The Cursed Sisters: Public Relations and Rhetoric*

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The rhetorical tradition offers public relations scholars, managers, and practitioners a resource that helps them to understand organizational discourse, its effects, and its role in society. Rhetoric helps to explain the ways in which organizations attempt to achieve specific political or economic goals, or build relationships with their stakeholders. Further, in addition to offering down-to-earth practical advice, rhetoric also presents epistemological perspectives that temper theoretical tendencies toward naïve realism and Platonic notions of absolute truth. Rhetoric helps us to understand how knowledge is generated and socially constructed through communication.

In recognition of the centrality of discourse, there has been a recent turn toward rhetoric in many academic disciplines. Scholars of philosophy, management, economics, law, political science, social psychology, history, anthropology, political science, sociology, and literature have all drawn on rhetoric (Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008). The application of rhetoric in public relations has also been championed, most notably by Robert L. Heath (e.g., 1980, 1992, 2001, 2009). This chapter starts by giving a short overview of the rhetorical tradition, before going on to discuss rhetoric in public relations. Particular attention is paid to epistemology, as this demonstrates why rhetoric should be included in the canon of public relations. It is proposed that the rhetorical tradition can still divulge crucial concepts and ways of thinking that illuminate public relations practice and help build theory. A call is also issued for more research on the rhetorical situations that organizations encounter and the archetypical ways in which they respond.

Classical Rhetoric

In everyday parlance, rhetoric is more often than not applied as a contrast to “substantial action” and “reality.” Rhetoric is reserved for empty words and deception. Every rhetorician is happy to point out that this negative understanding of rhetoric is due to rhetorical theory that emphasizes only style and delivery, and to argue that the ancient
tradition is misrepresented. At the very least, it can quickly be pointed out that rhetoric is inescapable. Everyone uses rhetoric, not least the anti-rhetoricians.

The classic and best-known definition of rhetoric is given by Aristotle: “Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, trans. 1991, 1.2.1). According to this tradition, then, the normative aim of rhetoric is “persuasion” or “influence.” Influence is defined as the capacity to affect the thoughts or actions of others by persuading or convincing them. This definition excludes force and material inducement, but allows for both rational and irrational processes. Although some use the phrases “to persuade” and “to convince” interchangeably, there may, in fact, be a difference between them. To persuade somebody about \( p \) is to get him or her to believe \( p \), but to convince somebody about \( p \) is to provide other sufficient reasons to believe that \( p \) is true or acceptable (Tranøy, 1986). Some argue that rhetoric should confess to its aim of influencing and changing people, and that persuasion is thus the better definition (Andersen, 1995). Others, in contrast, stress that rhetoric involves both reason and emotion; that it attempts to convince and persuade (Corbett & Connors, 1999).

A particular concept touched upon by most of the ancient theorists of rhetoric was that of artistic proofs in the form of ethos, pathos, and logos, that is, ethical appeal, emotional appeal, and appeal to reason. These proofs are linked to the rhetor, the audience, and the message, respectively. In a given discourse, “these are at all times coordinate [sic] and interact mutually, distinguishable but not separable from one another, although one may occasionally take precedence over the others” (Conley, 1990/1994, p. 15).

Interestingly, the ancient rhetoricians treated emotions as epistemic, as a way of knowing. Today, logic and emotion are most often pitted against each other as intellectual and bodily processes, respectively. The ancients, however, saw feelings not only as subjectively real, but as objectively true (Andersen, 1995). In Latin, sentire means both to
mean and to feel: “‘I understand,’ or ‘I feel’ or ‘I see’ are often equivalent to ‘I know’” (Quintilian, trans. 1920/1996, 10.1.13). The purely logos-based rhetoric tends to ignore the fact that changing peoples’ minds depends on at least two things: “the emotional intensity with which they cling to an opinion; and the degree to which their identities—their sense of themselves as integrated people—are wrapped up with that opinion” (Crowley & Hawhee, 1999, p. 153). Some use of pathos is thus indispensable for a rhetor.

Although classical rhetoric encompasses a range of other concepts, the notion of ethos, logos, and pathos are arguably the most well-known theoretical contribution. Rhetorical theory does not, however, end with the ancients. During the twentieth century, a new form of rhetoric emerged.

**New Rhetoric**

The new rhetoric was largely driven by debates on epistemology. It was characterized by rhetorical scholars moving away from the aesthetic understanding of rhetoric that was so preoccupied with form, and from scientific understanding, with its modernist notion of objectivity. From the 1960s onward, the hegemony of the neo-traditionalists was challenged (Booth, 1967; Fogarty, 1959). The luminaries of this movement included Kenneth Burke and Chaïm Perelman, and their respective books *Rhetoric of Motives* (1950/1969) and *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (1969/1971) are widely held to be the two main texts on contemporary rhetorical theory (Gaonkar, 2001).

Some have argued that classical rhetoric—excluding the sophists (see Jarratt, 1991)—typically saw truth as something that the rhetor had arrived at previously, and that rhetoric should merely help to communicate this truth. Further, there was a clearly defined relationship between the rhetor, the audience, and the world that was mediated by language. In modern rhetoric, however, there is no fully confident or generally accepted epistemological stance that articulates the relationship between the knower and the known.
(Lunsford & Ede, 1994; Ohmann, 1994), although a widespread position is that truth is inseparable from discourse, or the way in which we use language and interact. Rhetoric is not seen as something that decorates or disguises truth; rhetoric is a way of creating truth.

In 1967, Robert L. Scott (1999) argued that rhetoric is epistemic: it is a way of knowing. This so-called social-epistemic rhetoric understands rhetoric as constructing and modifying reality, social conditions, and relationships. Rhetoric is implicated in all human behavior and constructs social knowledge that is situated materially and historically. It is through rhetoric that ideas are accepted or rejected; truth is not discovered or unearthed, and cannot be determined in any *a priori* way. Rhetorical interaction is involved when something is declared to be a fact, in the interpretation of that fact, and in how that fact is used to justify action. This also extends to discourse communities that try to deny that rhetoric plays a role, such as economics and branches of science that deal with “objective facts.” All types of knowledge must rest upon some kind of human consensus, and there is thus a need for rhetoric (Farrell, 1999; Moran & Ballif, 2000).

In a sense then, truth can be conceived as being created moment by moment. This has brought about a renewed interest in the ancient sophistic tradition and its emphasis on contingency, or how something is probable rather than certain (e.g., Jarratt, 1991; Poulakos, 1999). Scott later regretted the use of the word “epistemic,” as he saw no way of being certain. To him, rhetoric is *a* way of knowing or understanding, not *the* way. Most importantly, however, the positivist notion of the grand truth should be ignored (Scott, 1993).

Others have given this and related epistemological stances different labels, including *intersubjectivity, rhetorical subjectivism,* and *rhetorical relativism.* These stances can be shown to have a modern counterpart in what is alternately called *rhetorical objectivism,* *rhetorical dialectic,* or *critical rationalism.* The general view held by scholars taking the epistemological standpoint is that truth is discovered with the help of rhetoric. Attempts have
been made to bridge this problematic dualism by placing the two positions on a continuum and by mixing them differently (Cherwitz & Hikins, 1999). The debate has clear parallels with the sociological discussion of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Heide, 2009).

It is possible to argue that “reality” is a product of a synthesis between material structures and practices on one side, and the use of symbols that reinforce or question those structures and practices on the other. The most radical version of the “rhetoric is epistemic” stance has little room for material existence. This leads to discussions of ontological matters, that is, thoughts of what exists, kinds of being, and the relationship between them. It is argued here that although material structures do exist, rhetoric is needed for the social mediation of this knowledge. It is not possible to communicate without rhetoric, and rhetoric is crucial for human understanding. In this sense, rhetoric is epistemic, but it seems most fruitful to comprehend it as having a dialectic relationship to the ontological.

Rhetoric and Organizations

Organizations define problems and their solutions and try to influence stakeholders’ opinions and public policies to best suit their own interests and perspectives. Sometimes they succeed in this, and sometimes they do not. Sometimes the interest of an organization is shared by other parts of society, and sometimes it is not. These relatively banal observations notwithstanding, rhetoric is used by organizations in these instances regardless of the label appended to the communication activity, be it “lobbying” or “relationship management.” The process by which organizations influence and are influenced by others involves persuasion. Unless an organization or its stakeholders uses force or material inducement, its power or influence is likely to be based on both rational and irrational processes. Ultimately, it rests on the agreement of the other party, in that the latter recognizes its own interest in complying with the wish of the rhetor. Such influence implies the presentation of arguments, that is, it
involves rhetoric (Kennedy, 1991; Mayhew, 1997).

The rhetoric of modern organizations is different to the rhetoric of the ancient rhetor addressing an assembly. The first distinction is that the rhetors of today mostly represent organizations and are inseparable from those organizations (Crable, 1990). The practical consequences of this become especially evident during crises. For instance, when defending itself against charges of wrongdoing, the organizational hierarchy creates possibilities for denying or diffusing responsibility (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998), resulting in the organization as a whole taking the blame, thereby absolving the individual. Alternatively, an individual may be made a scapegoat, thus deflecting blame away from the organization.

The second distinction is that modern rhetors have a variety of channels through which to convey their messages. This is reflected by the fact that the object of research on organizational rhetoric is not only speeches, but text in the broad sense. In the field of public relations research, it is the “public record” that is most often used as the unit of analysis, including rhetoric that is distributed via social media or the mass media (Toth, 1992).

Third, modern rhetors often reach mass audiences with which they have no direct contact. Unlike a physically present audience, a mass audience provides no immediate reaction. Further, not only is the spatial dimension different, but the audience is also more diverse and may have widely differing values and multiple organizational identifications (Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004; Crable, 1990). This means that a strategy that is designed to communicate with one group of stakeholders can easily alienate another (Ice, 1991).

The fourth point is that rhetors are more or less agencies for organizations. They have become actors in the Hollywood sense: the “words we hear are someone else’s: the understanding or emotions generated are controlled by forces off-stage. The actor in the Hollywood sense ‘appears’ and the actor in Burke’s sense remains behind the scenes, not a
part of the scene” (Crable, 1990, p. 123).

Taken together, such differences point to the need for a revamped rhetorical theory for organizations. Several attempts have been made in public relations to achieve this goal, as illustrated in the following.

**Rhetoric in Public Relations Studies**

Public relations pioneer Edward L. Bernays (1952) may well have been the first to mention rhetoric in conjunction with public relations. Nonetheless, an observer writing in 1970 noted the absence of any real exploration of the role of rhetoric in the early public relations literature (Knapp, 1970). Ten years later, however, Robert L. Heath (1980) published an article that laid the groundwork for much of the subsequent research on rhetoric and public relations. Heath proposed rhetoric to be the essence of an organization’s relationship with its environment. One of the arguments that he has repeated since is that rhetoric affords public relations the possibility of ethical and pragmatic practice: “the good organization communicating well” (Heath, 2001, p. 39). With the help of rhetoric, organizations can achieve specific goals, such as legitimacy. Rhetoric can also help organizations to focus on the different interpretations and zones of meaning of stakeholders (Heath, 1993). Rhetoric helps to co Define and co Create meaning. According to Heath, concurrence is the aim of the rhetorical process, and a clash of viewpoints strengthens the public opinion process. Based on these ideas, much effort has since been made to argue for the legitimacy and usefulness of a rhetorical approach to public relations (Heath, 2009; Toth, 2009).

Public relations scholars have suggested several analytical models for public relations based on the work of ancients such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2002; Porter, in press), Isocrates (Heath, 2009; Marsh, 2003; Porter, in press), and new rhetoricians such as Toulmin (Skerlep, 2001), Bitzer (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, in press), and
Burke and Perelman (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2004; Mickey, 1995). Although it would be wrong to claim that the rhetorical approach to public relations is flourishing, a considerable number of rhetorical concepts and cases have been analyzed in edited volumes such as *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations* (Toth & Heath, 1992), *Public Relations Inquiry as Rhetorical Criticism* (Elwood, 1995), *Corporate Advocacy: Rhetoric in an Information Age* (Hoover, 1997), *Power and Public Relations* (Courtright & Smudde, 2007), and *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II* (Heath, Toth, & Waymer, 2009). The field has largely been dominated by US scholars (Ihlen, 2008), although useful exceptions include the work by the UK scholar Jacquie L’Etang (1996, 1997, 2006).

Whereas some of the published rhetorical public relations studies have an intrinsic historical character that contributes little to theory building, there are also several that discuss particular rhetorical concepts. Authors have taken on enthymematic argumentation (Edwards, 2007), ethos (Bostdorff, 1992; Ihlen, 2009), paradoxes (German, 2007; Heath & Waymer, 2009), apologia (Hearit, 1995, 2001; Jerome, 2008), stasis theory (Marsh, 2006), metaphors (Zhang, 2007), model and anti model arguments (Brand, 2007), employee recruitment strategies (Russell-Loretz, 2007), and strategies for high-tech industries (Baker, Conrad, Cuadhy, & Willyard, 2009). Nevertheless, the best-developed line of rhetorical public relations research remains the studies of organizational self-defense and image restoration during or after crises (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999, 2009; Hearit, 2006; Millar & Heath, 2003). Other rhetorical situations (Bitzer, 1968) are largely unexplored, a point that will be revisited later.

Scholars in the field of organizational communication have also made use of rhetoric (see Cheney, et al., 2004 for an overview). These theorists have typically made a strong case for focusing on how reality is defined and created through the use of rhetoric, in line with the epistemological debate already touched upon. Indeed, some propose that the use of rhetoric,
or symbols, is the essence (if not the substance) of organizations. This means, they argue, that public relations practitioners should be taught to manage symbols, rather than substance (Cheney & Dionisopoulos, 1989; Tompkins, 1987).

As indicated, the research streams of public relations and organizational communication can inform each other, despite their different focuses on external and internal communication, respectively. Indeed, given that organizational rhetoric has both an internal and external audience, this traditional distinction often makes little sense (Cheney & Dionisopoulos, 1989). Others have similarly argued for the blurring of boundaries with other fields studying organizational rhetoric, such as propaganda analysis and social movement theory (Meisenbach & McMillian, 2006). Organizational scholars of various kinds have made great strides recently in bridging management and organizational rhetoric (i.e., Sillince & Suddaby, 2008), and public relations scholars are now following suit (i.e., Heath, in press), demonstrating the importance of external rhetoric.

Debates about Rhetorical Public Relations Studies

Various debates relating to orientation, ethics, epistemology, and ontology have emerged from studies of public relations and rhetoric (Ihlen, 2008).

Scholars have argued that public relations should be studied like any other social activity (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009), and several authors have explicitly linked the rhetorical approach to the instrumental goals of organizations (i.e., Toth, 1992; Trujillo & Toth, 1987). Some authors, however, question this administrative approach, and argue that it often underpins the research agenda even when a critical orientation is supposedly espoused. Thus, they contend, rhetorical public relations studies do not constitute an alternative paradigm to the dominant theories in the field (L'Etang, 1997, 2006; Porter, in press). Others believe that these rhetorical studies have been too critical, and that this explains why rhetoric is not a larger field of study within public relations (Toth, 1999).
Still, rhetorical public relations studies range from applied work that suggests strategies to help organizations survive crises (e.g., Coombs, 2009) to studies illustrating how public relations rhetoric works for particular ideologies (e.g., Crable & Vibbert, 1995; Holloway, 1995). This makes it difficult to argue that the rhetorical approach is one thing or the other in terms of the administrative versus critical perspectives. It is also recognized that public relations can play both a constructive and a destructive role in society (Heath, 2006).

A recurring issue for critics of rhetoric is its ethics, and whether persuasion can be considered a legitimate activity. This criticism echoes the traditional criticism of rhetoric (i.e., Platon, trans. 1960). Arguments for persuasion include the notion that practitioners are hired precisely to engage in persuasion on behalf of their organization or clients, and that the field must address the issue of ethics in persuasion rather than denying its role altogether. Open and responsible dialogue is often suggested as the ethical ideal (Edgett, 2002; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pfau & Wan, 2006; Porter, in press).

Heath has argued that rhetoric is intrinsically ethical, as “rhetoric fosters truth as best as can be done; it serves to solve problems that confront the public” (Heath, 2007, p. 50) and “empowers participants to engage in dialogue” (Heath, 2001, p. 33). Heath’s view is also reflected in the way in which he defines public relations, as “the management function that rhetorically adapts organizations to people’s interests and people’s interests to organizations by co-creating meaning and co-managing culture to achieve mutually beneficial relationships” (Heath, 2001, p. 36).

Although such normative definitions certainly have a place in a field that wants to be relevant for practice and to provide ethical guidance, much rhetoric and much of what goes on in public relations fails to live up to such standards. The rhetoric of public relations thus risks the conflation of the normative and the descriptive. Rhetoric and public relations may certainly have ideal forms, but unethical public relations thrives, as indicated by the number
of front groups and public relations scandals that are covered in the mass media on a regular basis (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009). Another view is that neither public relations nor rhetoric is inherently ethical or unethical. Both disciplines, either alone or together, can be used ethically and unethically, and for good or bad purposes.

A particular charge leveled against the rhetorical approach of Heath is its move away from perspectivism toward relativism (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). The good organization, communicating well is upheld as the ideal. “Well” in this context means adhering to norms such as “truthfulness” and “appropriateness for the situation,” but also instructing, moving, and charming the audience. The ideal orator of Quintilian is dead, however, and modern rhetoric has an even less secure ontological and epistemological platform than its ancient counterpart (Lunsford & Ede, 1994). For what is really “good,” and how is “good” determined? The solution that Heath suggest for this problem is that of relativism, or the idea that the “limit on any point of view is the counter statement that can gain more support” (Heath, 1997, p. 60). Relativism is regarded as a practical solution, as this may at least privilege “people in society to struggle in concert to reduce differences, to compromise and to have opinions challenged. That is the essence of the process of rhetoric” (p. 60). This has led to the criticism that Heath sometimes acknowledges reality to be socially constructed, yet at other times assumes that there is really one universal truth, that some “facts” are better than others. According to L’Etang (1997), the problem is that no hints are given as to how these two perspectives can be distinguished and why.

Heath’s approach has also been subject to ontological criticism. Heath states that rhetoric is built on “dialogue to define and advance . . . interests within the limited of other’s opinions about these matters” (Heath, 2001, p. 32). The underlying assumption is that “no entity can manipulate others forever, if at all” (Heath, 1993, p. 143). Public relations practitioners must thus advocate not only the needs of the organization, but also the needs,
concerns, and points of view of the public. Cheney and Christensen (2001) have criticized the ontological assumptions of this argument and the faith in a well-functioning “marketplace of ideas” in which the resource issue plays no role. A better metaphor may be a “supermarket of images in which large establishments offer their customers a limited number of brands promoted by a few social leviathans” (Sproule, 1988, p. 484). Not all arguments are guaranteed to be heard, neither is there a guarantee that the better arguments will prevail over the self-interested argument (Ihlen, 2002). Indeed, commentators on rhetoric and management have asserted that “rhetoric is a strategy of the powerful, a form of control” (Hartelius & Browning, 2008, p. 33).

Rhetorical Typologies of Public Relations Strategies

As already mentioned, the study of crises is by far the largest branch of rhetorical public relations studies (e.g., Millar & Heath, 2003). It has been demonstrated that organizations in crisis typically rely on different archetypical strategies ranging from the aggressive to the accommodative (Coombs, 2007). The rhetorical notion of *apologia*—or speech of self-defense—has been explored at length (e.g., Hearit, 2001), strongly linked to the writings of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969/1971) and the notion of *disassociation*, or the separation of, for instance, the individual from the group.

Several other strategy typologies have been suggested. Cheney, in examining internal communication, argued that organizations “assist” in identification processes with their employees to induce cooperation or reduce the range of decisions to encompass only those alternatives that benefit the organization (Burke, 1950/1969, 1972; Cheney, 1983, 1991). At least three interesting strategies can be identified. The first is the use of common ground, whereby the rhetor puts emphasis on the humble origins that he or she shares with the audience. The second is antithesis, which is a strategy of congregation by segregation. The rhetor holds up an antithesis that suggests that the rhetor and his or her audience has a
common enemy. The third is the device of the transcendent “we.” This strategy often works on an unconscious level, as when an environmentalist identifies with a well-known activist and wants to partake in the same protest actions as this activist.

Ihlen (2009) suggested four archetypical ways in which corporations attempt to come across as credible environmental actors. Corporations will argue that (1) they make the world better with their product or the positive leadership that they offer; (2) they have cleaned up their own house by such actions as recycling or curbing emissions; (3) that others like them, such as the authorities or NGOs, approve of their environmental efforts; and (4) that they care about their stakeholders by, for instance, talking about the environmental challenges that they share with them.

It is posited here that the development of several more of these typologies would go some way toward establishing a rhetoric of public relations. Somewhat in line with this, Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, and Lair (2004) argued that rhetoric can be useful in the study public relations strategies in four instances that relate to how organizations: 1) respond to existing rhetorical situations, for instance through crisis communication; 2) attempt to anticipate future rhetorical situations, for instance through issues management processes; 3) attempt to shape rhetorical situations, for instance through strategic definitions; and, 4) try to shape their own identities (Cheney, et al., 2004).

Here it is argued that future research should aim to develop typologies and a fully-fledged rhetoric for the organizational activities described. However, avoiding the trap of “rhetoric-as-technique, rhetor-as-magician pole” remains a basic challenge (Conrad & Malphurs, 2008, p. 134). It is necessary to keep in mind the complex, dialectical relationships that exist between action, agency, and structure that help define rhetorical action. This could help to avoid the reductionism that Burke, Perelman, and others warned against when they sought to revitalize the rhetorical tradition.
Conclusion

This chapter sets out why and how rhetoric is crucial for public relations, with particular emphasis on the epistemological perspective. In summary, it is argued that the epistemic and the ontological have a dialectic relationship. Rhetoric is seen as enacting and creating the environment, and facts as being conditioned by social agreement. At the same time, however, it is acknowledged that an environment exists and that humans must presuppose the existence of *something* that is true. The main implication is that a pluralism of perspectives should be invited, as truth with a capital “T” is impossible to achieve.

Adopting this perspective propels rhetoric to the forefront. However, some rhetorical scholars have argued that rhetoric should not be conceived of as a general all-encompassing epistemological theory because it has a normative ambition (Kock, 1997). Rhetoric strives to tell us how everything in an utterance should be in the context of the text, that is, the “opportune moment,” or *kairós* (Sipiora & Baumlin, 2002). This is a reminder that scholars should also research whether public relations rhetoric has achieved what it set out to do. Still, here it is argued that such research endeavor should also be informed by a critical-analytical agenda. Public relations must be viewed within a wider cultural, economic, and political context (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009), and rhetorical theory could help to analyze the symbolic strategies that organizations use. Creating new typologies of archetypical rhetorical strategies may be the first step toward a fully-fledged rhetoric of public relations. The obvious conclusion here is that public relations needs its big sister: the *grand dame* of communication studies.
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