti-Mining Movement', *Political Studies*, 65.1 (2016), 215–30; *Voices of the UK Left: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Performance of Politics*, ed. by Judi Atkins and John Gaffney (London: Palgrave, 2017); Nick Turnbull, 'The Questioning Theory of Policy Practice: Outline of an Integrated Analytical Framework', *Critical Policy Studies*, 7 (2013), 115–131.

⁹ See Judi Atkins, 'Rhetoric and Audience Reception: An Analysis of Theresa May's Vision of Britain and Britishness after Brexit', *Politics*, 42 (2022), 216–30; Benoit Dillet, 'Speaking to Algorithms?

Studies, and Politics to understand how communication technologies and practices are changing rhetoric and ideology, giving rise to new modes and styles of argument, and powering reactionary digital politics, conspiracy theory, and ideological sectarianism.¹⁰

All of this work opens onto and helps to address larger questions about the social organization and governance of political persuasion – the ‘rhetorical culture’ which shapes expectations of what political argument is like and how it should be evaluated, and of who is thought able to do it well or appropriately (which is also about who and what ‘counts’ in a polity and how power to determine that is exercised and protected). These are also questions about *genre* – the development and change of forms and styles of argument that come to define ideologies (socialist or conservative) and institutional practices (Parliamentary speaking, White Papers, political interviews). Rhetoric research of this kind is largely new to the UK but is developing apace. There are active research groups such as the Rhetoric and Politics Group which in collaboration with the Network for Oratory and Politics, based in Classics, has been holding research seminars investigating rhetoric and speechwriting.¹¹ There are close relationships with the Rhetoric Society of Europe and the Rhetoric Society of America, and a rapidly expanding, interdisciplinary, and international book series on Rhetoric, Politics, and Society.

The fifth canon of rhetoric is *actio* or delivery, the physical and vocal expression and performance of a speech. It is the least studied today although, of course, elements of it appear in Linguistics, Theatre Studies, and Drama. Practical lessons in public speaking are widely sought by politicians, business leaders, and other public figures. Organizations such as Toastmasters try to make such training available to everybody, and there have been some efforts to make ‘Oracy’ a more central part of the school curriculum, as well as, of course, the work of the Speaking Citizens project.¹² The pedagogical aspects of rhetoric have always been at its core. The foundation of Plato’s objection to rhetoric was in part that it promised to teach *anybody* the ability to speak and argue their case in public. Plato wanted to make philosophers kings. Some would like writers to be acknowledged as legislators. Rhetoric tends towards giving everybody the chance to turn their hand to the making of a public argument. I have tried to teach some of the elements of the art of speechwriting and speechmaking as part of undergraduate courses but also to all ages at music festivals, to under 14s interested in the politics of climate change and to political actors of various kinds. This is, one hopes, of use to participants. It is certainly of value to rhetoric scholars. Teaching speechmaking always demonstrates the complexity of the embodiment of words and ideas, and how what Ranciere calls a ‘distribution of the sensible’ affects our perception and experience of our own voices when they sound out in public spaces in a vernacular tone and accent seemingly in contradiction with the practiced and stylized articulacy of the Honourable Members.

Rhetorical Political Analysis as Technological Analysis’, *Politics*, 42 (2022), 231–46; Nick Turnbull and Rose Broad, ‘Bringing the Problem Home: The Anti-Slavery and Anti-Trafficking Rhetoric of UK Non-Government Organisations’, *Politics*, 42 (2022), 200–15; Sophia Hatzisavvidou, ‘Studying Political Disputes: A Rhetorical Perspective and a Case Study’, *Politics*, 42 (2022), 185–99; James Martin, ‘Rhetoric, Discourse and the Hermeneutics of Public Speech’, *Politics*, 42 (2022), 170–84.

¹⁰ For an overview, listen to the podcast *Reactionary Digital Politics*, <<https://reactionarydigitalpoliticspodcast.wordpress.com>> [accessed 6 November 2023]; and see Robert Topinka, ‘The Politics of Anti-Discourse: Copy-paste, the Alt-Right, and the Rhetoric of Form’, *Theory & Event*, 25 (2022), 392–418.

¹¹ Alan Finlayson and Henriette van der Blom, *Crisis of Rhetoric: Renewing Political Speech and Speechwriting* (2019) <<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-artslaw/caha/cor/crisis-of-rhetoric-report.pdf>> [accessed 3 November 2023].

¹² See *Speak for Change: Final Report and Recommendations from the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry* (2021) <https://oracy.inparliament.uk/files/oracy/2021-04/Oracy_APPG_FinalReport_28_04_21_4.pdf> [accessed 6 November 2023].

Here we touch on what the Danish scholars Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen have called ‘rhetorical citizenship’.¹³ I understand this to be a name for thick, practical way of thinking about rights to be consulted, to hold political actors to account, and to participate in ‘disputation’. Rhetorical Citizenship involves not merely listening to and evaluating arguments but also being part of them in the fullest sense. In a strong political culture speech and debate are treated seriously, and it is an everyday right of citizens to hear and see for ourselves political actors presenting their arguments and making their case, in real time and adapted to particular audiences, in situations where we may assess those arguments and the political actor making them. That requires publics to have the skills to take part in public debate and discussion but also to listen and attend, to understand, criticize, and perhaps even celebrate the rhetorical art performed in their name. It also – importantly – requires political actors and politicians who can do it, who can communicate more than slogans, highlight-reels, and predigested press releases, who go beyond the assertion of their moral standing and seek to win assent with arguments more substantive than the clichéd and defensive blandishments compiled by committees of risk-averse advisers.

At the close of his famous textbook, Terry Eagleton called for a revival of the tradition of Rhetorical theory and analysis which he praised for seeing ‘speaking and writing not merely as textual objects, to be aesthetically contemplated or endlessly deconstructed, but as forms of *activity* inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences, and as largely unintelligible outside the social purposes and conditions in which they were embedded’.¹⁴ That isn’t a formulation Eagleton invented. It’s what Rhetoric was always about. But this was not a research programme that Eagleton then undertook. As far as I am aware, although there is really great work on Rhetoric within English Studies there is not what might be called a Rhetorical School. It’s a ‘road not taken’ which if it had been would, I believe, have helped English Studies be itself while also deepening its conversations with Politics, Sociology, Linguistics, and Communication. Conversely, there is much for political rhetoric researchers to learn from colleagues in possession of skills honed by rigorous training in close-reading and invaluable experience in the feel and flow of creative language. It’s a road that is still open and a conversation – not an argument – which all are welcome to join.

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¹³ See Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen, ‘Introduction: citizenship as a rhetorical practice’, in *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation*, ed. by Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012), pp. 1–10.

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 263.

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