

by  
Jennifer Oakley**Rhetorical Canons and Extemporaneous Speaking**

The conceptualization of rhetoric is linked with the formation of citizen juries in ancient Sicily. Unlike Athens, where democracy had flourished for a century and a half, Sicily became democratic suddenly and citizens found a need to speak publicly to defend their property in court (Kennedy 18). Teachers such as Corax and Tisias emerged, and success-

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ful practices in litigation began to be written down. This codifying of sound practices eventually led to the division of rhetoric into the five canons: Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery. The canons "have long been useful for both analytical and generative purposes. That is to say, they provide a template for the criticism of discourse (and orations in particular), and they give a pattern for rhetorical education" (Burton 1). By defining the relationship of the canons to the practice of extemporaneous speaking, evaluative questions, which can serve as a guide for the critic of the extemporaneous performance, will emerge.

The first canon, Invention, "concerns finding something to say" (Burton 1). We must determine whether an extemporaneous speaker has, in the throes of Invention, both clearly defined a purpose for the speech, and provided content that is, in fact, inventive. Classically, rhetoric has three ends: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. But Daniel Cronn-Mills defines extemporaneous speaking inherently persuasive, as he writes that it is "an abbreviated form of persuasion designed to persuade an audience in a particular direction concerning current news issues" (8). Aristotle himself defined rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in the par-

ticular case all the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle 37). For many in the ancient world, "Invention involved the choice not simply of a subject on which one could discourse, but rather of one for which a convincing case could be made" (Ulanov 298). Thus, even an informative speech is inherently persuasive if we adopt Cronn-Mills definition of extemporaneous speaking and the ancient practice of Invention. Even an informative speech should be designed persuade the audience to share the carefully constructed view of the topic the speaker presents. This first step in Invention, defining a purpose, is key. The purpose of the speech is like the trunk of a tree, metaphorically speaking, from which all other rhetorical choices spring.

The second concern under the heading of Invention is whether the contents of the speech are fresh, or whether the speaker offers only "old wine in new bottles". Examining the introduction will give us some clues as to the inventiveness of the speaker. Canned introductions, used over and over by a speaker or speakers, are not only antithetical to the impromptu nature of extempore, but are also often lacking in relevance. Often judges are forced to watch a good speaker try to fit the introduction to the speech as if the speaker were Cinderella's prince trying to fit the slipper onto one of the stepsister's feet. Introductions should be germane to the topic, and lead into analysis that reflects the original thoughts of the speaker, not unthinking cant which passes for an understanding of the topic at hand. Invention, then, is concerned with what the speaker has selected as the purpose of the speech, and the contents he has chosen to reach that purpose.

Classical rhetoric's second canon is that of Arrangement, which "concerns how one orders speech or writing" (Burton 2). The organization should emerge from the topic and purpose of the speech. In fact, James A. Benson argues, "certain patterns of organization are inherent in topics" (151). Trying to use organization unsuited to the speech at hand often leads to problems such as the inclusion of irrelevant information, subversion of the intent of the topic, shallow analysis, and misuse of time (Burton 151). A question asking for the major arguments against school vouchers cannot be effectively shoehorned into a "past, present, future" organization. A speaker asked to predict the

government's probable reactions to "aggressive accounting" in corporations would be ill advised to settle for a three point organization which examines local, national, and global feelings about the practice. In short, effective Arrangement serves the purpose of the speech.

Style is sometimes scorned as part of the canon, since too often in rhetorical history it has been the only concern of some schools of rhetoric. "The artful expression of ideas," however, must be considered in evaluating extemporaneous speaking, since it allows us to look closely at how the speaker expresses himself (Burton 3). Consideration of Style is like a microscope, in that it allows us to examine the choices of word and phrase that speakers make in their effort to persuade the audience. Mark Twain once said, "the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug". Speakers who exhibit Style in their speeches make choices that exhibit the striking effect of lightning rather than the feeble, intermittent glow of the lightning bug. As Ulanov points out, "this is where the elements of grammar and syntax and figurative language enter" our evaluation of written and spoken communication (299). It is at this level that we may examine how the speaker has put all of the above to work in achieving the purpose of the speech.

Applying the canon of Memory in evaluating extemporaneous speaking is problematic. Burton offers two definitions of this canon that are relevant to the extemporaneous situation. He suggests that Memory is both the "facility with which a speaker calls upon his Memory of apt quotations and thoughts that effectively meet the rhetorical intention" and "an analysis of the methods a speaker uses in order for the message to be retained in the Memory of those hearing" (4). Thus, Memory is both in the speaker and in his or her effect on the audience. Again, the effectiveness of Memory is measured by how well the storehouse of knowledge serves the speaker in achieving the purpose of the speech.

It is within this canon that we might also evaluate information the speaker uses to develop the speech. Loosely speaking, an extemper may be judged on both simple accuracy and depth of information. Even if a speaker gives us "just the facts," and the correct facts at that, we also need to give credit to speakers whose knowledge shows a depth more indicative of an understanding of the historical and social context of the question, not just an acquaintance with the latest issues of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The Economist*. There is a gap between a student who has skimmed the latest issues and put together a speech based on the topic sentences in the latest magazine article and the student who shows a command of the subject by offering historical or literary allusions. Students who craft their own analogies may also be noted, because original attempts to make the complex clear show a dialogical approach to the topic, that is, an approach that illustrates the thinking process the speaker has gone through in developing the speech.

As Burton points out, the Greek word for the final canon, "Delivery" is 'hypokrisis,' or 'acting,' and rhetoric has borrowed from that art a studied attention to vocal training and to the use of gestures" (Burton 5). A fluent speaker eschews metalanguage that impairs his or her purpose, such as filler phrases like "uh" or "uhm", and pursues fluency in speech. Gestures may be used effectively to underline the verbal message.

The canons of rhetoric allow us to frame five basic questions about an extemporaneous speaker's performance:

**Invention:** Has the speaker provided fresh content to achieve the purpose of the speech?

**Arrangement:** Is the organization of the speech intrinsic to the topic and purpose of the speech?

**Style:** Is the speaker's choice of words and phrases appropriate to the purpose of the speech?

**Memory:** Does the speaker demonstrate knowledge of strategies to achieve his purpose and make the audience retain his message?

**Delivery:** Are the speaker's voice and gestures effective in achieving his purpose?

All of these questions grow out of the speaker's ability to define a strong purpose and thesis in the invention stage. If the speaker nurtures a strong trunk, the rest of the tree grows from it.

#### Works Cited

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