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Jane S. Sutton

Mari Lee Mifsud

University of Richmond, mmifsud@richmond.edu

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A Revolution in Tropes
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Introduction

A Revolution in Tropes

Jane S. Sutton and Mari Lee Mifsud

When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change —
Max Plank¹

Our view of tropes is that they are rhetoric's own unique resources, but for ineluctable historiographical reasons have been more or less closed off from the production of theory. Our "trope project" began simply enough. If the workings of tropes could be identified in a new way, then the aim and purpose of rhetoric could be retheorized in terms new to democratic deliberation. Working under the slogan "Yes, tropes—but all of them,"² we attempted a new classification system based on the Greek roots of hundreds of tropes listed in various old and new sources such as Bernard Dupriez's *A Dictionary of Literary Devices, A-Z* and Richard Lanham's *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, respectively.

Our suggestion led us to create charts of tropes. Eventually after several starts, we organized a heck of a lot of tropes in relation to their function specified by their root domain. Metaphor fell under the category of the root *phora*; *anastrophē* under *strophē*; and *antimetabolē* under *bolē*. The work was tedious. We quit working on it from time to time. Our trope project seemed to be getting us closer and closer to just compiling pages and pages of excel spreadsheets, but all the while farther from our question, *how do tropes work?*

One day, unexpectedly, we discovered through our root work that a connection exists between the trope *antistrophē* and *katastrophē*.³ Basically, *katastrophē* is a subset of *antistrophē* which effectively binds them uniquely. The binding sequence appears in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and functions in a static

model straight away to originate and uphold a theory of civic discourse. When we recognized this, we were stunned and began down another route. We are jumping ahead of ourselves. We should start over, at the very beginning.

When we met some twenty years ago, Jane, writing on the history and theory of rhetoric, was immersed in the study of Aristotle's *Physics*. Mari Lee, a doctoral student in rhetoric, wondered why. She learned that Jane was trying to figure something out about Aristotle's view of contingency in rhetoric. Jane was finding from Aristotle's idea of an earth at rest that his rhetoric was not only built for a *polis* but also that it was designed in the earth's model. That is, *Rhetoric*, the *polis*, and the earth are interconnected. In one of our first conversations, we found ourselves astonished as we recognized that, to the extent that *Rhetoric* is influenced by Aristotle's desire to bring a people to rest, Aristotle's rhetorical theory is an art of denying contingency rather than affirming it in civic life.

We both remember how alienating our exchanges were. That contingency is the heart of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is akin to a first principle of rhetorical studies. How could rhetoric be an art of denying rather than affirming contingency? And what would this mean for future rhetorical theorizing?

As we ventured into the question of contingency, it became an object of study with respect to both rhetorical theory and the history of rhetoric. We began at the beginning, the first line of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: "Rhetoric is the counterpart [*antistrophos*] to dialectic."⁴ Our first lesson in analyzing rhetoric's relation with dialectic is that rhetoric is prefigured by the trope *antistrophē*. The resulting insight into the "tropics" of *Rhetoric* led to our recognition that rhetoric's *antistrophic* relationship with dialectic is not neutral,⁵ and we wondered how *antistrophē* functioned in Aristotle's construction of contingency.

We situated *antistrophē* in a particular construction of contingency, namely one oriented toward bringing people to a rest in accordance with Aristotle's rational account of change in his model of the earth. We discovered that when paired with contingency, particular tropes provide an interested way of making contact with the other. The trope *antistrophē* entails a unique tropical style called *katastrophē* wherein the activity of turning (*strophē*) down (*kata*) the other occurs. Within this configuration, the slave, the barbarian, the alien, the stranger, and women embody aspects of contingency related to an unnatural change that rhetoric has expunged in its *antistrophic* model to dialectic. As Aristotle puts it, the most appropriate trope for stylizing *antistrophic* rhetoric is "*katastrophē*," quite literally a style that "turns down" other possible meanings so that a single one can be settled upon by "all, or the majority, or the wise" among us.⁶ While we certainly see the value and significance of the majority in the conceptual context of rhetorical theory, we also see something else. We see how contact is configured in

antistrophic rhetoric also creates a way of turning down the other in an effort to achieve a single resting place settled upon by “all, or the majority, or the wise” among us. We wonder where the rhetorical theory is for unsettling this resting place when it turns out to be a place of oppression for others?

The question *how might rhetoric make contact with difference?* creates a responsibility to discover how the art systemically excludes the other, and then based on that knowledge, to provide not only the resources but also the means for theorizing rhetoric anew to meet the demands of civic engagement that it is called to perform in the contemporary world. Eventually, our trope project—our enormous number of excel spreadsheets—took us down a route, mostly esoteric. Then once again and unexpectedly we stumbled upon a trope whose orientation is the other—*alloiōsis*.

And so we pursued the trope of the other. We ventured even further beyond the tropes contained within the *Rhetoric* and even traditional historiography, and now offer another trope, one of the other—*alloiōsis*. Could this trope be figured with contingency so as to create new relations with the other? What would the trope of the other mean for future rhetorical theorizing? As should be apparent by now—after hearing about our attempts at creating a new classification system of tropes—we will barely scratch the surface of an enormous topological terrain as we try to present possible ways for this to happen. Nevertheless, we theorize that rhetoric can cease being reductive if other tropes can emerge. For starters, such tropes could come out of the discovery that the concept of contingency built on a principle of rest has distorted perceptions of contact, the other, and authority and turn us otherwise.

This book presents a collection of sorts of the conversations we have had across two decades of working together. A small part of our conversations has seen the light of day in earlier published essays, from which we draw in this book. As our conversation evolved over the years, it began to extend beyond our interpersonal dyad to include others. In this volume, we are joined by Michele Kennerly and Marie-Odile N. Hobeika to explore *alloiostrophic* rhetorical history, theory, and practice. In what follows in this Introduction, we wish to give you, our readers, a fuller sense of why we write, where we are coming from, what we collectively offer in this volume, and where we aim to go.

Because a new approach to rhetorical theorizing comes out of the discovery that assumptions regarding contingency have distorted perceptions of how rhetoric functions in the civic realm, then questions of democracy and rhetoric’s relation to its ideals and practices must be engaged. Democracy is, after all, why rhetoric is claimed to have been theorized by Aristotle in the first place. In the civic realm, Aristotle affirmed that we can never know essentially or necessarily, only ever probabilistically, because the contingencies of civic life are too great. So, the story goes, he theorized an art of

rhetoric to train our deliberation and decision making in the condition of contingency to produce wise practical judgments, decisions that are likely to be best for the greater good. If rhetoric takes as its effect the denial of contingency, what hope for democracy have we?

This traditional narrative affirming the centrality of contingency in Aristotle's rhetorical theory is conjoined with a mythic resonance of rhetoric being a gift from Zeus. The story goes something like this: The people—*demos* (from which the English word *democracy* is derived)—were living like animals.⁷ Without civilization they “at first lived scattered . . . there were no cities.”⁸ The people had fire; they had ways to get food; they could build houses. What they did not have was a way to settle their differences. Whenever “they formed communities,” they would resort to violence since the people lacked a way of making decisions.⁹ For Zeus the people's violence was wrecking his idea of people living peacefully. Zeus wanted to create civilization. So Zeus asked one of his lackeys—the god Hermes also known as Mercury—to distribute rhetoric among the people. The gift of rhetoric would enable the *demos* to settle their differences by means of speech rather than by means of violence. *How should we distribute this art?* Hermes asked Zeus. “Shall I,” inquired Hermes, the god of rhetoric, “distribute [the art] in the same way that the arts have been distributed? For example, one physician is enough to treat many laymen, and it is the same with other craftsmen.”¹⁰ In other words, should rhetoric—the power to speak—be distributed to only a few? Zeus thought for a moment. Give rhetoric to everyone, Zeus said, and distribute its power equally. Zeus explained to Hermes that civilization would not come into being if only a few shared the art. It is said that democracy was born the day that rhetoric was distributed as a gift to all the people. Rhetoric shapes democracy because, insofar as it offers people—*demos*—a tool, it enables them to conduct the business of living together.

From the vision of everyone receiving rhetoric emerges the impression of equality. Since all were given rhetoric then all can speak; all can participate in the deliberative process and make decisions about what to do. Yet, we know this same mythic scene finds Penelope being shouted at by her son Telemachus when she, according to him, dared violate the norms of speaking culture by instructing the Bard Phemius to sing another song than the all-too-sad one of her husband Odysseus. Telemachus makes quite a scene shaming his mother for speaking, as such action is to be taken only by men.¹¹ And we know too from this mythic scene that when Lysistrata attempts to make her great speech on why the Spartans and Athenians should make peace rather than continue their warring, the Magistrates leer at Lysistrata's body, and jeer at her for thinking she has any place speaking on matters that are men's.¹² We know as well that Cassandra, a truth speaker, was dismissed as a crazy lady fated to be ignored.¹³ The idea that speech was given to all comes into question.