readings of major sixteenth and seventeenth century works. The book is also an excellent jumping-off point for future research, and Acheson’s specific insights relating to the four particular modes of brainwork the book deals with and the work’s broader project of finding productive cross-modal correspondences will certainly be productive for many working in the Renaissance.

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Recently I was looking at an early 15th-century manuscript copy of a 14th-century Greek “synopsis of rhetoric” in the Austrian National Library in Vienna. Christian Walz, in the preface to his 1832 edition of this text, says that he has not seen the Vienna manuscript, but cites an 18th century scholar who cites a 17th century scholar who has (Walz vol. 3, pp. 465–466). It occurred to me that I might have been the first person since the 17th century to actually open the Vienna manuscript and read it. True or false, there’s a certain romanticism in such experience, and a certain pleasure: the intrepid academic, decoder of texts, historian and rhetorician, paddles alone upriver past ruins and jungles, armed with machete, flashlight, and a pencil sharpener, into the world that time forgot. Heureka; I have found it; houtos ekeinos; this is that.

Thus I am happy with both books on review here. Both offer new perspective(s) on an insufficiently studied part of rhetoric’s ancient history—four fifths of it, in fact: the roughly eight centuries from the Hellenistic age to the end of the ancient world. Both books, moreover, offer a case well-grounded in the available evidence and delivered in a (mostly) clear, accessible style. In short they have many virtues, and are a pleasure to read.

Let’s paddle upriver a little way. I’ll start with Kremmydas and Tempest.

1. Hellenistic Oratory and the Myth of Decline

At stake throughout this volume is the pervasive myth that rhetoric, or more precisely oratory (rhetorical performance), “declined” in the Hellenistic age, the period conventionally dated from the death of Alexander (in 322 BCE) to the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium by the soon-to-be emperor Augustus (in 31 BCE). The myth presumes that
“rhetoric” is the art of practical civic discourse embodied in the speeches of the fourth-century Attic Orators, especially Demosthenes, and that it flourishes in democratic polities and languishes under autocratic rule. There are no preserved examples of Hellenistic oratory, which prompts an inference that little or nothing worth preserving was produced. Rhetoric (says the myth) had lost its civic role and was reduced to “merely” epideictic and literary functions for most of the next three centuries.

Elsewhere I have argued against the “decline” story, mostly on probabilistic and definitional grounds (Rhetoric & Poetics in Antiquity, Oxford 2000, ch. 3). One can make epideictic/panegyric discourse the paradigmatic (“central,” “primary”) form of rhetoric, as do Chaim Perelman and Kenneth Burke, in which case “rhetoric” seems to have enjoyed a great flourishing in the Hellenistic age. But even if we define rhetoric as the art of the Attic Orators, the fact is that it continued to play an important civic role. Law-courts continued to be busy, city councils continued to meet, kings and governors engaged in deliberative discourse with their advisors (if they were wise), inter-city diplomacy involved embassies and large amounts of written correspondence and chanceries to manage it, and so on. The needs of empire created jobs in the imperial bureaucracy, for which a rhetorical education was required, and there were municipally sponsored (“public”) as well as independent (“private”) schools to serve the need in cities large and small, as can be seen in the papyrus fragments of boys’ rhetorical exercises found at Oxyrhynchus and other provincial towns in Hellenistic Egypt. Schools of rhetoric multiplied and thrived. There were significant advances too in rhetorical theory, notably Theophrastus on style and Hermagoras on stasis, as well as advances in grammatical analysis at the Library of Alexandria. As the saying goes, moreover, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: the now-lost speeches of the Hellenistic orators who were famous in their day were published and circulated all around the Mediterranean (Thornton p. 22); and the loss of Theophrastus’ and Hermagoras’ writings is clearly no argument against their worth. It is gratifying, then, to see the old “decline” myth refuted at length and in detail.

Hellenistic Oratory divides its fourteen chapters into three thematic sections. The first and longest (6 chapters) is devoted to the rhetorical-theoretical conceptions implied in literary representations of oratory. John Thornton’s leadoff essay, for example, examines the speeches described in Polybius’ Histories, with an eye to the types of speeches that Polybius recognizes. These include deliberative speeches (demegoriai), exhortations (parakleseis) — “especially those addressed by generals to their troops before the battle” (p. 23) — and ambassadorial speeches (presbeutikoi logoi). These may well have been taught in schools. I note, for example, that Hibeh Papyrus 1.15, an early Hellenistic artifact (circa 260 BCE), contains what appears to be a student’s declamation exercise, and it is a paraklesis: word of Alexander’s death has come, and the general Leosthenes exhorts the Athenians to join him in rebellion against their Macedonian overlords. As Thornton argues, Hellenistic portrayals of oratory testify to “its persistent vitality, its practical efficacy, and the debate it aroused” as an object of critical attention (p. 22), and that
vitality is an index, too, of the continued (if modified) activity of courts, councils, and assemblies.

The rest of Part I develops this position in different ways. For example, Michael Edwards’ piece on Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ critical treatment of Isaeus (the reputed precursor and teacher of Demosthenes) and the notion of deinotes (forcefulness) demonstrates the existence of an ongoing critical discussion through the Hellenistic age. The next four chapters explore the knowledge and impact of rhetorical techne (art) in Hellenistic poetry and drama: Eleni Volonaki considers the speeches of Jason in Apollonius of Rhodes’ Argonautica, Gunther Martin the rhetoric of encomium and invective in Theocritus’ Idylls, Cristopher Carey the speeches in Menander’s comedies, and Edith Hall the on-stage performance of Herodas’ Mimiamb 2 — a satiric mime (popular sketch-comedy) in which a brothel-keeper sues a ship-captain for assault and the theft of one of his girls, in a parodic version of judicial speech. Taken together, the samples examined in these four chapters reveal not only a sophisticated use of the rhetorical techne taught in schools and handbooks, but also an expectation of a similar sophistication in the audiences for whom the poets, orators, and others wrote. As Hall points out (p. 113), one must be deeply familiar with the principles of judicial rhetoric and the famous orators (who are echoed in almost every line) to get the jokes in Herodas.

Part II consists of just three chapters (two of which are fairly long), devoted to the relationship between rhetoric as taught in school and rhetoric as actually practiced in civic assemblies. Christos Kremmydas examines rhetorical papyri from the period for evidence of the main occasions, genres, and stylistic practices for rhetorical performance, and concludes with a discussion of the continuing prestige of Attic models, as exemplified in the “speech of Leosthenes” mentioned above. Turning to epigraphical evidence, Lene Rubinstein examines the case of ambassadorial speech-performances and their reception as recorded in inscriptions, and shows that ambassadors faced a complex task of delivering the message (or, more broadly, the position) they were charged with while sustaining a state of friendship between the two cities. The oral performance was much more than a formality. Rounding out Part II, Angelos Chaniotis’ chapter also turns to epigraphical evidence, the narrations included in decree-inscriptions, for information about “commemorative” oratorical performance, and its relation to historiography and other literary genres. But perhaps most memorable is Chaniotis’ frame for that analysis: an ambassadorial speech delivered at Athens in 88 BCE, described by Posidonius as a “theatrical” spectacle to which everyone, “men, women, and children,” came running as soon as they got word of the performance (pp. 202–203; Posidonius fr. 247 Theiler). This illuminating anecdote connects well with Rubinstein’s account of ambassadorial performances.

Part III consists of five chapters devoted to the Roman reception of Hellenistic rhetoric and oratory: J. G. F. Powell on the famous “embassy of the three philosophers” to Rome in 155 BCE; Jula Wildberger on pre-imperial Stoic rhetoric; Gesine Manuald on the rhetoric of the speeches in Roman drama; Kathryn Tempest on Cicero’s Pro Marcello as an example
of Hellenistic oratory; and Stanley Porter on the influence of Hellenistic oratory (and/or rhetoric) on Paul of Tarsus. The aggregate effect is similar to that of Parts I and II, and extends and confirms the general argument. The picture here is one of considerable vitality, adaptability, relevance, and effectiveness, not decline or decadence; and it comes through perhaps most clearly in Powell’s chapter, which makes the key points that the Greek cities routinely sent philosophers (and sophists) on embassies, and that they were chosen for their “more than ordinary gifts and accomplishments” in argumentation and public speaking (pp. 222–225). The practice reflects an assumption that such abilities are essential to the business of an embassy, and that the ambassador’s role is fundamentally to deliberate and negotiate, chiefly through sym bouleutic (“advisory”) and demegoric (“public”) discourse.

Complaints? Just two. Or one. In the Works Cited list my name is misspelled as “G. Walker” (Geoffrey?). Not a big deal, but I wish the editors had gotten it right. More seriously, here and there one finds a tacit assumption that rhetoric is a genre, essentially oratory, and that (in consequence) the “rhetoric” in, say, poetry is found in the speeches of the characters but not in the poem as a whole. Of course the strategy of looking at literary representations of oratory is valid where no actual examples have survived; but it also invites a subtle drift toward the fundamental mistake of dividing discourse into “rhetorical” and “non-rhetorical” kinds. I will return to this point presently. Let us now turn our boat toward Cribiore.

2. Libanius the Sophist, and What He Really Thought

Raffaella Cribiore has been doing for rhetoric in late antiquity what Hellenistic Oratory does for rhetoric in the Hellenistic age — across a series of books (and articles) focused on Greco-Roman education, she has provided a revised/corrected perspective and a thicker, more detailed, better contextualized description of rhetoric as a teaching art. Libanius the Sophist more or less picks up from where her previous book, The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch (2007), left off. Having culled information from Libanius’ 1,544 letters, 64 orations, and other sources about the inner workings of his school and his career as the municipally subsidized “Sophist of Antioch,” Cribiore now turns to what those sources reveal about him as a political and social actor.

Basically Libanius the Sophist offers a deeper look into what Libanius thought of the triumphant Christian empire all around him. A couple of questions are at stake. First, there is “Edward Gibbon’s depiction of Libanius as a ‘recluse student,’ deaf to contemporary issues” and living in a fantasy world where the Trojan War is recent news and Demosthenes still speaks (p. 3). Libanius’ actual speeches on civic issues in Antioch and his letters to the emperor Julian show him clearly to be politically engaged; nevertheless the Gibbonesque judgment still circulates in modern views of Libanius and of late-antique rhetoric in general (i.e., as in decline). The second question has to do with Libanius’ sincerity: in his letters he sometimes is friendly
to people whom he smears with invective and insult in his orations. Can Libanius be believed? What did he really think, especially of students and colleagues who were Christians? I am not sure how exigent these issues are, at least for rhetoricians, though I acknowledge that for historians of late antiquity Libanius’ morality and truthfulness may be an issue, if Gibbon still has their ear. The fact that Libanius was the teacher of John Chrysostom (and other Christians), and seems to have been on friendly terms with Gregory Nazianzos and Gregory of Nyssa while remaining openly pagan, settles it for me.

Here I should note that Libanius the Sophist began as a lecture series delivered at Cornell University in 2010. That fact explains some things. First of all, the (original) audience is necessarily more general than one composed of specialists in Cribiore’s field, and the underlying lecture-address to an intelligent general audience still is present in the book. This has certain effects. For example, the book is structured in a way that appeals to the romance of scholarly investigation: the solitary scholar enters the archive, peels away centuries of accumulated error, decodes the text, and solves the riddle, which in this case is the question(s) of Libanius’ engagement with the issues of his day and his real opinions and sincerity. Cribiore in effect invites the audience to come along with her on this journey of discovery.

The problem is how to assess what any text means, especially when there are apparent contradictions, as in Libanius’ invectives against people his letters address as friends. I do not think that anyone who studies rhetoric, and ancient rhetoric especially, will need much explanation on this point. But Cribiore’s general audience does. Thus much of the first two chapters (of four) is taken up with discussions of genre and reception theory. Different genres entail different norms and expectations; the meanings of words depend on context and addressee. Invective in certain kinds of speeches is conventional and expected, and does not mean what the same invectives would mean in, say, a letter. And so on. Cribiore very deliberately exposes her methods and her theoretical assumptions, and in ways appropriate to her lecture-audience, producing an introduction to the pleasures of scholarship and the romance of studying late antiquity. But I think that most readers of Rhetorica will find the discussion pretty basic.

More problematic is Cribiore’s distinction between “rhetoric” and “reality,” which is made explicit in the title of chapter 1: “Rhetoric and the Distortion of Reality.” Rhetoric necessarily shapes and thus distorts our perception of reality, so that we need to look through or past it to get to the facts. This position is related, too, to thinking of rhetoric as a genre or distinguishing “rhetorical” genres from “nonrhetorical.” For example, Cribiore discusses what she calls the “less rhetorical style” of Libanius’ narration in his Autobiography (pp. 42–43). From rhetoric’s perspective, the style could be described as “historical” or “plain,” but such a style could never be described as non- or less-rhetorical. Nor can (or should) we speak of getting to the undistorted truth once we have identified the “rhetorical” parts and appropriately discounted them.
In chapters 3 and 4 Cribiore works through the question(s) of Libanius’ opinions of paganism and Christianity in his letters and speeches, showing convincingly that Libanius held a moderate cultural-conservative position that enabled him to genuinely be friends with Christians as well as pagans — which, after all, one would expect from a rhetorician who grasps the value of argumentum in utramque partem not only as a method of debate but also as a way of life, an ethic for a civilized, humane society.

Despite these criticisms I do in fact like this book. I particularly like its refutation of the Gibbonesque judgment on Libanius, and its portrait of rhetoric in late antiquity as very much still alive and doing practical civic as well as cultural work (see in particular p. 36). In a sense this book is a sort of appendix to The School of Libanius, which I think remains the most important of Cribiore’s books for rhetoricians and historians of rhetoric.

Different readers of this journal will want to read both Libanius the Sophist and Hellenistic Oratory for different reasons, and your responses likely will differ from mine, depending on your scholarly interests and orientation. Bottom line, these books give us a closer, better description of rhetoric in the Hellenistic age and late antiquity, and belong on the rhetorician’s bookshelf.

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Midway through the introduction to Rhetoric and Rhythm in Byzantium, Vessela Valiavitcharska sets forth the book’s aim, which is to “make a step toward contributing to” an understanding of “the argumentative and emotional effects of discourse, and of the mental habits involved in its production” (p. 12). That professed goal, enfolded in prepositions and couched in the incremental language of a step—and a single step at that—is modest. And while the framing of the book, and for that matter, Valiavitcharska herself, exude modesty, the rigor, disciplinary reach, and sheer brilliance of her study calls for less modest account. That is where I come in.

In addition to its intrinsic value of reclaiming the Old Church Slavic homily tradition for rhetorical study, Rhetoric and Rhythm in Byzantium joins at least three rising trends in rhetorical studies. The first two are burgeoning interests in 1) Byzantine rhetoric and 2) the recovery of pre-modern classroom practices. Thomas Conley and Jeffrey Walker have both pointed out the importance of Byzantine rhetoric and have done much to dismantle assumptions that this period presents merely a redaction of classical texts and teaching. Scholars in the U.S. (David Fleming, Raffaella Cribiore, Marjorie Curry Woods, Martin Camargo) and Europe (Manfred Kraus, Ruth Webb,