

2007

## On Rhetoric as Gift/Giving

Mari Lee Mifsud

University of Richmond, [mmifsud@richmond.edu](mailto:mmifsud@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/rhetoric-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mifsud, Mari Lee. "On Rhetoric as Gift/Giving." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 40, no. 1 (2007): 89-107. doi:10.1353/par.2007.0015.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Rhetoric and Communication Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rhetoric and Communication Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

## On Rhetoric as Gift/Giving

---

Marilee Mifsud

In this essay, I explore the possibilities of rhetoric as gift. I begin with the Homeric gift economy and the rhetorical resources of this economy.<sup>1</sup> My use of “economy” here is not reducible to a monetary exchange system, but rather a more general system of practices orchestrating cultural identity and relations. As Georges Bataille suggests, studying a general economy may hold the key to all the problems posed by every discipline (1991, 10). For Bataille everything from geophysics to political economy, by way of sociology, history, and biology, to psychology, philosophy, art, literature, and poetry has an essential connection with economy. So, too, rhetoric. Henry Johnstone once defined rhetoric as the art of getting attention (1990, 334). We cannot attend to everything at once, so something must call our attention, invite our focus, and this something is rhetoric. Rhetoric’s desire to dispose its audience to invest in the object of attention connects rhetoric to economy. Rhetoric can be said to enact a disposition to invest, or a *cathexis*, a certain kind of savings. As such it is subject to economic movements and displacements, a dimension seen as well through Lyotard’s figure of the *dispositif* (1993, x).

My use of “gift” here draws broadly from work in anthropology and philosophy on “the gift” starting with Marcel Mauss’s groundbreaking anthropological work on archaic gift cultures. Mauss argues that as far back as we can go in the history of human civilizations, the major transfer of goods has been by cycles of gift-exchange. Each gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honor of the giver and recipient are engaged. That every gift must be met with a return gift, even if delayed, sets up a perpetual cycle of exchanges within and between cultures. In some cycles the return is equal to the gift, producing stable systems. However, in some cycles the return exceeds the gift. Such excess creates a competitive generosity, an escalating contest for honor. Mauss’s work shows there are no free gifts: a gift economy creates for members permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions of law, politics, culture, and interpersonal relations. The theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity.

---

*Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2007.

Copyright © 2007 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

From Mauss, the gift has taken off as a subject not only of sociological and anthropological interest, but of philosophical. Alan Schrift makes the case that the theme of the gift is located at the center of current discussions of post-modernity, discussions ranging from deconstruction, to gender, to ethics. The gift is, as Schrift argues, “one of the primary focal points at which contemporary disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses intersect” (1997, 3). As a sampling, and an insight into theories of the gift underwriting this essay, consider the encounters Bataille, Derrida, and Cixous have with the gift. Bataille encounters the distinction between restrictive and general economies, and theorizes general economy through an economic logic based on the unproductive expenditure of excess associated with gift cultures. Derrida encounters the impossibility of the gift, that is, once a gift is recognized as gift, it is no longer a gift but an obligation demanding reciprocity. Hélène Cixous encounters the difference between masculine and feminine economies in terms of the latter creating relations with others through gift-giving where the gift does not calculate its influence.

My exploration of the archaic Homeric gift economy takes me eventually to explore what such postmodern theories of the gift offer rhetoric, but not before moving through the classical Athenian polis economy. In the Western tradition, the polis is a familiar economy. For the most part, this familiarity arises because of the marketplace and state structure of the polis, so familiar still in modern capitalism. However, in particular regard to the study of rhetoric, this familiarity arises from the historical claim that the polis invented rhetoric as an idea and practice of serving its needs (e.g., arguing in the public assembly about the administration of the state, in the courtrooms to administer justice, and in the agora to proclaim and persuade the values of the culture). The polis has become so familiar as the economy of the Western tradition, and the situation of exchange in which rhetoric takes place, that it has become normalized. This normalization makes the polis economy visible only as *the economy*, rather than as a particular form of economy. This normalization masks a more archaic past where gifts not markets, and people not entities, regulate cultural economy, including rhetoric.

When the Homeric gift economy is taken as the starting point for theorizing rhetoric, the Athenian polis and its rhetoric seem alien and strange, not at all “normal.” Just as the Homeric Greeks are aliens to the Athenian Greeks and vice versa, so too the gift economy is alien to the polis economy and vice versa. The two economies are not only alien, but incommensurable. Drawing from Paul Feyerabend, I posit incommensurability as a means by which to articulate cultural alterity. This creates an orientation of distinction between these economies, where the alien is both between and within each economy.

Such an orientation works to resist trading a relation of difference for a regime of domination.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, such an orientation allows the relation of difference to be generative of directions beyond these incommensurable economies.

My approach in this essay is not so much, if at all, about history, and getting it right, or rescuing its lost virtues. My approach is, in Deleuzian terms, a becoming, that belongs to geography, not history. Becomings are “orientations, directions, entries and exits” (1987, 2). Deleuze writes of a woman-becoming that is not the same as women, their past, and their future, but that is essential for women to enter to get out of their past and their future, their history (2). Likewise, there is a philosophy-becoming that has nothing to do with the history of philosophy and that happens through those whom the history of philosophy does not manage to classify (2). And, I add, there is, too, a rhetoric-becoming that has nothing to do with the history of rhetoric, and that happens through those whom the history of rhetoric does not manage to classify. Such is Homer to me in rhetoric. Yet, as we shall see, Homer is not a savior. Rather, exploring Homeric gift economy and rhetoric offers an experience of alterity. What Cixous calls a *sortie* and Deleuze a *becoming* opens in the rub between the archaic gift and the classical polis. This opening allows for rhetoric becoming, not so much *gift*, but *giving*.

#### Homeric Gift Economy

The Homeric gift economy is situated in the home: the *oikos*.<sup>3</sup> The same could be said of all economy, for *oikos* is the root of “economy.” In the Homeric gift economy, we see how the home serves as the space of cultural orchestration. The aorist passive, middle sense of the verb *oikew* (to live) means, of a people, to settle, organize or dispose themselves. This disposition gives rise to the Homeric economy, the systems of exchange, both material and symbolic, by which a people dispose themselves.

The dynamism between the home and the disposition of a people shows the significance of hospitality in Homeric economy. Archaic hospitality, the virtue of being a host to a guest in the home, or vice versa, generates the obligation of friendship and solidarity, as well as the acquisition and amplification of honor within and between peoples. Hospitality involves the *xenos*, meaning both guest and host. That the term *xenos* is one of Zeus’s epithets marks the particularly sacred association of guest-host relations, and signals the significance of hospitality rituals.

Homeric depictions of hospitality rituals are lavish. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus's arrival at the palace of Alkinoös, King of the Phaiakians, presents such an occasion for Homer to tell the details of greeting a guest, welcoming him as a stranger with guest gifts, offering to him a feast, and the occasion for story telling, as well as preparing a splendid departure for the guest, with more guest gifts, another feast, and still more occasions for the exchange of speeches. Whereas action generally passes quickly in Homer, the story of Alkinoös' hospitality and guest-friendship offered to Odysseus spreads from Book 8–13, a remarkable dedication to the details and dynamics of gift-exchange.

Details of the luxurious items exchanged during hospitality rituals abound as well: silver, gold, tunics, fine fabrics, wines, cauldrons, baskets, mixing bowls, tripods, decorated armor, and swords. Homer tells of the gifts given to Helen and Menelaus from the King and Queen of Egypt: the silver work-basket with wheels underneath, edged in gold, to hold yarn for spinning, a golden distaff with dark-colored wool, two silver bathtubs, a pair of tripods, and ten talents of gold (*Od.* 4.125–35). We are told as well of the gifts of the Phaiakians to Odysseus: the surpassingly beautiful tripods and caldrons, the intricately wrought gold, and all the fine woven clothing (13.217–18) that the Phaiakian men of counsel gave to Odysseus, man by man, to create a most generous collection of treasure (13.7–15). Menelaus gives to Telemachus, not utilitarian gifts, but the single most precious gift in his storehouse of treasure, a silver fashioned mixing bowl, edged in gold, made by the god Hephaestus (4.615–17).

The luxury of the gifts and the liberality of hospitality rituals portray in the orchestration of relations in and between peoples a competitive generosity. Competitive generosity directs the Homeric gift economy. Menelaus must bestow precious treasure on Telemachus not only to establish his honor, but to communicate to Telemachus the deep bond, the solidarity, he feels for Odysseus (4.612–19). The elaborate hospitality of the Phaiakians not only ensures their honor in the moment with their guest, but that their honor transcends the moment into the future as Odysseus will tell great stories of them upon his return to his homeland. Generosity is the primary means by which characters acquire and sustain honor, as well as create a network of obligations to each other that can carry this honor into the future, and to many different peoples. This network of obligations creates solidarity both within and between cultures, and this solidarity engenders trust. One who expends his surplus so liberally by giving feasts and treasure is not only honorable, but trustworthy.

The Homeric gift economy is situated in the home, structured through norms of hospitality, the highest of these being generosity, and directed toward creating the obligations of friendship and solidarity, as well as acquiring honor.

This does not mean, however, that the gift is always a friendly economy. Examples abound of the gift being a source of trickery and enmity, as is the case with the infamous Trojan horse, given in the guise of a luxurious hospitality gift to the Trojans. That such examples exist does not, however, undermine the structure of the gift economy through hospitality rituals. The Trojans were obligated to receive the lavish horse as a gift because of the norms of gift cultures. How else could they have been so duped?

Of note in this sketch of the Homeric gift economy are the inextricable relations between public and private, and between persons and things. First, no radical separation between the public and the private makes sense in the Homeric world. Even in what might be considered the public world of Homeric men (assembling in the *Iliad* to orchestrate war, or in the *Odyssey* to orchestrate the return of a hero and the security of the hero's kingdom), private rituals of guest-host relating, friendship, and gift-giving structure the public assembly. Moreover, the site of the assembly is often the home, the palace of the King. This private space in which the public disposes itself connects the public to the intimate, as do the private rituals of hospitality.

The intimacy of the gift economy inextricably links the person and the private to the public. Moreover, this intimacy links the person to the thing, and vice versa, creating an animistic quality to the gift. The power of the gift is, in Maussian terms, a laying hold of both persons and things. In gift cultures, no absolute boundary between persons and things can be drawn. No radical separation exists between the two. Things are an extension of persons, and people identify with the things possessed and exchanged. Mauss describes worlds where the relation between persons and things is one between souls, because the thing itself possesses a soul (2000, 12). To make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself (12), hence the thing given is not inactive. The thing is intimately connected to the person, hence it is invested with life (13).

A gift economy is an intimate economy, where things have not yet become distant, abstract, objectified commodities, and acts of exchange between people have not yet become less about the people and more about the things. In the gift economy, things and people imitate each other, as do the private and public. Things represent and portray the people who give them, and vice versa. The private represents and portrays the public, and vice versa. Hence things and people, and the private and public, in a gift economy are mimetic: they represent or portray one another. Their mimesis allows for the gift "to be less an entity or object than a matrix of relations" (Naas 1995, 150). "Entities" or "objects" can be treated as independent analytic units. A kind of abstraction and

distance figures their being. The gift as “a matrix of relations” resists treatment via analysis of isolated parts as independent of the whole, or of inanimate objects to be exchanged, or of public assembly divorced of private rituals of hospitality. Not only does the gift as thing represent or portray the person as giver, and vice versa, but it represents and portrays the past as present and the present as past, thus constituting the future out of both simultaneously. Gifts always bear the traces of others, and of the past. Gifts link generations to each other, representing or portraying not so much a present value as the figure of past and future relations. Hence, the significance of gifts lies not so much in their material worth as in their creation of cultural intimacy and cultural memory.

The consciousness required for such intimacy and memory is a consciousness of aggregation, not division. Aggregation guides relations in the gift economy. Archaic aggregation is a product of archaic paratactic consciousness and speech. Parataxis is a style of thought and speech that holds multiple related and divergent things in mind simultaneously, not “as one unified entity” but “as ones in the aggregate” (Feyerabend 1975, 179–180n.51).

We can see how parataxis stylizes ideas in and through aggregation in the following passage from the *Odyssey*:

We came next to the Aiolian island, where Aiolos  
lived, Hippotas' son, beloved by the immortal  
gods, on a floating island, the whole enclosed by a rampart  
of bronze, not to be broken, and the sheer of the cliff runs upward  
to it; and twelve children were born to him in his palace,  
six of them daughters, and six sons in the pride of their youth, so  
he bestowed his daughters on his sons, to be their consorts.  
And evermore, beside their dear father and gracious mother,  
they feast, and good things beyond number are set before them;  
and all their days the house fragrant with food echoes  
in the courtyard, and their nights they sleep each one by his modest wife,  
under coverlets, and on bedsteads corded for bedding. (10.1–13)

In this passage, we encounter paratactic style: the presence of grammatically co-ordinate propositions fashioned through “and,” and in place of “and,” the comma. We can see as well the absence of logically subordinating connectors such as “then” and “because.” The aggregate quality of parataxis parallels the absence of elaborate systems of subordinate clauses in the early Greek language. This absence of subordination in Homeric language as well as style displays a simultaneity operating in archaic rhetoric, where many and multiple ideas can be strung together, to proliferate meaning and connection. In the passage cited above, a rhetorical intimacy can be experienced where the detail of the corded

bedsteads is as significant to the passage's offerings as the details of sleeping under coverlets, being given over to one's siblings in marriage, and feasting all one's days in the courtyard of one's family home. In the multiplicity in unity, minority ideas are equalized with majority, allowing for a liberality to meaning not offered by majority rule.

A paratactic consciousness allows for aggregation, and in turn allows, as archaic mimetic consciousness allows, cultural intimacy and memory. Multiple and divergent things can be seen as touching. The possibilities of connection proliferate. One thing cannot be thought without simultaneously thinking of some digressively incidental thought (Feyerabend 1975, 179–80n.51). An intimacy emerges in parataxis. In the process of simultaneously entertaining a digression with the thought that sparked it, we experience a connection and connectedness and both particular and general awareness of our situation. This intimacy forges a cultural memory of general relations, a memory that is ever-present yet always becoming.

Cultural intimacy and memory work within a general economy. In Bataillean terms, with an orientation toward a general economy, exchange cannot be studied in isolation as an independent act, or as collection of independent acts all coordinated to perform a specific end. Bataille writes that when it is necessary to change a car tire, it is easy to manage a quite limited operation. It is possible to act as if the elements on which the action is brought to bear are completely isolated from the rest of the world. One can complete the operation without once needing to consider the whole, of which the tire is an integral part (1991, 19). Bataille considers the whole, general economy at play—not just the particular operations of the changing of a tire but the more general economy that expands even to the production of cars. The changes brought about do not perceptibly alter the other things, nor does the ceaseless action from without have an appreciable effect on the conduct of the operation. However, something changes when the question becomes that of economic activity in general. A certain kind of intimacy and memory are at work in general economy—an intimacy where elements on which action is brought to bear are not completely isolated from the rest of the world, but are brought into contact with it—and a memory is forged of general relations, not merely of operations, at play in any cultural activity. The gift is not a series of technical operations, nor an exchange of entities and objects as inanimate things. Nor is the gift a private ritual separate from the public. The gift is an economy of intimacy and memory, where exchange wrought from hospitality structures cultural identity and relations.

## Polis Economy

The polis transfigures exchange to meet the needs of the nation-state, an idea wholly alien to the Homeric Greeks. A striking portrayal of the transfiguration of exchange in the polis economy can be found on the Temple of Hephaestus, looming directly above the bouleterion, on the crowning hill of the agora.<sup>4</sup> Decorating the face of the temple is a configuration of the labors of Heracles. This configuration is quite different from the mythic tales of the labors. On the temple, the labors are organized differently, some are excluded, one is included twice, and one offers a different portrayal altogether of a labor from the mythic portrayal. This different portrayal is of Heracles giving the golden apples of the Hesperides to Athene. Moved to the climactic metope on the frieze of the temple's face (in the myth this is Heracles's eleventh labor; in the temple frieze it is his twelfth and final labor), this portrayal signals the transfiguration of exchange from the gift economy to the polis economy. In this climactic metope, we see Heracles wearing the impenetrable pelt of the Nemean Lion, whom he killed for its magical protective skin. He has other objects around him, perhaps the other commodities he secured in various labors. He has in his hands the golden apples of the Hesperides, which he cunningly stole from Atlas. He is giving these apples to Athene, who in turn gives him an olive branch.

That Heracles's gift of the apples is not an extension of himself, but rather a yield from his labor, is significant. The apples are actually things intimately connected not to Heracles but to the Hesperides. That Heracles was not given them as a gift, that rather he secured them through trickery as a commodity that would fashion a favorable future for Athens (not the Hesperides), is significant. That the impenetrable skin that Heracles flays and uses for his own protection is intimately of the Nemean Lion not of Heracles, yet the Nemean Lion is not the giver of its own skin, is significant. The significance of all this lies in the distance between the gift and the giver, the abstraction of the thing from the person, which in turn creates a commodity out of the apples, and of the Lion's skin, and a trader (traitor?) out of Heracles for putting these commodities in circulation for the benefit of the Athenian polis, a benefit wrought from the robbing and murder of the proper givers.

That the metope tells a different story than the myth, too, is significant. In the myth, Heracles tries to give the apples first to Eurystheus, who hands them back to him; then to Athene, who returns them to the Hesperides, the nymphs who tended and protected Hera's orchard, making them the proper givers. Some tellings of the myth hold that Athena was angry with Heracles's offer as it was an affront to gift exchange. In the metope, we see none of this. Gift exchange

is transfigured from the myth to the metope. In the metope, the apples are not a gift, but a commodity, exchanged for the good of the state. Moreover, Athena's participation in this exchange, as depicted in the metope, sanctions the exchange. In the myth, Athena's rejection of the apples as a gift marks the wrongfulness of the exchange of "gifts" figured as such. In the metope, this kind of exchange is not only depicted as right, but as requisite for Athenian peace and prosperity.

The practice of exchange as depicted in this final metope of the labors of Heracles on the Temple of Hephaestus spirits exchange in the agora and bouleterian in particular kinds of ways, in and through relational distance, abstraction, commodification, technical operation/procedure, and utility. This spirit of exchange expresses itself in actual practices of the polis, such as ostracization, liturgy, and antidosis. These practices of the polis present figures of exchange in a polis economy.

First let's consider the practice of ostracization. When the last tyrant, Peisistratus, was driven from Athens, Athenian citizens were left to create a system of rule appropriate to freedom, not only in political situations but economic too. The tyrant, after all, was likely as hated for his accumulation of wealth and resources as his despotism, not that these two are necessarily separate phenomena. We see evidence of the suspicion of over-accumulation of resources in the ancient practice of ostracization. This practice came into favor in the early years of the polis and continued through the fall of Athens. Whenever a citizen began to amass too much—too much wealth, too much loyalty, too much social status—anyone perceiving this excess as a threat to the polis could call for a vote of ostraka. The council would gather. Speeches would be made about the threat of the man who had accumulated such great wealth and resources, and on pottery shards, or ostraka, councilmen would scratch the name of the person feared to have accumulated too much. If five hundred ostraka were cast, the citizen in excess would be ostracized for a period of seven years. Seven years was thought to be sufficient for the destruction and redistribution of one's excess so upon re-entry to the polis the once overly accumulated citizen would be appropriately reduced to the norm, or even below. Over-accumulation happens because the over-accumulator never gives anything away; he has no competitive generosity. Rather, he hoards, in a spirit of generous competitiveness. Ostracization worked as a state mechanism to force the exchange process when members of the polis economy felt no obligation to keep wealth in circulation.

Another such practice illuminating the transfiguration of exchange in the polis economy is the practice of antidosis. Literally "a giving in exchange," antidosis was a practice of the newly developing Athenian democracy. The practice came about when a man wished to avoid his duty of performing a liturgy.

Liturgies were related either to the army or to the state. The trierarchy (ship keeping) was an “extraordinary liturgy” directly related to wartime. “Ordinary liturgies” comprised such acts as theatre sponsorship, running the gymnasia, providing civic meals, and horse-breeding. A liturgy is a practice of taxation that transfigures the gift through the mechanism of a state apparatus. The liturgy, in theory, was to inspire pride in the Athenian taxpayer, for it placed his estate at the service of his city. The practice called for the wealthiest Athenian men to come forward to carry out various services for the good of their polis in the best possible fashion. They were to get out of it notability and self-respect. Yet, the liturgy, because of expense and responsibility, could be received as a compulsory act that some might want to avoid performing. A man who was nominated to perform a liturgy could avoid this duty if he could name another citizen who was richer and better qualified to perform the task, in effect, shifting the burden of hospitality to another. If the man challenged agreed that he was richer, he had to take over the liturgy; if he claimed to be poorer, then the challenger could insist on an exchange of all their property to test the claim in which case the challenger would himself perform the liturgy as the new owner of the supposed greater estate. This process of exchange was called *antidosis*.

The advantage of *antidosis* and ostracization as formal systems from the viewpoint of the democracy was that they encouraged the rich to be suspicious of each other, instead of being hostile toward the state. In both the practice of ostracization and *antidosis*, we can see how suspicion structures citizen relations. This is not to say that members of the gift economy did not also get suspicious of each other. They certainly did. We know well, for example, that the *Iliad* is as much a story of Achilles’ suspicion of Agamemnon as it is a story of the Trojan War. Yet, the gift economy did not have a state mechanism constructing operations that formalize suspicion as an orientation toward others. The distinctness of the gift economy, as it structures relations through rituals of hospitality, is not that of technical operations formalizing suspicion. The state cultivation of suspicion works as a safeguard against tyranny, but it works against cultural intimacy and memory.

The polis economy transfigures exchange to meet the needs of the nation-state. The transfiguration works through positioning people and things differently. Relative to the gift culture, things and people in a polis culture are related through distant, abstract mechanisms of power, rather than personal relations, and through technical proceduralism and utility, more so than through relational obligations, luxury, and honor.

In terms of cultural memory, exchange in a polis economy spirits the future, using the present and the past as means to a desired end. The conflu-

ence of past and present brought forward in memory creates points of closure from which the future can be built. These points of closure prevent memory of peoples and cultures as givers prior to the point at which the gift is transfigured into the commodity. Polis exchange operates in and through distance and commodification. Things are distant—by this I mean non-intimate—from people, and people distant from things. Things become means or tools to be used by people—a use governed by *techne*. Technics overwhelms mimetics. And in the technic culture, intimacy and memory suffer. How intimate is a *techne*? In what way memorable? In technics, intimacy is transfigured into fetishism—as when Heracles wraps himself in the skin of the Nemean lion, and memory becomes particular and operational rather than general and relational. Rather than remembering relational experiences in their general economy, brought forward to shape present and future relations, we now remember the particular reward for particular labors well executed. We remember the particular operations of our labors that secure a desired outcome, and our cultural memory develops from this restricted economy. We don't remember the Nemean Lion as he wore his own skin, and as he came into relation with Heracles. We only remember Heracles in the operation of his kill, and the yield of his labor, which secured a desired future—impenetrability in the quest to civilize Athens by ridding her of beasts, monsters, and the uncivilized Other.

Not only is the mimetic power in a gift economy transfigured by a polis economy, but so too its paratactic power, and again cultural intimacy and memory suffers. The polis economy figures exchange through a hypotactic consciousness, not paratactic.<sup>5</sup> Hypotaxis figures relations in and through logical subordination. This logic of subordination is essential to making judgments in the public sphere on matters of politics, law, and culture, and it exists as well in archaic culture. The difference is that classical hypotaxis overwhelms exchange with its demand for subordination. Hypotaxis as the sanctioned style of speech constrains a general consciousness where subordination can be one of the many in an aggregate, and cultivates a restricted consciousness where subordination figures thinking and relating.

#### Rhetoric-Becoming

The rub between the gift and the polis economies can be generative of rhetoric's possibilities. The possibilities, in the positive, of the rhetoric of the polis are well known, since so much of the history and theory of rhetoric is situated and

understood only in the context of the polis economy. Yet the polis economy and its rhetoric can be encountered otherwise when juxtaposed with the gift economy and its rhetoric. When rhetoric is put in the situation of the polis economy, in light of the gift, we can suppose a rhetoric operating in an ethic of abstraction, approaching its situation with a fundamental distance between self and other. In this distance, the other's assent becomes regarded as a commodity to secure, and rhetorical *techne* the tools for the task. We can suppose technical attention to operations in the successful design of persuasion transfiguring persons into things or objects, and in so doing undermining cultural intimacy and cultural memory, turning the former into fetishism and the later into proceduralism.

We can suppose, too, rhetoric's utility in structuring citizen relations through suspicion. Note that ostracization and *antidosis* are rhetorical situations, the latter so much so that Isocrates' *Antidosis*, an imaginary *antidosis* fashioned to protect his wealth of rhetorical teachings from being given over to the suspicion of the polis, has become a mainstay of education in rhetoric.

Perhaps more than these suppositions, we can suppose a rhetoric wrought from the polis economy to be a rhetoric of generous competitiveness, and not competitive generosity. The agonistic impulse of rhetoric in the polis aspires to win, to conquer, and, in so doing, to establish one's honor. This kind of honor is wrought from a spirit of domination, not friendship. We can suppose, then, the worst case scenario of rhetoric's effects in a polis economy: Fetishism. Proceduralism. Suspicion. Domination.

Henry Johnstone did more than suppose such a rhetoric when he wrote about technology and ethics (1982). He showed such a rhetoric as a logical consequence of technological process. A process, e.g., rhetoric, is technological in the sense when it is a series of steps in which either a given step or the project as a whole determines the sequel to the given step; or else the question whether the successor is fitting to its predecessors does not arise. In such a process, the means are determined by the end. A technological procedure is distinct from a creative process. A creative process consists of a series of steps none of which is strictly determined by its predecessors but each of which, once taken, is seen to have been a fitting sequel to its predecessors. One salient feature of a creative process is that two or more people are cooperating, taking turns to make the step that is retrospectively seen to be appropriate. A technological process fixes in advance the relationships among the steps, and requires no cooperation between those involved in the process to accomplish its task.

Johnstone writes that creative communication occurs only among persons, and persons require creative communication. The only alternatives to creative communication are technological communication and no communication at all.

And technological communication is in fact only an unstable phase of a transition that leads to no communication at all. If I am so exclusively occupying myself with the procedures for winning a rhetorical position that I end up simply manipulating my listener in order to win, clearly I am no longer communicating with my listener. My listener stops being a person to me, and becomes instead a commodity, a thing abstracted, better yet robbed, from the listener for the benefit to me. The commodified listener then becomes my fetish, rhetoric the procedure for feeding it, and brutalization the outcome. If I am surrounded by things and disconnected from persons, not only do I get no cooperation, but nothing calls for my own cooperation. There will be no occasion for me to exhibit my own humanity. Johnstone writes of the probability that under such circumstances a person could not survive as a person: "His environment would sooner or later brutalize him. From the role of sole technological manipulator of things around him, he would pass to the final phase of his degradation; he would become a thing himself, a thing interacting with other things in a minuet of meaningless transfers of energy" (48).

When rhetoric is put in touch with the legacies of the gift economy, we can imagine it not so much as a tool but a gift. We can suppose rhetoric as a gift to be creative, intimate, memorable, luxurious, and liberal. Creativity is the antinomy of technical procedure. Intimacy is the absence of commodification and fetishism. Memory is of general relations or persons, not particular operations on things. Luxury is surplus of meaning produced. And liberality is a feast-like expenditure of surplus. However, that the gift is well known to be both remedy and poison complicates too romantic a view of the gift.<sup>6</sup> Gift recipients in a gift economy can become burdened by the debt of compulsory reciprocity and obligatory exchange. Moreover, strict lines of exchange tend to be culturally coded in gift cultures, hence defining and reifying class stratifications. Not just anyone can give to or receive from just anyone. And that women are wares of exchange in gift culture offers plenty of caution about romanticizing the gift.

The archaic Homeric gift economy is not our *savoir*. However, exploring this archaic economy in contradistinction to the classical polis economy creates an experience of alterity. This experience becomes generative of new theoretical directions for rhetoric, so as to get out of the historical trappings of both the gift and polis economies. In recognizing the radical otherness that the polis is to the gift, and vice versa, we can resist trading a generative relation of difference for a deadly regime of domination. If we resist such a trade, we will be given two incommensurable economies in the study of rhetoric, neither of which should be the only economy, nor even should both be considered the only two. Instead,

we can work with the generative relation of difference between (and within) the two to create something new.

Whereas the gift economy is incommensurable to the polis economy, they are both economies. This becomes a problem for the gift. We see in the gift economy a certain kind of savings. The savings of the gift comes in the form of cultural memory, and while this cultural memory saves obligations to create solidarity and honor into the future, it also creates permanent cycles of obligatory reciprocity. Derrida points out that the gift that is recognized as a gift ceases thereby to be a gift, but an economic exchange. The gift, as Derrida notes, is figured through antinomy, so that the conditions of its possibility are precisely its conditions of impossibility (1997, 128). The gift, once recognized, collapses into a system of exchange. The return to the giver nullifies the act of giving. As Cixous writes of the ever-presence of economy in history, even the gift brings in a return (1986, 87).

Mauss never denies the gift's return; rather, he attempts to calculate the circulation of the gift under a law of return somewhere between the economic and the aneconomic. The question becomes whether this return can be denied. Can the gift be aneconomic? Can we imagine giving, not figured through cycles of obligatory return, i.e., not savings, but squander; not return, but release?

Both Derrida and Cixous suggest that we can, and both bring this suggestion to bear upon writing, the privileged term for rhetoric in the vocabulary of these philosophers. Derrida writes of the demand in writing for excess, with respect to what the writer can understand of what she says. The demand is "that a sort of opening, play, indetermination be left, signifying hospitality for what is to come" (2001, 84). Yet "whoever gives hospitality ought to know that she is not even the proprietor of what she would appear to give" (84). There is no "I" that ethically makes room for the other in the act of giving, but rather an "I" structured by the alterity within it. Derrida writes, "The other is in me before me" (84). The hospitable "I" is itself in a state of self-deconstruction and of dislocation, and from this state writing acts as aneconomic gift of excess meaning.<sup>7</sup>

Cixous is not so much interested in aneconomic space, but in transfiguring economy from its masculine to its feminine body. She takes Mauss's construction of the return of the gift and Derrida's deconstruction of this return and inscribes it within the gendered unconscious. The masculine economy of giving is always associated with debt. The desire to save and to invest so as to receive a return on one's investment in the form of increased savings directs a masculine economy. Cixous suggests we call this economy "masculine" in part because it is erected from a fear that is typically masculine, namely of expropriation, of loss. In contrast, feminine economies transfigure return. They are not restricted

economies where giving is a means of deferred exchange in order to obligate a counter-gift in return. Rather, giving becomes in a feminine economy an affirmation of generosity that cannot be understood in terms of exchange economies. Yet, women's giving does not escape the law of return:

You never give something for nothing. But all the difference lies in the why and how of the gift, in the values that the gesture of giving affirms, cause to circulate, in the type of profit the giver draws from the gift and the use to which he or she puts it. (Cixous 1986, 87)

We can see this feminine economy as an alien within the Homeric gift economy. In Cixous's terms, the dominant norms of giving in Homeric gift economy are masculine. Givers give in expectation of a particular, calculated return, as when the Phaiakians give such liberal and luxurious departure gifts to Odysseus, among all the pomp and circumstance of a public hospitality ritual, in return for his spreading their honor to his home. This scene of gift-giving stands in stark contrast to the scene of Circe sending off Odysseus. Circe, with no pomp and circumstance, stocks the ship with the departure gifts of a ram and black ewe, and she does so without being detected by Odysseus and his men: "for easily had she passed us by. Who with his eyes could behold a god against his will, whether going to or fro?" (*Od.* 573–74).<sup>8</sup>

This example of Circe's giving shows that the masculine gender of the Homeric gift economy is not essential, but yet another accident of history. Something other is already within the gift. The other is a feminine giving able to resist the gift that calculates influence.

This escape from calculation of return makes possible Cixous' feminine writing. This writing puts the abstracted, autonomous self at risk, bringing the self into intimate contact with alterity, so intimate that the alterity is already within. The self recognizes its own radical alterity, and writes from this recognition. This writing is not about saving, or holding in reserve, but sending, not about return but release. We women, Cixous notes (without excluding men in her sexual qualifier "women"), do not find our pleasure in "employing the suitable rhetoric" (92):

indeed, one pays a certain price for the use of a discourse. The logic of communication requires an economy both of signs—of signifiers—and of subjectivity. The orator is asked to unwind a thin thread, dry and taut. We [women] like uneasiness, questioning. There is waste in what we say. We need that waste. To write is always to make allowances for super-abundance and uselessness while slashing the exchange value that keeps the spoken word on its track. (92–93)

For Cixous, a feminine economy of the gift is a launching forth and effusion without return. Woman giving doesn't try to "recover expenses" (87). She does not have to return to herself: "she is not the being-of-the end (the goal), but she is how-far-being-reaches" (87). This giving makes possible a feminine writing that like woman's cosmic libido can only go on and on, in a paratactic flow, without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours:

*Voice!* That, too, is launching forth and effusion without return. Exclamation, cry, breathlessness, yell, cough, vomit, music. Voice leaves. Voice loses. She leaves. She loses. And that is how she writes, as one throws a voice—forward into the void. She goes away, she goes forward, doesn't turn back to look at her tracks. Pays no attention to herself. Running break-neck. Contrary to the self-absorbed, masculine narcissism, making sure of its image, of being seen, of seeing itself, of assembling its glories, of pocketing itself again. (94)

Such a rhetoric that Derrida and Cixous theorize as writing through giving requires not investment and savings, but a spending of excess, waste, and surplus. If rhetoric is not a disposition to invest, then it is an expression of excess.

Henry Johnstone seemed as well aware of this dimension of rhetoric, as he was of rhetoric's *cathexis*. His work on *pankoinon* attends to the way in which rhetoric offers surplus meaning. In formal logic, a tautology is an instantiation of a logical truth such as the Law of Self-Identity ("X=X") (2000, 7). In rhetoric, a *pankoinon* is, as Johnstone writes, a paradox: "it consists in the assertion or assumption that although a tautology, and thus logically true, it can nevertheless, have implicatures—one or more of them—the truth or falsity of which does not depend on logic alone" (2000, 10).

Take, for example, the following definition of rhetoric: rhetoric is rhetoric. This *pankoinon* came from a conversation I had with Johnstone about the trouble with definition, and in particular how this trouble wrecks havoc on rhetorical scholars asked to define their subject. Johnstone asked why we could not be content to say, "Rhetoric is rhetoric." Read as a *pankoinon*, this definition is quite evocative. A *pankoinon* becomes a figure of speech, in part, when it is assumed that its implicatures need not take the form of an explicitly stateable proposition (8). What the *pankoinon* conveys may amount to no more than the sense that something is being adumbrated that is indefinable, elusive, and mysterious (8). In *pankoinon*, we have an open, playful, indeterminate speech, offering surplus meaning, a giving rhetoric, or a rhetoric giving.

Rhetoric as giving goes beyond meaning that is known or that can be understood, readily translated, commodified, and exchanged. Such a rhetoric holds in mind many meanings not for the sake of meaning, not for the sake of

savings and return, but for the sake of liberal expenditure. A hospitable rhetor becomes, then, a producer of possibilities rather than a judge of meaning. In Deleuzian terms, a hospitable rhetor is like Bob Dylan organizing a song: “as astonishing producer rather than author” (8). To be “no longer an author” but a “production studio” takes a very lengthy preparation, says Deleuze, yet no method, nor rules, nor recipes apply (9). The enterprise is a wholly creative one. The creativity of production has an absolute speed, it does not slow down for reason’s plan, nor is its line of flight predetermined as a technical process.

Rhetoric as giving enacts a rhetorical hospitality, a sumptuous expenditure of surplus meaning, whether produced by host or guest, speaker or listener. Such hospitality requires an aggregative consciousness of multiplicity. This consciousness harkens to Homeric culture, where a paratactic style and the absence of a “self” have led characters to be called schizophrenic for the many voices in their heads constituting multiple orientations to their experiences and the world around them. This schizophrenia allows for meaning to be decentralized, or, in Deleuzian terms, *deterritorialized*. It gives rise to an encounter, a becoming, and it operates, as we see in Homeric rhetoric and as Deleuze notes, in and through “and.”

The power of rhetoric as giving is its power to generate surplus meaning, a power encountered only in its liberal expenditure. This expenditure, though, is beyond “exchangist” economic terms, beyond calculated return, beyond commodification and appropriation. A rhetoric as giving is a rhetoric becoming, betwixt and between the gift and the polis.

*Department of Rhetoric and Communication Studies  
University of Richmond*

### Notes

1. I am indebted to Henry Johnstone for introducing me to Homer. With Dr. Johnstone, I enjoyed a seven-year reading of the *Odyssey* in Greek. We began this work as friends, and it led not only to my dissertation (*The Rhetoric of Deliberation in Homer*, Penn State University, 1997), which Johnstone directed, but to a body of continuing writing, from which the present essay is born.

2. The benefit of experiencing alterity “to resist trading a relation of difference for a regime of domination” was articulated by Michelle Ballif citing Lynn Worsham in “Rhetorical Gifting of the Other.” Ballif presented this as a lecture in a course titled “The Gift: Theory, Culture, Language,” which I taught in spring of 2004 with my colleague Gary Shapiro, Professor of Philosophy, University of Richmond. Diane Davis also presented a lecture to this course, which foreshadowed her recent publication, “Addressing Alterity: Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Nonappropriate Relation” (*Philosophy and Rhetoric* 2005).<sup>1</sup> Davis’s distinction between the said and saying resonates with the distinction between the gift and giving that I will address in this essay.

3. For excellent commentary on Homeric gift culture, see Donlan (1982a, 1982b, 1989, 1993), Finley (1991), Grant (1988), Murray (1993), Naas (1995), Snodgrass (1990), and Tandy (1997).

4. For extended critique of the Temple of Hephaestus, and its significance to the polis economy and rhetoric, see Mifsud, Sutton, and Fox (2005). I am indebted to Jane Sutton for suggesting, in 1997, the significance of this temple. I am indebted to Lindsey Fox for her research on this temple culminating in her undergraduate honors thesis, "Illuminating a Space for Woman," Department of Rhetoric and Communication Studies, University of Richmond, 2004.

5. For Aristotle's comments on the hypotactic privilege of civic discourse see *Art of Rhetoric* 1409a.29–1409b.4.

6. See Benveniste (1997) for extended linguistic critique of *gift*.

7. I am indebted to Ballif, "Rhetorical Gifting of the Other"<sup>2</sup> for directing me to this passage in Derrida.

8. I am grateful to Henry Johnstone for pointing out during our reading the particularly feminine character of Circe's giving. Johnstone later gave to me an essay he wrote on this passage during his graduate work in classics at Bryn Mawr, "Potnia Kirkê" (1977).

### Works Cited

- Aristotle. 1991. *The "Art" of Rhetoric*. Trans. J. H. Freese. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Ballif, Michelle. "Rhetorical Gifting of the Othe." Seminar Lecture in "The Gift: Theory, Culture, Language." MariLee Mifsud and Gary Shapiro, Instructors. Department of Rhetoric and Communication Studies and Department of Philosophy, University of Richmond. Spring 2004.
- Bataille, Georges. 1991. *The Accursed Share*. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books.
- Benveniste, Emile. 1997. "Gift and Exchange in the Indo-European Vocabulary." In *The Logic of the Gift*, ed. Alan Schrift. New York: Routledge.
- Cixous, Hélène. 1986. "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays." In *The Newly Born Woman*, ed. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- Davis, Diane. 2005. "Addressing Alterity: Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Nonappropriate Relation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38(3):191–212.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Claire Parnet. 1987. *Dialogues*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Columbia UP.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1997. "The Time of the King." In *The Logic of the Gift*, ed. Alan Schrift. 121–47. New York: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Maurizio Ferraris. 2001. *A Taste for the Secret*. Ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb, trans. Giacomo Donis. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Donlan, Walter. 1982a. "The Politics of Generosity in Homer." *Helios* 9(2):1–15.
- . 1982b. "Reciprocities in Homer." *Classical World* 75(3):137–75.
- . 1989. "The Pre-State Community in Greece." *Symbolae Osloenses* 64:5–29.
- . 1993. "Dueling with Gifts in the *Iliad*." *Colby Quarterly* 29:155–72.
- Feyerabend, Paul. 1975. *Against Method*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press.
- Finley, M. I. 1991. *The World of Odysseus*, 2nd ed. London: Penguin Books.
- Grant, Michael. 1988. *The Rise of the Greeks*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.
- Graves, Robert. 1977. *The Greek Myths*. Vol. 2. Middlesex: Pelican Books.
- Homer. 1963. *Iliad*. Vol. 1–2. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Homer. 1965. *Odyssey*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Johnstone, Henry. 1977. "Potnia Kirkê." Seminar Paper, Department of Classics, Bryn Mawr.
- . 1980. "Pankoinon as a Rhetorical Figure in Greek Tragedy." *Glotta* 58(1-2):49–62.
- . 1982. "Communication: Technology and Ethics." In *Communication, Philosophy, and the Technological Age*, ed. Michael J. Hyde, 38–53. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P.
- . 1990. "Rhetoric as a Wedge: A Reformulation." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 20(4):333–38.
- . 2000. "Pankoinon as Paradox." *Rhetoric Review* 19(1–2):7–11.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1963. *Libidinal Economy*. Trans. Ian Hamilton Grant. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

- Mauss, Marcel. 2000. [1950]. *The Gift: The Form and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. W. D. Hall. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Mifsud, MariLee, Jane Sutton, and Lindsey Fox. 2005. "Configurations: Encountering Ancient Athenian Spaces of Rhetoric, Democracy, and Woman." *Journal for International Women's Studies* 7(2):36–52.
- Murray, Oswyn. 1993. *Early Greece*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Naas, Michael. 1995. *Turning from Persuasion to Philosophy*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press.
- Schrift, Alan D. 1997. *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*. New York: Routledge.
- Snodgrass, Anthony. 1990. *Archaic Greece: The Age of Experiment*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P.
- Tandy, David W. 1997. *Warriors into Traders: The Power of the Market in Early Greece*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P.

Copyright of Philosophy & Rhetoric is the property of Pennsylvania State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.