

“Excess in Meaning: How the Ancient Interpretive Stases Create and Mitigate Surplus Readings of Texts”

ASHR 2020 Symposium Teaser

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My name is Martin Camper, and I was scheduled to deliver one of the keynote addresses at the 2020 ASHR Symposium in Portland. The title of my planned address was “Excess in Meaning: How the Ancient Interpretive Stases Create and Mitigate Surplus Readings of Texts.”

In US rhetorical history, a body of key texts—including the Declaration of Independence, the Star-Spangled Banner, Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, MLK’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”—have played a vital role in shaping debates about citizenship, rights, and the idea of America itself. Or perhaps it is better to say that rhetors in these debates have shaped these texts to advance their respective causes. Indeed, these texts have played such an important role because rhetors have been able to interpret them in multiple ways. These texts have an excess in meaning that has supported a wide range of agendas often in several different societal debates.

In my ASHR talk, I planned to explore some patterns in how rhetors have employed argument to mold the meaning of these texts to influence our collective civic life. To identify and analyze these patterns, I would have turned to the interpretive stases. A largely neglected part of stasis theory, the interpretive stases were originally devised in ancient Greece and Rome to help courtroom orators and speechwriters compose arguments about the meaning of legal documents, such as wills, laws, and contracts. However, ancient rhetoricians themselves recognized that these stases were not limited to the courtroom but outline general, recurring types of disagreement over the meaning of any type of text. I identify six interpretive stases: ambiguity, definition, letter versus spirit, conflicting passages, assimilation (in which a rhetor elicits a nonexplicit meaning from a text), and jurisdiction (which concerns the preliminary conditions for issuing a legitimate interpretation). Additionally, ancient rhetoricians catalogued common lines of reasoning/argument, or *topoi*, that rhetors can use to support competing readings of the same text in each stasis.

In my talk, I planned to discuss, as one of my examples, the perennial debate over the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Together these two texts form the civic foundation of our country. However, as many commentators, like historian Vernon Parrington, argue, the two documents

offer competing views of American society (Prothero 78). The Declaration seems to be a radical statement of equality, democracy, and self-determination, while the Constitution seems to blunt democratic rule and promote the interests of the elite. Reconciling these two foundational documents thus falls under the stasis of conflicting passages, in which rhetors try to resolve apparent contradictions in a text or in a body of texts considered a whole.

One topos, or argumentative strategy, available to rhetors in this stasis, is the appeal to one text's relative priority over the other. One way to measure this relative priority is time. Cicero advises rhetors to "consider which law passed last, for the latest law is always the most important" (2.49.145). However, in this case, Americans measure the relative priority of the Declaration versus the Constitution based on which one coincided with the actual birth of the country. For example, Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address famously dates the country's birth to the penning of the Declaration, thus tying the country's telos to the document's egalitarianism (Prothero 334). Directly attacking Lincoln's argument, Willmoore Kendall, a twentieth-century conservative political scientist, argues that a loose confederation of colonies was birthed in 1776, not a new nation; what birthed the United States was the Constitution and it therefore should have primacy in defining what America is about (Prothero 342-344).

So that should give you a taste of what my talk would have been like. I'm sorry that I was unable to share this analysis at the ASHR Symposium and that I missed so many other promising talks; however, I hope I can share my work and hear research from the other planned talks in other venues before too long.

Works Cited

Cicero. *De Inventione*. Translated by H. M. Hubbell, Harvard UP, 1949.

Prothero, Stephen. *The American Bible: How Our Words Unite, Divide, and Define a Nation*. HarperCollins, 2012.