Book Reviews


Every fall I teach a course called “Art of Persuasion” to college juniors and seniors majoring in rhetoric and writing. In this course I attempt to apply the principles of classical rhetoric to modern discourse, using a variety of ancient texts along with Edward Corbett’s now-legendary *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. After reading Sharon Crowley’s new book, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, I have decided to retire Corbett and make Crowley required reading for my course.

To be sure, I do not take this step lightly, given the respect and admiration I have for Edward Corbett and his work. It is simply that I find Crowley’s book less overwhelming (it’s half the length), more accessible (it does not split the hair that separates a syllepsis from a zeugma), and more directly focused on the rhetorical thought of ancient Greece and Rome. In fact, it is no accident that Crowley’s title reflects Corbett’s, as she explains her deliberate attempt to pay homage to her rhetoric teacher who introduced her “to a very old and yet entirely new way of thinking about how humans get along, or fail to get along, with one another” (xvii). I believe those who have used Corbett’s text throughout the years will find this new treatment by Sharon Crowley a fresh and engaging approach to the subject.

Let there be no mistake about it. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* is not a freshman composition text. If you are looking for such an introductory-level book, Winifred Horner’s *Rhetoric in the Classical Tradition* offers a useful blend of classical rhetorical theory and modern composition practice that will serve as an effective introduction to college writing. By contrast, Crowley avoids much of the “traditional and contemporary lore” about composition such as thesis statements, topic sentences, free writing, brainstorming, modes of discourse, or writing research papers, preferring instead the composing exercises employed by ancient students, such as the classical *progymnasmata* (xv). The audience for this book includes students in humanities or critical thinking courses seeking “an introduction to ancient ways of knowing and thinking” and both undergraduate and graduate students engaged in the study of classical rhetoric (xvi).

Not unlike Corbett and Horner, Crowley has organized her book according to the five canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. She devotes more than half the book to invention, holding that “copiousness” (“the art of having more to say or write than
a rhetor needs for a single occasion”) should be the goal of rhetorical instruction, not the creation of a finished product (xv). Crowley begins with a discussion of ancient rhetorics, and throughout the book she makes a conscious attempt to avoid presenting classical rhetoric as a monolithic structure of thought, being careful instead to show the variety and evolution of rhetorical thought from the Older Sophists, through Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Throughout the book she addresses the difficulties involved in making conceptual leaps between the ancient and modern worlds, focusing especially on issues related to the nature and function of fact, opinion, proof, and values.

Following this introductory material, the book then explores many of the possibilities for invention offered by the ancient world, including commonplaces, formal topics, ethos, logos, pathos, enthymemes, examples, signs, maxims, to name a few. Especially impressive is Crowley’s treatment of stasis theory, which she grounds thoroughly in ancient theory and makes wholly practical by applying it to an analysis of a New York Times article on hate speech. The chapter on arrangement opens up the parts of the classical oration for modern scrutiny, while the chapter on style treats correctness, clarity, ornament, sentence structure, and an especially interesting look at figures of thought. Like Horner, Crowley approaches the canon of memory in terms of library resources and computer data bases. Her discussion of delivery frames her presentation of contemporary editing practices.

The last two chapters are devoted to ancient rhetorical exercises, such as copying, paraphrasing, translating, and the classical progymnasmata, the original 12-step program of sequenced activities practiced by school boys for several centuries. I have read numerous accounts of the progymnasmata, both ancient and modern, and without a doubt, Crowley’s is the most lucid and practical of any I have seen. Each chapter ends with exercises aimed at addressing contemporary issues like sexism, freedom of speech, pornography, the environment, and breast cancer. The book concludes with an extensive glossary of rhetorical terms, a bibliography, and two brief appendices outlining major developments in the history of ancient rhetoric.

Now I must temper my praise for this book with a few quibbles. In her preface Crowley makes some observations with which I must differ. For example, Crowley boasts that her text contains “no drills or canned exercises” and that students are not called on “to analyze or comment on sentences written by other people” (xv). I am puzzled by this claim in light of her extensive treatment of the classical exercises of copying, paraphrasing, summarizing, and translating, with the inclusion of several modern texts on which she suggests the contemporary student can practice these exercises. And while ancient students might not use the term “canned,”
they might avoid the anachronism and label the exercises of the 
progymnasmata as “jarred.”

In addition, Crowley also claims to avoid asking students to com-
pose personal essays or “expressive discourse,” since ancient students 
“did not write themes about their roommates or about how they spent 
their summer vacations” (2). As one who tries to apply classical theories 
of discourse to the teaching of writing, I am not as eager to toss out 
expressive discourse. Perhaps one of the adjustments we must make in 
appropriating classical rhetoric is to account for our modern-day obsession 
with self, at least as a starting point for discourse. Crowley also rejects 
the process notion that “writing should begin with personal expression 
and move outward into expository and persuasive modes” (xvi). How-
ever, in her discussion of helping students find something to write or 
speak about, she suggests that they “begin by thinking about the 
communities of which they are a part: their families, relatives, and friends....” 
Then students should determine what issues are being debated in their 
communities and ask, “How do the students feel about those issues?” 
(32). Simply because the discussion is focused on issues rather than 
summer vacations does not preclude the use of expressive discourse. 
Crowley is clearly advocating personal expression as a classically-based 
invention technique, as a way of finding something to say.

Finally, in what must have been a momentary lapse, Crowley writes 
that ancient teachers “invented [emphasis mine] rhetoric so that they 
would have means of judging whose opinion was most accurate, useful, 
or valuable” (2). This reminds me of the time I heard Bill Monroe claim to 
have invented Bluegrass music or of my college roommate, who claimed 
to have invented beer drinking. People have been persuading each other 
with rhetoric for millennia before Corax ever thought of suing Tisias. If 
she had said that ancient teachers were the first to write treatises on the 
art of rhetoric, that would have been more in keeping with current Euro-
centric thought, but even that assertion in all likelihood would be equally 
indefensible.

These are minor quibbles and do not detract from the overall quality 
of this fine book. I look forward to trying it out with my students when 
“Art of Persuasion” comes around again next fall.

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