Magic And/As Rhetoric: Outlines of a History of Phantasy

WILLIAM A. COVINO

By counterposing "magical" and "non-magical" formulations of composing in 1981, Janet Emig identified the process movement in composition studies as a reaction against writing-as-magic. In "Non-Magical Thinking: Presenting Writing Developmentally in Schools," Emig connects current-traditional rhetoric with magical thinking, and "reinvented" or "new" rhetoric with non-magical thinking. In the magical classroom, writing is a silent, solitary product fully-formed in the writer's consciousness, and it materializes on demand. In the non-magical classroom, writing is an erratic process of gradual, constant revision according to changing factors such as purpose and audience and the advice of collaborators.

For Emig, magic means the inexplicable and spontaneous materialization of a finished product; this is the familiar rabbit-out-of-a-hat definition. If we consider an alternate definition, grounded in anthropological and sociological conceptions of magic, we allow for a significant reversal of what magical and non-magical mean, a reversal that preserves the spirit but not the terminology of Emig's distinction. Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe synthesizes the major modern social theories of magic in Stolen Lightning in order to propose that magic is the "audacious individual use of existing powerful symbols" in which "there is always a curious tension between the traditional and the surreptitious, and hence between syllogism, implications from accepted truth, and an enthymeme that bends consensus to private ends" (73, 85). Such tensions define a social context in which magic "works because people agree it works" (96). Stopping short of concluding that magic is rhetoric, O'Keefe defines magic with rhetorical terms, and he concludes that a complex of social/rhetorical contingencies account for its effects. Magic is not the instant and arhetorical product of an otherworldly incantation; it is the process of inducing belief and creating community with reference to the dynamics of a rhetorical situation. Magic is a social act whose medium is persuasive discourse, and so it must entail the complexities of social interaction, invention, communication, and composition. Thus, magic becomes a term through which we can address, as John Briggs points out, "the rhetor's power over audiences and subject matters, the power of audiences and
subject matters over the rhetor, the power of particular kinds of discourses" (363).

Understanding magic as a social and discursive process allows us to analyze and critique the powers at work in the "plain rhetoric" that mesmerizes audiences with its seeming clarity and simplicity (see Covino, "Magic"). Further, such a conception of magic may lead us to prefer a "magic rhetoric," if this means preferring a fertile, dynamic and fluctuant imagination to its opposite. In this essay, I wish to introduce some elements of such a rhetoric through a historical survey of pre-Enlightenment relationships between magic and rhetoric. Specifically, I want to propose that the rise of current-traditional rhetoric coincides with the destruction and disappearance of the magical consciousness that makes participatory, exploratory, generative rhetoric possible. Before about 1700, rhetorical and magical invention were complementary and in some ways identical processes; recognizing their similarities may lead us to believe in magic again. To begin, I offer three propositions which, examined in the following order, suggest a chronology of magic/rhetoric marked by changing conceptions of "phantasy" and the limits of imagination:

1) Through the Renaissance, words possess actual (rather than symbolic) power as agents of magic, and their effects are understood to vary with changing contexts.

2) By 1700, a changing conception of mind and language eliminates both rhetorical invention (with its "cosmology" of topoi) and treatises on magic (with their cosmologies of natural and supernatural powers and phantasms) as authorized discourses.

3) In this century, an ostensibly non-magical "plain rhetoric" informs discourse prepared for mass consumption.

The Power of Words

Magic formulas are, on the one hand, formulaic. That is, they are "rigidly scripted" (O'Keefe 62-78). But at the same time, every particular effect that the magus seeks requires a particular formula; that is, there would seem to be a lack of "all-purpose" formulas. For example, *The Greek Magical Papyri* (just over five-hundred spells surviving from antiquity) contains sixty-five different love spells. There is a love spell to be "performed with the help of heroes or gladiators or those who have died a violent death," a love spell to be recited "over myrrh which is offered," a love spell to be uttered "in conversation, while kissing passionately," and so forth (64, 137). The importance of making one's magic agree with circumstances continues through Marsilio Ficino's *Three Books on Life*, one of the most influential and popular statements of Renaissance magic. Ficino warns that even the slightest change in heavenly constellations affects both human behavior and the powers that magical discourse can invoke:
Observe the daily positions and aspects of the stars and discover to what principal speeches, songs, motions, dances, moral behavior, and actions most people are usually incited by these, so that you may imitate such things as far as possible in your song, which aims to please the particular part of heaven that resembles them and to catch an influence that resembles them. (3.21.69-74)

Ficino's guide here to "obtaining life from the heavens" resembles the call for systematic alertness to changing circumstances that defines rhetoric from antiquity through the Renaissance, a call initiated by Aristotle's famous sweeping definition of rhetoric as the process of finding "in each case the existing means of persuasion" (1355b), and by Cicero's proposal that "The real power of eloquence is such that it embraces the origin, the influence, the changes of all things in the world, all virtues, duties, and all nature, so far as it affects the manners, minds, and lives of mankind" (De Oratore 3.20). In the context of such definitive statements, natural magic (which includes astrology, medicine, and alchemy) is a rhetorical practice: the magus must align the elements and the right words and the paths of the stars, with a variation in any one of them affecting all the rest.

For Renaissance magicians, inventing cosmic harmonies required a broad synthesis of religious, magical, and secular philosophies, and promised to expand the powers of human nature. This is the promise of Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man," which Francis Yates has called "the great charter of Renaissance magic" (Bruno 86). Pico draws from Christian neo-Platonism, Orphic hymns, Chaldean oracles, Hermeticism, and Zoroastrianism, giving most prominence to the invocatory power of language through his emphasis on the Cabala. The Cabala is constituted by a body of speculative philosophy which holds that specific combinations of letters and words contain and convey spiritual energy. A text of "hidden meaning" is available to the trained Cabalist, who is also able to invoke and control natural forces. Francis Yates summarizes the cabalistic tradition that Pico calls "the best established philosophy concerning nature" (Oration 64):

Beliefs about the magic powers of words occupy sophistic, hermetic, gnostic, cabalistic, and patristic philosophers from antiquity forward. In
approximately 415 B.C.E., Gorgias writes that the power of speech can alter the soul:

The effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies. For just as different drugs dispel different secretions from the body, and some bring an end to disease and others to life, so also in the case of speeches, some distress, others delight, some cause fear, others make the hearers bold, and some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion. (41)

Nearly two-thousand years later, the most famous of the Renaissance magicians, Cornelius Agrippa, reaffirms this power in his *Occult Philosophy*:

Words therefore are the fittest medium betwixt the speaker and the hearer, carrying with them not only the conception of the mind, but also the vertue of the speaker with a certain efficacy unto the hearers, and this oftimes with so great a power, that oftentimes they change not only the hearers, but also other bodies, and things that have no life. (1.69.211)

Here Agrippa affirms a central tenet in the history of magic, which is also a presupposition throughout the pre-modern history of rhetoric. Mind exists in matter, and language affects matter: words and things are themselves volitional forces, and the magus attempts to invoke and participate with those forces, to enter his or her own mind into the constant flux of "minded" elements and signs (Berman 69-113). Distinctions between literal and figurative identity are impossible to maintain because everything is both actual and symbolic: a talisman or a word signifies a magic power and is that power. As Brian Vickers explains in his essay on the Enlightenment rejection of occult symbolism, in magic "the sign is the thing it represents, and as such it works in us, and we can use it to work on the world. The reification is functional, performative... The lute strings affect each other, the star's image affects us; by wearing a magic amulet we can tap the health-giving forces in the invisible world" (123).

**The Twin Suppression of Magic and Rhetoric**

The shift from a magical to a mechanical model of the universe, virtually complete by 1700, coincides with a determined effort to eliminate "fantastical" rhetoric, and its attendant magical cosmology, and to establish a stable, absolute language. Vickers observes that by the late seventeenth century, "those who held to the main linguistic and rhetoric tradition [drew] attention to the occult's subversion of it" (117).

Those preserving the rhetorical tradition are decidedly reactionary, advocating a new model of a mechanical universe in reaction to the threatening scope of the imagination that is allowed by magic and by classical conceptions of rhetoric. In this mechanical universe issuing from the Enlightenment, mind exists apart from matter. The separation of subject and object grounds empirical science and an emerging logical positivism, and requires a clear observation language (Berman 110).
of Peter Ramus' attacks on classical rhetoric in the 1540s through the 1660 establishment of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, rhetoric is reduced from the exploration of changeable truths to the production of direct, transparent propositions. The rhetor who once participated in a world of tentative perspectives (topoi), alert to the Greek doctrine of logos as magic (DeRomilly), is replaced by the technician fixed on clarity and precision, for whom words are lifeless (Covino, Art 82-83; Couliano 183).

As Ioan Couliano explains in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, "The transition from a society dominated by magic to a predominantly scientific society is explicable primarily by a change in the imaginary" (xix). Couliano concludes that "the Renaissance conceived of the natural and social world as a spiritual organism in which perpetual exchanges of phantasmic messages occurred. That was the principle of magic.... The Reformation destroys this structure of phantasms in motion; it forbids the use of imagination and proclaims the necessity for total suppression of sinful nature" (221). The phantasm that Couliano mentions here is something like an imaged archetype, a non-linguistic element of common sense which resides in the soul and—through the mediation of imagination—determines, or interprets, the language of the exterior world: "Imagination translates the language of the senses into fantastic language so that reason may grasp and understand phantasms" (11). A magic world populated by myriad phantasms—images that constitute a cosmology of interactive powers—offers the possibility for phantasy, for an imagination consistently engaged in the transfiguration of the soul, in the interplay of phantasms.

The play of the intellect and the spirit, that activity of the alchemist and cabalist which is licensed in a magical world, was repressed in the course of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. One of the most fierce denials of the phantasmic intellect came from Peter Ramus, who challenged the mnemotechnic practice, central to classical rhetoric, of converting sense perceptions into phantasmic images, replacing this mode of imagination with imageless dialectical order (Yates, Art 231-36). Ramus's decimation of phantasy coincides with his elimination of rhetorical invention (Murphy 12-13). Couliano emphasizes the cooperative effort by Catholic and Protestant forces to censor phantasy in the Reformation: "They seem to be at one concerning the impious nature of the culture of the phantasmic era and the imaginary in general" (203).

In *The Reenchantment of the World*, Morris Berman recognizes that the establishment of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge is the culmination of a developing fear of mystical "enthusiasm"; a magical epistemology was seen as a radical affront to the Protestant and rationalist establishment of new hierarchies (see also Thomas 641-47). Eventually, even those in the elite class who had once given credence to hermetic, cabalistic, and alchemical philosophies (Isaac Newton, for one) became opponents of magic:
From 1655 onward there was a series of conversions to the mechanical philosophy by men who had previously been sympathetic to alchemy.

These conversions were thus part of the reaction against enthusiasm on the part of the propertied classes and leading members of the Church of England, groups that coalesced in the Royal Society itself. Thomas Sprat, in the earliest history of the Society (1667), viewed the mechanical philosophy as helping to instill respect for law and order, and claimed that it was the job of science and the Royal Society to oppose enthusiasm.

(Berman 123-24)

As Karin Johannisson has pointed out, the appearance of the Royal Society punctuates the twin suppression of magic and rhetoric, leaving “plain style” as the only province of rhetoric, and sending magic underground (254-55).

The magic and rhetoric that disappeared—with their emphasis on imagination, phantasy, and amplification—were progressive forces. In the context of the Enlightenment, they became subversive forces. Magic survived in secret societies such as the Rosicrucians and Freemasons (Johannisson 253-60). A rhetoric with imaginative scope and a cosmology of phantasms emerged in the poetry and poetics of Romanticism, in the language of magic. The Romantic movement was an attempt to reaffirm the magical properties of language. As Anya Taylor points out in Magic and English Romanticism, Romantic thinkers turned to magic in order to recall pre-Enlightenment conceptions that license the powers of imagination, and to find a language for intellectual and political revolution:

Sudden change is made possible by changing the words and thus the categories in which men think, and words can be changed by those most skilled in their use—those poets who can weave words together in irresistibly arousing sounds, songs, and rhythms that will alter the listener even when he thinks he is not conscious of changes within him. (193)

Drawing elemental forces into communion is the activity of the Romantic magical imagination, “coercing all things into sympathy” (Wordsworth 2.390). Romantic writers called themselves magi, and their major critical theses—Wordsworth’s Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria, Shelley’s Defense of Poetry—claim that the time has come to react against scientific reductionism with visionary scope; like alchemists forging new realities, they call up a sympathetic universe. With the supernatural as his vehicle, Coleridge declares in the Biographia that “I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you” (13.7-8). Shelley writes in the Defense that the “alchemy” of poetic imagination produces new lexicons of thought, new associations which eventually resonate in the political reorganization of society: poetry “marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts” which effect “revolutions in opinion” (111-15). The mythologies of Blake, the enchanted dreamscapes of Coleridge in “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan” and Keats
in *Endymion*, the Faustian desires of Byron in *Manfred* and Shelley in *Alastor*, all appeal to the "witchery" of language, and aim to reform the public imagination by defining writing as a liberatory force that can construct alternate realities (Taylor 38-63).

**Magical Thinking and Liberatory Rhetoric**

The Romantic effort to reconstitute magic/rhetoric in the Western imagination was supplanted by what DeQuincey recognized as the sterile and non-magical rhetoric of "public business," with its reliance on "external facts, tangible realities, and circumstantial details" (97, 227). In the post-Romantic modern age, the dissociation of magic and rhetoric seemed complete. I would propose, however, that rhetoric and magic remain synonymous, set in a diminished cosmology. Performing magic has always involved issuing a "coercive command"; insofar as such commands are intrinsic to language, and really do make and re-make reality, we "do magic" when we "do rhetoric," and vice-versa (Covino, "Magic" 25-26; Burke 5). For the Greek orator, the Renaissance magus, the Romantic poet, and the variety of present-day institutional authorities who invoke a cosmology of sanctioned forces in every act of official discourse, language alters the social situation. Consider, for instance, the especially potent force of *performatives*, "statements that by themselves create a new state of affairs" (O'Keefe 54). When George Bush issues a performative declaration of war against Iraq, we are reminded that all such declarations, from "I pronounce you husband and wife" to the professor's "Your final grade is an A" to the boss' "You're fired," are instances in which saying makes it so (Austin, especially 151-64). In such cases, the speaker/writer (the rhetor) performs magic by effecting real action through the "use of existing powerful symbols" (O'Keefe 25, 73). In the event that any of us employ powerful words to change a situation, or are ourselves changed by what we read or hear, we participate in a magical transactive transformation.

What is at issue then is not whether rhetoric is magic, but what kinds of magic/rhetoric produce what kinds of effects. Still enclosed in the Enlightenment privileging of plain, unambiguous maxims, we are too often victims of a repressive magic that limits the possibilities for action. Couliano associates such magic with the hypnosis induced in a "police State," in contrast to the flexible but inefficient "magician State":

But the essential difference between the two, the one which works altogether in favor of the [magician state], is that magic is a science of metamorphoses with the capacity to change, to adapt to all circumstances, to improve, whereas the police State always remains just what it is: in this case, the defender to the death of out-of-date values, of a political oligarchy useless and pernicious to the life of nations. The system of restraints is bound to perish, for what it defends is merely an accumulation of slogans without any vitality. The magician State, on the other hand, only expects to develop new possibilities and new tactics, and it is precisely excess of vitality which impedes its good running order.

(105-06)
Within a paradigm that privileges machine virtues such as "good running order," and values stability and efficiency, the discourse of slogans is the "sorcery" that prevails. The most obvious examples of such discourse come from advertising: in a recent Nike commercial, all of the reasons not to buy athletic shoes and start exercising disappear with the injunction, "Just Do It." This is the kind of magic that Emig implicitly identifies with current-traditional rhetoric, the magic of authoritarian, simplistic incantations passed from salesperson to consumer, from teacher to student, incantations that identify preferred public discourse as instantaneous, formulaic, and absolute.

Countering such sorcery means disrupting it by employing the pre-Enlightenment magical/rhetorical belief in a cosmology of possibilities for re-ordering discourse and reality, through writing that creates new phantasms, new magic rhetorics. One of these new rhetorics is Mary Daly's *Wickedary*, a "dictionary for witches" which reminds us—in its vicious parody of Webster's patriarchal dictionary and the sexist epistemology it enforces—that the root of the word "grammar" is "grimoire," that language is a book of spells, that each spell is, as Kenneth Burke says, a strategy calculated to address a situation "in the name of" a certain power (3-4). For Daly, a new cosmology of powers requires a new lexicon, as wickedly funny as it is insistent upon wild intellectual play. Here is her definition of "Metapatriarchal Metaphors":

Metaphors, Metapatriarchal (*metaphor* derived fr. Gk. *metapherein* to transfer, change, fr. *meta-* + *pherein* to bear—Webster's): words that function to Name Metapatriarchal transformations and therefore to elicit such change; the language/vehicles of transcendent Spiraling; words that carry Journeyers into the Wild dimensions of Other-centered consciousness by jarring images, stirring memories, accentuating contradictions, upsetting unconscious traditional assumptions, eliciting Gynaesthetic sensing of connections, brewing Strange Ideas. *N.B.*: Metapatriarchal Metaphors are by no means to be confused with the mere "figures of speech" that are described in textbooks on composition. Rather, they are bearers of complex multiple meanings which reflect the complexity and diversity of life itself. (82)

Alertness to the historical, conceptual, and practical correspondences between magic and rhetoric motivates Daly's call for a new celebration of "complex multiple meanings," which entails the magical disestablishment of "archetypal mummy terms" that are "reiterated in the halls of academentia" (242). Hers is a radical recognition that magical thinking can coincide with a liberatory rhetoric, and a warning that we choose well the discourse, and the attendant powers, that we invoke.

*University of Illinois*
*Chicago, Illinois*
Notes

1 A few provocative scholarly investigations of magic and rhetoric through the Middle Ages—by Jacqueline de Romilly, Frances Yates, John Ward, Peter Brown, and Edward Peters—signal the importance of a survey of the continuous interpenetration of these subjects, especially their relationship from the Renaissance forward.

2 Also see Yates, Art and Carruthers.

Works Cited


### Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 11 of *JAC* was awarded to Patricia A. Sullivan for “Writing in the Graduate Curriculum: Literary Criticism as Composition.” Professor Sullivan received a cash award and a framed citation.

Joseph Petraglia received an honorable mention for “Interrupting the Conversation: The Constructionist Dialogue in Composition” and also received a framed citation.

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by him at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Cincinnati.