tionary militant, who, unlike the "sad, ascetic agent of the Third Interna-
tional," poses "against the misery of power the joy of being." In one the
most beautiful passages in a beautifully written book, Hardt and Negri
call on Saint Francis of Assisi to refuse "every instrumental discipline"
and oppose the "mortification of the flesh." What I find altogether
persuasive—and inspiring—about Empire is that it asks readers to
identify with St. Francis' opposition to nascent capitalism and thereby to
affirm, at the level of lived experience, the "irrepressible lightness and joy
of being communist."

Work Cited


Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis, Phillip
Sipiora and James S. Baumlin, Editors (Albany: State U of New York P,
2002. 235 pages.)

Reviewed by Alice M. Gillam, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

When I told a colleague that I was reviewing a book entitled Rhetoric and
Kairos, she replied that she woke up the morning of September 12th,
thinking of our need for a theory of kairos. I was reminded of her comment
when I read a New York Times article recently about Wallace Miller's
difficulty in finding words for the July 4th speech he was invited to give
in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, the small hamlet where United Airlines
Flight 93 crashed. Miller is the Somerset County coroner whose job it was
to recover and identify the human remains that had been, in Miller's
words, '‘particle-ized' within the land." In the interview, Miller wonders
if he should speak of the grieving relatives he has met, of the passengers
who 'took over to try to decide their own fate,' or if he or anyone should
speak at all. Words like "profound" and "sacred," he observes, have
become empty with overuse. He concludes by saying that although he has
no idea what he will say, he understands his role: "It's for the annals of
whatever it is that all this becomes." Although the term may not have
occurred to Miller, he seems clearly aware of the kairic tensions entailed
in his forthcoming speech—between the constraints of tradition and the opportunities provided by his radically unique situation, between any meaning he may make in the present and the unknowable meanings that will emerge in the future.

It is precisely these and other tensions that have defined this seminal concept from its inception in early Greek thought according to the essays in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*. Wide-ranging in scope, this volume brings together both previously published and new essays on such kairos-related topics as the Pythagorean influence on later concepts of kairos, the effects of ancient time-keeping technology on oral and written discourse, the centrality of kairos in Isocrates’ paideia, and images of kairos in popular Renaissance emblem books. Not only does this volume demonstrate the heft and complexity of this ultimately untranslatable concept, as Carolyn Miller argues in the Forward, but also it demonstrates the continuing hermeneutic value of kairos, and by implication of other ancient rhetorical concepts. Thus, for Carolyn Miller, this book responds indirectly to recent charges that the classical rhetorical vocabulary is “thin,” time-bound, and inappropriately “globalized” as an “universal hermeneutic.” In this review, I discuss the ways in which these essays contribute to our understanding of kairos as conceptually dense, central to rhetorical theory, and cross-disciplinary in scope.

Since many of the multiple meanings of kairos in Greek rhetorical theories can be traced to its earliest conceptualizations, the first few chapters devote considerable attention to the term’s etymology. Particularly instructive is Phillip Sipiora’s “Introduction: The Ancient Concept of Kairos,” which discusses the evolution of the term from its early concrete meanings to broader and more abstract meanings, a familiar trajectory in the development of conceptual terms. The earliest known appearance of the word is found in Homer’s Iliad, according to Sipiora, “where it denotes a vital or lethal place in the body,” a place of physical vulnerability for oneself but of opportunity for one’s enemies. In the work of Theognis and the tragedians, explains Sipiora, there is a shift in meaning from Homer’s association of kairos with mortality to an emphasis on the moment of decision: “From death or ‘truncation of life,’ the meaning shifts to decision or ‘truncation of doubt.’” Another early reference to kairos appears in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, where the term assumes the meaning of “due measure” or “proper proportion,” which Hesiod illustrates with the example of the need to load a wagon judiciously so as to avoid breaking the axle. Viewed in light of this concrete
example, the maxim usually attributed to Hesiod—"Observe due measure, and proportion [kairos] is best in all things"—anticipates later, more complex meanings of kairos—namely, those that entail the interplay of material situational constraints and human judgment.

Yet another way in which these essays establish kairos' conceptual density is by examining this key term's meaning in relation to other terms. Several essays, most notably John Smith's, thus complicate the temporal dimension of kairos. In "Time and Qualitative Time," Smith explores the meaning of kairos in relationship to chronos. While chronos refers to "time as measure, the quantity of duration, the length of periodicity," kairos "points to a qualitative character of time, to the special position an event or action occupies in a series, to a season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen just at 'any time,' but only at that time, to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur." However, as Smith hastens to note, the two are inextricably linked: "kairos presumes chronos, which is thus a necessary condition underlying qualitative time," but chronos also requires a concept of kairos to give meaning to events that occur in the flow of time. Further, argues Smith, the relationship between chronos and kairos helps explain the subject-situation equation entailed in concepts of kairos. That is, the process concept of time, or chronos, intersects with human discernment to create kairic opportunities. In "On Doing the Right Thing at the Right Time: Toward an Ethics of Kairos," Amelie Frost Benedikt extends Smith's discussion to suggest that notions of kairos-time as "interpretive, situational, and thus, subjective" must be grounded in notions of chronos-time as "absolute, universal, and objective" if we are to consider the ethical dimensions of kairos: "failure to grasp how the objective qualities of a moment shape interpretive judgment can lead to ethically bad results."

Richard Enos' "Invention or Constraints on the Technographers of Ancient Athens: A Study of Kairos" also takes up the question "What is time?" and invites us to consider the concept of "immediate time" in relation to kairos, that is, the hours and minutes that constrain the production and delivery of discourse. According to Enos, this aspect of kairos was particularly compelling for fifth and fourth century forensic and deliberative rhetors, whose time was governed by a klepsydra, or water clock. Other essays mention different orders of time—kairos as eschatological time in Sipiora's "Kairos: The Rhetoric of Time and Timing in the New Testament" and aion or timelessness in James Baumlin's "Ciceronian Decorum and the Temporalities of Renaissance
Rhetoric” and James S. Baumlin and Tita French Baumlin’s “Chronos, Kairos, and Aion: Failures of Decorum, Right-Timing, and Revenge in Shakespeare’s Hamlet.” In these essays, the concept of kairos is associated with crises that are precipitated by physical and/or metaphysical imperatives. Not surprisingly, for example, Sipiora finds that “the most striking semantic use of kairos [in the New Testament] lies in the meaning of urgency or crisis. . . . The concept of kairos energizes or catalyzes the rhetorical imperative.”

Another cluster of essays complicates the concept of prepon or “fitness,” whose many meanings include fitting the discourse to the listeners and fitting the discourse to social, cultural, or moral dictates. Augusto Rostagni in “A New Chapter in the History of Rhetoric and Sophistry” examines the former by linking the concept of kairos with the earlier term polutropos, a term whose meaning is explored in a series of fragments by Gorgias’ disciple, Antisthenes. Polutropos, or knowing many ways to express the same thing, is associated both with Odysseus and Pythagoras, who was reportedly able to charm others by attuning his speech to particular listeners. Through a detailed and intricate exegesis of Antisthenes’ fragments, Rostagni traces Gorgias’ concept of kairos, the “heart” of his rhetorical system, to Pythagorean philosophical principles. Briefly, Gorgias’ concept of kairos, as mediated through Antisthenes, borrows heavily from Pythagorean notions of harmony and unity in multiplicity: “The multiplicity of the ways of speaking (polutropia logou) and the use of varied speech for various ears becomes a single type (monotropia) of speech. For one thing is appropriate for each person. Thus, that which is adapted to each person reduces variety of speech to one thing—that which is suitable for each person.” For Gorgias, “the magic effects of the word” meant that “the rhetor must know, scientifically, the ways of the soul, from which the speeches capable of spellbinding and persuading descend.”

Recognizing the power of kairos and polutropos, Plato later appropriates and transforms these concepts in the service of his ideal rhetoric, counseling philosopher rhetors to know the “souls of the audience” and adapt their speech accordingly. As Kinneavy puts it in “Kairos in Classical and Modern Rhetorical Theory,” “it is very clear that in Plato’s system, rhetorical thought becomes effective only at the moment of kairos. . . . Plato’s world of ideas is brought down to earth by the notion of kairos.” Or as Sipiora explains it, drawing on the ideas of Doro Levi: “Central to Plato’s philosophy . . . this conception of unity-in-plurality provides the connecting link between ethics and aesthetics; and it is a link
provided by *kairos*. *Kairos* is thus the fusion of ethical and aesthetic elements. Concepts such as the 'divine logos' can be understood only if one knows that conceptions of goodness and evil, life and death, and the cosmos can be known *exclusively* by the principle of proportion."

The meaning of *prepon* as "decorum" or "propriety" is addressed in Joseph Hughes' "*Kairos and Decorum: Crassus Orator's Speech de lege Servilia*" and the previously mentioned essay by James Baumlin. As Hughes explains, Roman society expected public speakers to follow strict social conventions and cultural definitions of appropriate behavior and speech. Thus, in his theoretical pronouncements about rhetoric, Cicero emphasizes *decorum* over kairic inventiveness: "In life as in oratory, there is nothing more difficult than identifying what is appropriate. . . . Failure to appreciate it leads to mistakes not only in life, but also quite often in poetry and oratory." However, Hughes argues that Cicero's attitude toward the often competing demands of *decorum* and *kairos* is more complicated when it comes to actual practice: "Indeed, Cicero—the orator, that is, not the rhetorical theorist—was quite willing to cross this boundary [of *decorum*] when the *kairos* demanded." Baumlin offers a somewhat different interpretation of Cicero's concept of *decorum*: "Though Latin *decorum* specifically translates the Greek *to prepon,* it would appear that Ciceronian theory [regarding *decorum*] combines *to prepon* and *to kairos,* the "fitting" and "the timely" in a complex synthesis, at once observing both the formal and the temporal or situational aspects of discourse."

As I have been suggesting, analyses of *kairos*' conceptual density lead many of these authors to reconsider classical rhetorical theories in light of this more complicated understanding of *kairos* and to claim, in many cases, that *kairos* is the linchpin of a particular rhetorician's theory. While this is not such a new claim in relationship to Gorgias, the evidence of his debt to Pythagorean principles offers new perspectives on the interrelated aesthetic and epistemological dimensions of his theory. Drawing heavily on the earlier work of Rostagni, Sipiora summarizes Gorgias' Pythagorian influenced concept of *kairos*: "In accordance with *kairos*, therefore, we are compelled to maintain contrary perceptions, interpretations, and arguments: opposing arguments—the *dissoi logoi* of sophistic rhetoric—remain equally probable, and yet the mystery of *kairos* enables rhetors to choose one *logos* over another, making one and the same thing seem great or small, beautiful or ugly, new or old." Since the choosing of "one *logos* over another" includes concern for "the secret affinities that link harmony and rhythm to
various psychic moods,” aesthetic concerns work epistemologically in the kairic moment in for Gorgias.

More surprising is the connection between the Pythagorean-inspired notions of *kairos* and Platonic theory (noted above) and Aristotelian theory. Reminiscent of Pythagoras’ notion of justice as necessarily kairic, Aristotle links *kairos* to *epiekeia*, or equity, in the *Rhetoric*, where he defines equity as “justice that goes beyond the written law.” Thus, in Kinneavy’s words, Aristotle’s concept of equity can be thus seen as “*kairic* law” in which fair treatment is determined by situational context. But the ancient rhetorical theorist with the most fully developed concept of *kairos*, according to Sipiora, is Isocrates, whose rhetorical *paideia* was structured around the principle of *kairos*. The whole of Isocrates’ educational program aimed at producing ideal citizen orators, who, in Isocrates’ words, “manage well the circumstances which they encounter day by day, and who possess a judgment which is accurate in meeting occasions as they arise and rarely miss the expedient course of action.”

A further perspective on the conceptual density of *kairos* is provided by those essays that consider its meaning in other disciplinary discourses. The value of these cross-disciplinary perspectives is that they suggest that ancient rhetorical concepts of *kairos* have often been influenced by its conceptualization in other discourses, and that they deepen our understanding of the concept through analogy. In “Hippocrates, *Kairos*, and Writing in the Sciences,” Catherine Eskin notes the influence of Hippocratic discourse on Aristotle and argues that “Hippocrates’ statements [for example, “a little later does not suffice, for a little later most patients die”] . . . might as easily be applied to discourse and rhetoric.” And in the previously mentioned “*Kairos* and *Decorum*,” Hughes notes the similarities between the dilemmas faced by Roman actors and rhetors. Indeed, according to Hughes, Cicero borrowed his famous statement about *decorum* in *De Oratore* from the Roman comic actor Quintus Roscius Gallus, who said “Observing decorum is the main thing about art, but it is also the one thing that cannot be passed on by means of art.” Roscius’ most famous role, Ballio, the pimp in Plautus’ *Pseudolus*, required him to make this “reprehensible” character believable but not too sympathetic to a staid Roman audience: “[a]nother name for the dilemma Roscius faced when he played Ballio is *kairos*."

A final issue worth mention is the question of teachability suggested by the Roscius/Cicero quotation. Two essays in the volume address this issue specifically, one more instructively than the other in my view. As
John Poulakos points out in “Kairos in Gorgias’ Rhetorical Compositions,” the centrality of kairos in Gorgias’ rhetorical theory presented him with a practical problem: its unteachability. The “proper” or well measured rhetorical response can never be directly taught because each occasion demands an original response to a unique set of circumstances. Gorgias’ solution, according to Poulakos, is to “manufactur[e] controlled opportunities [for kairic actions] within” Palamedes and Helen, so as to teach his students how “to create an impression of timeliness in the audience” through a text. That is, while students cannot be taught in advance of particular situations how to respond effectively to those situations, they can learn a great deal about how “unforeseen circumstances determin[e] human words and deeds” through their study of texts that exemplify “sensitivity to timeliness.” The other essay that considers the question of pedagogy is Carolyn Eriksen Hill’s “Changing Times in Composition Class.” While I found Hill’s discussion of Pythagorean theory provocative, her discussion of what she calls “Pythagorean pedagogy” seems more useful as a teaching narrative than as a pedagogical model.

In conclusion, the contribution of this volume is primarily theoretical and not directly pedagogical. These essays enrich our concept of kairos and encourage a reconsideration of both ancient and contemporary rhetorical theories. At the same time, there is an indirect practical benefit in that an enriched understanding of kairos might enable rhetors to use the complexities of their rhetorical situations inventively. Further, such an understanding might remind us of our responsibilities as citizens. For is not Coroner Wallace Miller, mentioned at the outset, very much in the position of Isocrates’ citizen orator, who is called upon to “manage well the circumstances which [he/she] encounter[s] day by day”? It was Isocrates’ belief that “[i]f these ‘public citizens’ are of sufficient number and take it upon themselves to dedicate themselves to deliberative activity within the polis, the state has the potential to rescue itself from present evils and head off future dangers.” While warding off “present evils” and heading off “future dangers” is quite beyond the powers of an epideictic 4th of July speech, the need for all of us to act and speak imaginatively and courageously in the face of overwhelming complexity has never been more pressing.