Reviews


Reviewed by Edward P.J. Corbett, Ohio State University

As Kathleen Welch says in the first sentence of her Preface, “This book presents a version of how classical rhetoric has been studied since 1965... and suggestions for those appropriations that are most productive for current rhetoric and composition studies.” The rest of the book tells the reader what version she is talking about, what she means by the term “classical rhetoric,” and what appropriations she thinks are most productive for current studies in rhetoric and composition. This book represents the culmination of a campaign that Welch has been engaged in since she took her degree at the University of Iowa and began teaching at the University of Oklahoma. She is one of the bright young teachers of rhetoric in this country who in their published articles and convention talks have been calling for a reassessment of the contributions that Plato and the sophists made to the establishment of rhetoric in ancient Greek culture. Those who have read the articles Welch has published in such journals as JAC, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Written Communication, and College Composition and Communication will recognize the recurring themes in this book.

The prime target of Welch’s objections to contemporary receptions of interpretations of classical rhetoric is a group that she calls the “Heritage School.” She never does provide a clear, illuminating definition of the Heritage School, either in the six chapters of the book or in the Glossary of Keywords. But one can gather a rather wooly idea of what she means by this term from her discussions of this group’s version of classical rhetoric and from the authors and the works that she critiques throughout the book. In Chapter 1, Welch tells us that the scholars in the Heritage School range from Douglas Ehninger (in his 1968 article “On Systems of Rhetoric”) to Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike (in their 1970 book Rhetoric: Discovery and Change), and in Chapter 2 she provides a fairly lengthy critique of C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon’s Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing (1984) and of James A. Berlin’s Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-
What she objects to in the Heritage School’s version of classical rhetoric is (1) its insistence on univocal translation of key Greek words into what it considers to be equivalent English words, (2) its reduction of classical discourse theory to rigid, outmoded formulas, and (3) its conflation of 700 years of rhetorical theory into a monolithic system. The “good guys” in her view of contemporary receptions of classical rhetoric are the members of the group that she calls the “Dialectical School.” That group includes such writers as Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, Donovan Ochs, Richard Leo Enos, C. Jan Swearingen, Victor Vitanza, John Poulakos, Susan Jarratt, W.K.C. Guthrie, Francis Cornford, Andrea Lunsford, and Lisa Ede. Those who are conversant with contemporary studies in rhetoric and composition will recognize most of these names and will be familiar with the work of these writers. Welch does not give us any clearer definition of the Dialectical School than she does of the Heritage School, but one eventually gets the idea that this group adopts various stances in relation to classical rhetoric but, unlike the Heritage School, avoids misleading and univocal translations of such Greek keywords as nomos, physis, arete, ethos, and pistis; does not decontextualize the classical rhetoricians and so does not give us rigid, formulized conceptions of the classical system of rhetoric; and is not averse to making adjustments in its appropriations of classical theory and practice in order to fit the exigencies of modern cultures.

As is clear from her Glossary of Keywords, Welch conceives of classical rhetoric as the art of persuasive oratory as taught and practiced by the ancient Greeks and Romans, but in the book itself she is mainly dealing with the Greek rhetoric of the fourth and fifth centuries. When you look at her index, you find sixty-six entries under Aristotle and one hundred and fifty-two entries under Plato. No other author or concept gets anywhere near that many entries. The closest is Isocrates, who gets thirty-seven, and he, of course, is another of the Greek rhetoricians. There is nothing wrong with concentrating on the Greek rhetoricians, but you have to read her book to find out that the “classical rhetoric” that occurs in the title of her book and in the titles of her chapters is predominantly that of the Greek rhetoricians.

As I said earlier, Welch has been preoccupied with making us aware of the very important contributions that such sophists as Isocrates and Gorgias have made to the establishment of the classical system of rhetoric and with rehabilitating the reputation of Plato in relation to rhetoric. Chapter 5, “Appropriating Competing Systems of Classical Greek Rhetoric: Considering Isocrates and Gorgias with Plato,” is the chapter where she concentrates on that triumvirate of Greek rhetoricians. She and other writers of the so-called Dialectical School have done us a great service by making us aware that classical rhetoric did not begin with Aristotle and that Aristotle is not the prime mover and shaper of the classical system. As a matter of fact, teachers of rhetoric such as Isocrates and Gorgias had a greater influence on the
students of rhetoric in their day than Aristotle did.

What is different about Welch's treatment of the sophists is that she has striven to make Plato a soul mate of the sophists instead of an antagonist. After pointing out the many ways in which the educational views of Isocrates and Plato were similar, she says by way of summary, "Isocrates and Plato, two striking figures in the emergence of ancient rhetorical theory, resembled each other on so many pedagogical issues and on value systems, even though their theories diverge in various ways" (119). That revelation will be rather startling to many students of rhetoric, who are accustomed to the traditional view that the Socrates/Plato displayed in the two dialogues Gorgias and Phaedrus is irreconcilably opposed to the sophists. Students of rhetoric may be even more startled by Welch's claim that Socrates/Plato is not anti-writing. But maybe they will be convinced by the arguments she presents in Chapter 5 about the compatibility of these two schools of "philosophy."

The most curious thing about this attempt to correct the traditional views about the sophists and Socrates/Plato is that Welch makes no attempt to counteract the views of Brian Vickers. In his 1988 book In Defence of Rhetoric, Vickers presents what is perhaps the most devastating case to date against Socrates/Plato for being anti-rhetoric. There is one reference to Vickers in this book. Welch says, "The imposing and sensitive reading of a writer such as Brian Vickers in the 1988 In Defence of Rhetoric presupposes that classical rhetoric has been attacked and needs a defense of the kind that supplies the title of his book . . . . This reception is not only understandable, but from many points of view is also very sensible" (158). Here, instead of launching into a fierce refutation of Vickers' case against Socrates/Plato, Welch is actually being complimentary: Vickers' interpretation of the Platonist school is "imposing and sensitive," is "understandable" and "sensible."

Many readers will be grateful to Welch for pointing out the many ways in which classical rhetoric is useful and applicable in the teaching of writing. She says, "No other system for the production and reception and texts in all symbol systems possesses the completeness of rhetoric and its definitive connection to systems of education and to cultures" (160). For a long time now, she has been insisting that the two neglected canons of memory and delivery be restored to the teaching of writing and, for that reason, she is pleased to see that Winifred Bryan Horner has adapted and adopted those two canons and joined them with treatment of invention, arrangement, and style in her textbook Rhetoric in the Classical Tradition (St. Martin's P, 1988). She has also made a good case for the applicability of classical rhetoric to the teaching of writing in the current era of secondary orality that has been effected by the electronic revolution. Teachers will find in this book many other suggestions for the applicability of classical rhetoric to the contemporary composition classroom.

This is an important book on rhetoric and composition studies, but I wish that Welch had more often made a convincing case for her various
theses. The main fault of her presentation is that she tends to rely on assertion rather than demonstration. She presumes her readers know as much as she knows about classical rhetoric and composition studies. As evidence of her astonishing erudition about her subject, her nine-page List of References contains over two hundred references. Frequently when she asserts that some writer represents a certain position, she expects her readers to be familiar with the text, and so she does not make any attempt to demonstrate her claim. This is one of the few scholarly books that I have read in recent years where I wish that there were more quotations in the book. Most scholarly books are, like most convention talks, too long. This book is too short for what the author attempts to do. Kathleen Welch may very well be right about the various issues she discusses in this book. But she does not always convince me that she is right. Too much of the clinching argument is still in her head.


Reviewed by Walter H. Beale, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

While discussions of "theories of composition" or schools of pedagogy and their epistemological and political relations are attracting crowds of rhetoricians and composition specialists these days, the audience for discourse theory is not so large. It ought to be larger. To put this another way, schools of pedagogy ought to be interrogated not only about their epistemological and political affiliations but also about what kinds, settings, functions, and strategies of writing they envision. Why? Because there is no globally affirmable definition or art of "good writing," no unequivocally endorsable organization of forms and strategies. It is all a matter of local circumstances, particular genres and functions, particular traditions, settings, public and covert motives at the moment, author-audience relations, rhetorical situations, times of life. And here is where the theory of discourse comes in.

Arts of rhetoric—which have traditionally been responsible for organizing our knowledge about the variables of subject, author, audience, and circumstance and for developing a consistent terminology for discussing them—must draw upon theories of discourse, whether they would prefer to or not. Most teachers of composition would prefer not. There is no escape from theory, however; the only question is whether theory will be engaged