Selections from Aristotle's *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*

Written 350 B.C.E
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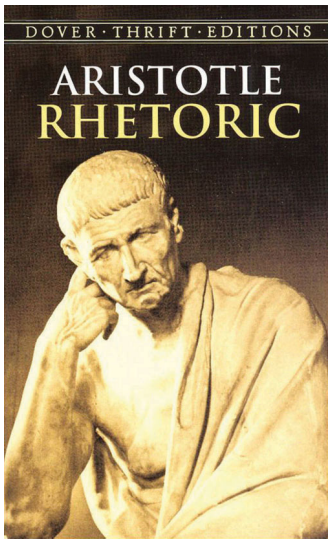
Please note the following:

When Aristotle uses words like "man," "men," "he," or "him," in most cases I have substituted words like "person," "people," or "humans." In some cases, when substitutions seemed to adversely affect the sentence structure or style, I left "man," "he," etc.

Also, when Aristotle uses the words "speech" or "speaking," we can understand them to mean "argument." That is, what he says about speech, about oral argument and persuasion, also applies to written argument and written persuasion as well.

If you want to read *On Rhetoric* in its entirety—suffering from insomnia, perhaps?—you can find it free online here: http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.html



Book I Selections

Part 1

Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic. [Dialectic is, as simply as possible, a method of inquiry or investigation for discovering what is true.] Both alike are concerned with such things as come, more or less, within the general knowledge of all people and belong to no definite science. Accordingly all people make use, more or less, of both; for to a certain extent all people attempt to discuss statements and to maintain them, to defend themselves and to attack others. Ordinary people do this either at random or through practice and from acquired habit. Both ways being possible, the subject can plainly be handled systematically, for it is possible to inquire the reason why some speakers succeed through practice and others spontaneously; and every one will at once agree that such an inquiry is the function of an art.

It is clear, then, that rhetorical study, in its strict sense, is concerned with the modes of persuasion. Persuasion is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated. . . . The true and the approximately true are apprehended by the same faculty; it may also be noted that people have a sufficient natural instinct for what is true, and usually do arrive at the truth. Hence the person who makes a good guess at truth is likely to make a good guess at probabilities.

Rhetoric is useful (1) because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites, so that if the decisions of judges are not what they

ought to be, the defeat must be due to the speakers themselves, and they must be blamed accordingly. Moreover, before some audiences not even the possession of the most precise or accurate knowledge will make it easy for what we say to produce conviction. For argument based on knowledge implies instruction, and there are people whom one cannot instruct. Here, then, we must use, as our modes of persuasion and argument, notions possessed by everybody, as we observed in *The Topics* when dealing with the way to handle a popular audience. Further, we must be able to employ persuasion, just as strict reasoning can be employed, on opposite sides of a question, not in order that we may in practice employ it in both ways (for we must not make people believe what is wrong), but in order that we may see clearly what the facts are, and that, if others argue unfairly, we on our part may be able to confute them. No other of the arts draws opposite conclusions: dialectic and rhetoric alone do this. Both these arts draw opposite conclusions impartially. Nevertheless, the underlying facts do not lend themselves equally well to the contrary views. No, things that are true and things that are better are, by their nature, practically always easier to prove and easier to believe in.

Again, it is absurd to hold that people ought to be ashamed of being unable to defend themselves with their limbs, but not of being unable to defend themselves with speech and reason, when the use of rational speech is more distinctive of a human being than the use of limbs. And if it be objected that one who uses such power of speech unjustly might do great harm, that is a charge which may be made in common against all good things except virtue, and above all against the things that are most useful, as strength, health, wealth, generalship. People can confer the greatest of benefits by a right use of these, and inflict the greatest of injuries by using them wrongly.

Part 2

Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art. Every other art can instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter; for instance, medicine about what is healthy and unhealthy, geometry about the properties of magnitudes, arithmetic about numbers, and the same is true of the other arts and sciences. But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects.

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.

Persuasion is achieved by the speakers' personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think them credible. We believe good and fair-minded people more fully and more readily than others. This is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided or there is room for doubt. This kind of

persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speakers say, not by what people think of their characters before they begin to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to the power of persuasion; on the contrary, the speaker's character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he or she possesses.

Secondly, persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions. Our judgements when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile. It is towards producing these effects, as we maintain, that present-day writers on rhetoric direct the whole of their efforts. This subject shall be treated in detail when we come to speak of the emotions. Thirdly, persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question.

There are, then, these three means of effecting persuasion. The speaker who is to be in command of them must, it is clear, be able (1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) to understand the emotions—that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited. It thus appears that rhetoric is an offshoot of dialectic and also of ethical studies.

Part 3

Rhetoric falls into three divisions, determined by the three classes of listeners to speeches. For of the three elements in speech-making--speaker, subject, and person addressed--it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object. The hearer must be either a judge, with a decision to make about things past or future, or an observer. A member of the assembly decides about future events, a jury member about past events: while those who merely decide on the orator's skill are observers. From this it follows that there are three divisions of oratory: (1) political, (2) forensic, and (3) the ceremonial oratory of display.

Political speaking urges us either to do or not to do something: one of these two courses is always taken by private counsellors, as well as by people who address public assemblies. Forensic speaking either attacks or defends somebody: one or other of these two things must always be done by the parties in a case. The ceremonial oratory of display either praises or censures somebody. These three kinds of rhetoric refer to three different kinds of time. The political orator is concerned with the future: it is about things to be done hereafter that he advises, for or against. The party in a case at law is concerned with the past; one person accuses the other, and the other defends himself or herself, with reference to things already done. The ceremonial orator is, properly speaking, concerned with the present, since all people praise or blame in view of the state of things existing at the time, though they often find it useful also to recall the past and to make guesses at the future.

Book II Selections

Part 1

But since rhetoric exists to affect the giving of decisions—the hearers decide between one political speaker and another, and a legal verdict is a decision—orators must not only try to make the argument of their speeches demonstrative and worthy of belief; they must also make their own characters look right and put their hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind.

Particularly in political oratory, but also in lawsuits, it adds much to an orator's influence that his own character should look right and that he should be thought to entertain the right feelings towards his hearers; and also that his hearers themselves should be in just the right frame of mind. That the orator's own character should look right is particularly important in political speaking, that the audience should be in the right frame of mind, in lawsuits. When people are feeling friendly and placable, they think one sort of thing; when they are feeling angry or hostile, they think either something totally different or the same thing with a different intensity; when they feel friendly to the man who comes before them for judgement, they regard him as having done little wrong, if any; when they feel hostile, they take the opposite view. Again, if they are eager for, and have good hopes of, a thing that will be pleasant if it happens, they think that it certainly will happen and be good for them: whereas if they are indifferent or annoyed, they do not think so.

There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator's own character—the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense [*phronesis*], good moral character [*arêt*e], and goodwill [*eunoia*]. . . . It follows that anyone who is thought to have all three of these good qualities will inspire trust in his audience. The way to make ourselves thought to be sensible and morally good must be gathered from the analysis of goodness already given: the way to establish your own goodness is the same as the way to establish that of others.

Book III Selections

Part 1

In making a speech one must study three points: first, the means of producing persuasion; second, the style, or language, to be used; third, the proper arrangement of the various parts of the speech. We have already specified the sources of persuasion. We have shown that persuasion must in every case be effected by working on the emotions of the judges themselves, by giving them the right impression of the speakers' character, and by proving the truth of the statements made.