
Reviewed by Kenneth Lindblom, Stony Brook University

Move over rhetorica. In a forward thrust for masculinity studies, James Fredal reclaims what might be called "rhetorico." Far from being in any way anti-feminist, however, Fredal’s Rhetorical Action in Ancient Athens is more anti-theorist. For Fredal’s rhetorical taste, theorists think and study too much, and don’t live rhetoric as they should:

Theorists too often rely on the mountaintop perspective provided by an entrenched logocentrism, looking at schematic “maps” rather than walking the city, and reading the ruled delineations of its cartographers rather than the entangling narratives of its inhabitants.

The process of writing informed by rhetorical artistry requires calm, quiet, and leisurely thought, isolated from the place of public interaction and separated from the demands of the contest, the shouts of the audience, and the shifting tone of debate. (32–33)

Ancient Athenian rhetoric in practice was not about thinking, defining, or theorizing. It was about acting and doing. With the slightest of nods to Judith Butler and Kenneth Burke, Fredal constructs a rhetoric to be seen and heard (not read and studied) from the ordinary “performances” of everyday public life in ancient Greece. Since only Greek males were allowed citizenship and thus much of a public life, Fredal’s rhetoric is necessarily a masculine rhetoric. Fredal offers a new emphasis on a rhetoric that is immersed in the noises of the city and that takes account of the physical act of Athenian rhetorical contest in streets, social clubs, political chambers, and battlefields. Reading portions of his text, you can practically smell sweat.

We won’t truly know ancient Greek rhetoric, Fredal implies, until we’ve walked a mile in the sandals of an ancient Greek. In his aptly subtitled conclusion, “Walking the City,” Fredal explains that walking through ancient Greece—he means it figuratively and literally—can lend us moderns some genuine sense of what rhetorical life was like. For they
developed their own rhetorical skills by walking in the sandals of their forebears:

To walk where the city leaders and founders walked suggests following their footsteps (walking where they walked). Following suggests imitating (from walking where they walked to walking as they walked); imitating suggests rehearsal (walking as they walked to walking like them); rehearsal suggests impersonation (walking like them to acting like them); impersonation suggests inhabitation (acting like them to being another iteration of them, or more properly, of the character type that they, too imitated, rehearsed, impersonated, and inhabited). (187)

Fredal begins his walking tour with stops in Homer, whose narratives he uses to define what I earlier called “rhetorico”: a rhetoric of Athenian contest culture resulting from ubiquitous “zero-sum” competitions (played out with swords and shields on the battlefield or with voices and votes on the forum floor), a rhetoric with roots in the quest for honor, fame, reputation, and the consequent avoidance of weakness and shame. The rhetoricians whose performances in the male-display culture Fredal describes have more in common with today’s athletes than today’s politicians. (A possible exception is the congresswoman from Atlanta who slugged a security guard on the steps of the Capitol earlier this year.) Although this first chapter rather exhaustively repeats his central thesis, its engagement with Homeric texts is vibrant enough to sustain readers until Fredal’s writing becomes more confident and enjoyable in later chapters.

Moving on, Fredal spends two chapters on the seventh- and early sixth-century rise of the citizen (and citizens’ rhetoric) he claims results from the leadership of the rhetorical exemplar Solon. He examines Solon as political campaigner, lawgiver, and as sage, claiming his works gave rise to Greek citizens’ freedom to choose to participate in all facets of governance (assuming they could muster the skill actual participation required).

Of noteworthy interest in this chapter is Fredal’s use of the hoplite phalanx as emblematic of Athenian cultural rhetoric. A hoplite phalanx, a line of sworded and shielded foot soldiers that Fredal describes as a fearsome and wondrous spectacle, was an interdependent unit, as the
men’s swords would cover only half their own bodies and half of the body next to them. A hoplite line was thus a cooperative unit utterly defended and unyielding in its advance, powered only by its resolve and unity. Military leaders would place friends next to each other on the line to increase the line’s togetherness. Like rhetoricians (as we will see), the hoplites’ worst enemy was their personal fear; if the line broke at all, it was immediately decimated. The conceptual connection to broader Athenian rhetoric is seamless: rhetorical Athens at the time of Solon was a community of individual men whose separate interests advanced as they worked together against common enemies in whatever zero-sum contest they engaged in. Thus, the hoplite phalanx functions precisely as the sort of cultural rhetorical performance Fredal seeks.

Rhetoric in ancient Greece was hardly wielded effectively only by good men (with apologies to Quintilian). Fredal’s next chapter describes how the tyrant Peisistratus was able to use some of the same rhetorical actions, spaces, and events Solon used to give power to the people to transfer that power from the people back to himself. Events became more private, public deliberation more rare and exclusive, and the polis and theater became tools for the tyrant, because “communal talk and commensality lead to common resolve and collective action” (96), anathema to a tyrant. Fredal’s point here is that while many contemporary sources claim rhetoric flourished in democratic Greece, a different form of rhetoric also flourished under tyranny.

Following Peisistratus’ reign, Cleisthenes rose to power by once again using rhetorical spaces, actions, and events to empower the citizen. Fredal’s fifth chapter explores the culture of that period, examining Cleisthenes’ actions and more details of ordinary rhetorical life: for example, the practical impact of stage fright and dealing with aggressive hecklers in a real audience, and the problem of speaking to a crowd so large only a portion can actually hear the speaker.

The final chapter (as the title promises) is an examination of Demosthenes, who despite severe disadvantages (wellborn but financially impoverished parentage; a stutter, weak voice, and “a certain softness or effeminacy” [162]) was able to rise to leadership rank. The chapter, entitled “Acting Hard,” is in one sense a validation of the value
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of teaching and learning as opposed to the focus on natural "gifts" one might or might not possess at birth.

Being a "real man" in ancient Greece is difficult, Fredal points out in this chapter. Rhetors "should attend carefully to their deportment, their voice, and their looks to make them as appealing as possible. . . . [However,] the masculine ideal demands that they must not appear to be catering to or attempting to please or arouse the audience at all" (179). Attending too carefully to voice and body for the enjoyment of others is considered womanly and childlike. In ancient Athens, the metrosexual antics of Queer Eye for the Straight Rhetorician would have been only an underground sensation.

There are many good reasons to recommend Fredal's Rhetorical Action in Ancient Athens. Space permits attention to only a few of them.

Fredal's writing is mined with delightfully wry modern associations. Telemachus is a "not-ready-for-prime-time" rhetorician; orators were the "lone rangers" of politics. Fredal enjoys the history as he tells it. And while his history is traditionally chronological, his atypical approach to that history—with his attention to myths, stories, and the daily events of ordinary life and social interaction—avoids the dusty-dryness of more theoretical histories of rhetoric; this is, of course, part of his point.

Rhetorical Action in Ancient Athens also has valuable intellectual heft for the field, stemming from Fredal's remarkably useful thesis that a focus on the ordinary, everyday masculine culture of ancient rhetorical performance (action, not just theory about action) will give us richer and more dynamic definitions of rhetoric and deeper explanations of rhetorical events and strategies. In particular, Fredal's work admirably unifies and offers new explanations of the socio-politics of Athenian cultural habits such as pedagogical pederasty, conversation at social clubs, athletic contests, forum debate, and military readiness and battle. Because he evidences his claims through so many aspects of ancient Athenian culture, his arguments seem utterly sound and unstrained. Fredal's attention to the everyday also gives rise to a fascinating discussion of the material conditions of oratory in ancient Athens. He describes the decibels an orator would have to produce to be heard, explores the courage one must muster to face a hostile crowd, and otherwise examines the underexplored physical space of the ancient orator; reading this has
reminded me why even just speaking aloud in class can be a triumph for some students.

To be singled out for special attention is Fredal’s concentration on the role of fear in Athenian rhetoric, an aspect of rhetoric that underlies much of his discussion. Conquering one’s personal sense of fear was each citizen’s private fight, and mastering fear was the price of more influential public participation:

Fear, especially of speaking in a public space (facing a large, raucous audience), like fear of battle or any public contest (facing a determined enemy before one’s peers), constituted the impediment that the speaker hoped to overcome. It was precisely this bar that made rhetoric worth attempting at all. (25)

Winning the battle with fear would be rewarded by honor, reputation, and influence; losing would silence the citizen or, worse, dishonor him with shame. In this “zero-sum” contest, there were always losers along with winners; the losers functioned as poster-boys for the costs of the contest and served to sweeten the spoils of the victorious. Even today, the first-place Olympian looks more exalted when flanked by the second- and third-place rivals (on successively lower steps).

Fear, passively constructed by the terms of the contest and the masculine culture, functioned as a powerful force in the Athenian polis. A strong voice and other natural gifts would be an advantage. Aristocratic birth, with its concomitant reputation and wealth that provided leisure and resources for training, would also lend confidence to rhetors. However, all rhetors must still conquer their own, private fear in order to succeed and gain political and social influence. In one of the brilliant claims of his text, Fredal points out how such fear operated as an almost automatic agent of exclusivity in democratic Athens. All citizens had the right to compete; however, not all could muster the confidence to do so. Thus, a systematic hierarchy of influence emerged, with the mastery of personal fear as an underlying and unacknowledged criterion. When Fredal says the “orator’s fear,” encouraged in Athenian culture, has not been paid enough attention, he’s absolutely right (127).

*Rhetorical Action in Ancient Athens* also suffers some problems, which unfortunately limit its impact. Both problems I found occur in later
chapters of the text and may result from an overzealous defense of the
author’s thesis.

In chapter six, which I do not describe above, Fredal describes a
peculiar event in Athens, the “Herm-Chopping” of 415 BCE. Herms were
public statues that dotted the landscape of Athens and acted as sign posts
and ancient bulletin boards. They were characterized by rectangles for
bodies with fully formed heads and large, erect phalluses. One night in
415, a great many of the herms were defaced. While the crimes were never
solved, and it is now lost to history whether the noses or the phalluses
were cut off, the number of Herms disfigured and the simultaneity of the
mutilations suggested an organized effort with some specific intent.
Although his discussion of the event is fascinating, Fredal’s purpose for
including it in his book raises a problem: “I want to examine this event as
a significant moment of and model for rhetorical action in ancient Greece
that, while itself rhetorical, nevertheless stands in opposition to tradi­
tional views of Greek rhetorical practice” (143). Fredal theorizes that the
herm-chopping might have been committed by agents for whom autho­
rized and legitimate channels of rhetoric were not open (women, slaves,
foreigners). Fredal wants to define this use of weapons to crush cement
as a rhetorical action. Only five years from 9/11, we know defining a
violent, physical act as rhetorical has dramatic, theoretical consequences.
To his credit, Fredal makes explicit the 9/11 connection. Although he
rarely makes more than passing reference to the contemporary world,
Fredal makes an important exception here:

If we think of burning the flag as a form of anti-American political
“speech” and the attacks upon the World Trade Center or the
Pentagon as including a symbolic indictment of the institutions and
activities housed there (American capitalism and militarism), then
we might see the herm-chopping in part as a symbolic attack
against Athenian rhetoric and its characteristic ends. (154, empha­
sis added)

Here Fredal makes clear that he believes traditionally defined physical
force should be considered a form of rhetoric as well. Although he is
admirably careful in qualifying his claims—my italics of his words above
show the qualifications—Fredal’s claim is too broad and far too
underdiscussed. The difference between flag-burning and flying planes of people into populated buildings is enormous. To equate them is simply irresponsible. Further on Fredal claims we would be placing “fairly tight limits on our definition of rhetoric not to consider the herm-chopping an exemplary rhetorical event” (156). Should our definition of rhetoric be “the galled man killing well”?

Fredal is not wrong to raise the question of where the boundaries of rhetoric should lie. In fact, perhaps in Athenian fashion, he should be honored for having the courage to launch such a dangerous challenge to the tradition. However, it is disappointing that Fredal does not discuss what is at stake in blurring the line between rhetoric and force. In a sense, he has dropped a bomb himself and simply run from the empty crater. How would such a hit-and-run tactic have worked in an Athenian debate? Possibly very well. However, for a scholarly volume we have a right to expect more.

Fredal ends his text with a rather emphatic argument against what he describes as traditional histories of rhetoric, which focus on “theorists and their texts” more than on “citizens and their actions, to cities and their spaces,” the “everyday rhetoric” to which Fredal admirably attends throughout his book (185). He also takes issue with the “familiar narrative” of rhetoric that he says begins with Corax and Tisias and does not acknowledge the performative rhetorics he demonstrates through Homeric and other texts.

Fredal makes very, very few references to contemporary rhetorical theory or even to recent descriptions of ancient rhetoric. Perhaps he wants to ensure that his work is accepted as history and not as contemporary appropriation, a category invented for contemporary rhetoricians some time ago by Edward Schiappa (who appears in Fredal’s acknowledgements). While Fredal’s narrowness of purpose (his attention only to Athens and only to a short period of history) gives his work a depth and evidentiary heft, it also appears to trap him in a rather essentialist quest for a final definition of rhetoric, one that would reveal perhaps a “Truer” (my word) history of rhetoric than we have so far constructed as a field. More reference to contemporary theory, and, in fact, to neo-sophistic rhetorical theory in particular, would have opened Fredal’s work to the concept of rhetorics and the sophistic concept of a
multiplicity of simultaneous and conflicting truths that the idea of *rhetorics* implies. Instead, Fredal’s book ends on an unnecessarily combative note. Or is he performing the “zero-sum” rhetoric he explores?

Fredal’s version of the Sophists unfortunately appears to derive almost entirely from the texts of Plato and Aristotle and concentrates on their favorite sophistic anthem: making the weaker case appear stronger. With a little more attention to neo-sophistic rhetoric, Fredal might have found contemporary discussions of the sophistic concepts of *kairos* and *nomos* tremendously useful in realizing his desire to define a rhetoric that accounts for “the sense of time, of place, and of the contingencies of action produced through lived practice and live performance” (200).

Overall, *Rhetorical Action in Ancient Athens* is an impressively ambitious, enjoyably provocative, and admirably defended text. Fredal’s insights bring a clarity and unity to an unexpectedly broad scope of cultural events and habits, fitting them sensibly within a newly defined, performative ancient rhetoric. If the author overreaches, he can be forgiven. Or he can write another book. Or maybe he’d rather step outside.

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In mid-October 2006, in Snow Hill, North Carolina, members of the Tuscarora nation staged a “peaceful occupation” of Fort Neoheroka, the final stronghold destroyed by colonial forces during the Tuscarora War of 1711–1713. The purpose of this modern-day occupation was to highlight problems the Tuscarora encountered in maintaining a connection to one of their ancestral grounds. The Tuscarora’s stated goals included stopping the farming and ground-disturbing activities (including periodic archaeological digs) at the site, repatriating to the site remains currently located in East Carolina University’s Archaeological