

Diversifying the Teaching of the History of Rhetoric Series:

Arabic Interpretations of Aristotle's Rhetoric in 13th Century Europe

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Aristotle depicted in Arabic clothing, holding an astrolabe for students (Paris, Bibl. Mazarine, 3458).

Important Figures

al-Farabi (*Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al Fārābī*); Avicenna (*Ibn Sina*); Averroes (*Ibn Rushd*); Hermannus Alemannus (Herman the German); Roger Bacon; Thomas Aquinas; William of Moerbeke; Giles of Rome.

Important Concepts

Expanded *Organon*/Context Theory; Classical Reception; Translation and Commentary.

Background Information

Texts that seek to cover rhetoric's disciplinary history commonly misrepresent the teaching, transmission, and theorization of rhetoric in the European Middle Ages. To fully numerate these misrepresentations would require a much longer essay, but suffice to say that many accessible overview's of rhetoric's disciplinary history frame the medieval period as one defined by lack (e.g. a lack of appreciation for Cicero's "mature" rhetorical works and the complete teaching of Quintilian, or of Greek deliberative rhetoric), or alternatively as a period defined by the development of a few uniquely medieval genres (e.g. *ars poetria*, *ars dictaminis*, *ars praedicandi*).

Neither view can fully account for the medieval approach to rhetorical theory. On the one hand, the first type of misrepresentation both overstates the importance of ancient texts, while also intensely delimiting which ancient texts are worth study. For instance, while medieval culture on the whole was not fascinated with Cicero's "mature" rhetorical works such as *De oratore*, *De inventione* was both commonly copied and considered a text foundational to the teaching of rhetoric and argumentation. The latter type of misrepresentation overemphasizes the importance of novelty, assuming that only what is *uniquely* medieval is worthy of teaching to our students.

At the risk of over-generalizing, I will say only that medieval theorists did not define novelty in this way. As Rita Copeland has persuasively argued in her foundational *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, acts as varied as translation, commentary, and adaptation were all viewed as new and unique intellectual contributions. The intellectual

culture of medieval Europe, then, can never be understood as one solely indebted to the past, nor as one defined by its innovations (understood from our contemporary perspective). This should of course seem obvious, but is not always apparent in textbooks commonly assigned to graduate students and in upper-division seminars.

One way to push back against some of these assumptions to emphasize the acts of commentary and translation through the lens of classical reception. Many more [resources exist](#) for the [teaching of classical reception](#), so I will leave the [longer explanation](#) of this concept to more qualified scholars. But here, I will try to make sense of how the transmission and elaboration of rhetorical concepts through such modes as commentary and translation might allow us to teach medieval rhetoric more accurately and more inclusively, emphasizing the interplay between cultures and intellectual traditions that is characteristic of the 13th century. To do so, I want to give a brief overview of the transmission of Aristotle's rhetorical works from the Hellenistic period up to the 13th century, showing how the texts were copied, adapted, and retheorized by Greco-Roman, Syriac, Arabic, and medieval Latin cultures.

How the European Middle Ages Re-discovered Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

To advance my claim about the interplay between cultures, some background information is necessary. I'm inevitably simplifying and abridging here, but the broad strokes are necessary to make sense of the later events the suggested readings will cover in more depth.

As is perhaps familiar to scholars of rhetoric, after Aristotle's death (322 BCE), his teachings were collected and organized by his students. His works were divided into different categories; the most important for our purposes here are the *Organon*, or core works on logic, and Ethics/Politics and Rhetoric/Poetics. Scholars in the Alexandrian school in Egypt (1st to 5th century CE), an important center of Hellenistic thought, eventually collapsed some of these categories, adding the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* to the *Organon* and considering them branches of logic rather than entirely separate disciplines. The Alexandrian school influenced Western European thought directly through the theological teachings of some scholars working there, but the complete works of Aristotle were not integrated into European intellectual culture at this time.

Arabic thinkers, however, readily drew from the Alexandrian school, with al-Farabi (872-950 CE), Avicenna (980-1037 CE), and Averroes (1126-1198 CE) producing translations and original scholarship dealing with Aristotelian thought, particularly rhetorical and poetic concepts. This intellectual tradition has been studied extensively on its own terms; less studied, however, is the European reception and integration of these ideas into the university teaching of disciplines such as rhetoric, poetics, and logic. This area remains open for rich inquiry and can help to enrich the cultural exchanges that influenced the medieval development of rhetorical theory.

European scholars eventually encountered the texts, translations, and theories associated with Arabic centers of learning. Around the middle of the 13th Century, Hermannus Alemannus (or, Herman the German), a scholar working at the Toledo School of translators in Spain, completed several translations of Arabic texts. These included a nearly complete version of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which also included elements of Averroes's "Middle Commentary" and short sections from works of al-Farabi and Avicenna as well. Hermannus also produced a translation of al-Farabi's short introductory work, or *Didascalia* on the *Rhetoric*, as well as a translation of Averroes' "Middle Commentary" on the *Poetics*. Herman, then, represents just one of many possible entry points for understanding cultural exchanges pertinent to the development of rhetorical theory in Western Europe.

Hermannus's works were important, but not always well-received. Roger Bacon, for instance, found Hermannus's translation of the *Rhetoric* to be unreadable, and insisted that someone who understood logic needed to write a better version. Bacon's wish would later come true, by way of the theologian Thomas Aquinas requesting William of Moerbeke, a respected translator of Aristotle's other works, to create a new version from the Greek. This was important, as earlier versions had passed through a long chain of translation (from Greek, to Syriac, to Arabic, and then into Latin). While Moerbeke's translation was much better received than Hermannus's (as attested by metrics such as the number of surviving manuscripts), many of the ideas central to Arabic interpretations of Aristotle originally introduced to Europe by Hermannus, especially the idea of the expanded *Organon*, stuck around: we can see the influence of these readings even in the work of Aquinas, especially his *Expositio libri Posteriorum Analyticorum* or *Exposition of the Book of Posterior Analytics*. Later still, Aquinas's student Giles of Rome would write one of the more influential and widely-copied commentaries on Aristotle's text. A translation of both Aquinas and Giles's texts can be found in Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter's *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*.

My goal in this short module, then, is not to describe, summarize, or interpret these texts. Rather, I offer them as starting points for others, windows into an area of medieval intellectual culture often overlooked by historians of rhetoric, especially in our teaching. By studying the transmission, interpretation, and reception of ancient texts, the disciplinary history of rhetoric can be studied both more accurately and inclusively.

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