

Differences between Ancient and Modern Rhetorics

"Ancient," "Modern," and "Contemporary"

- "Ancient" refers to the theory and practice of rhetoric in the ancient world, in particular ancient Greece and Rome from the 5th century BCE to the 5th century CE.
- "Modern" refers not to a time period but rather a set of ideologies about reality, truth, knowledge, subjectivity, etc.
 - Modernity privileges objectivity over subjectivity, rationality over other forms of thought, empiricism over other forms of knowledge, individuality over sociality
 - Though not a time period, modernity is said to have occurred from the mid-17th century to around the beginning of the 20th century.
 - Modernity should not be confused with "modernism," which is a literary and cultural movement in the United States and Europe from the 1890s to the 1940s.
- "Contemporary" refers to the present time period.

The Role of Facts

- In ancient rhetoric, facts (especially empirical proofs) are not as highly valued as they are in modern times.
 - Facts and empirical proofs are neither reliable nor conclusive.
 - Facts and empirical proofs are given to us by other human beings, who are unreliable, selective, and biased.
 - Facts are always a matter of interpretation, even if it is simply the choice of which facts to use.
- Interpretation occurs within communities, not individually; in other words, our interpretations are influenced by the communities to which we belong and how those communities interpret things.

The Role of Opinion

- In ancient rhetoric, opinions (and emotion in general) are more highly valued than they are in modern times.
- Opinions are what the ancients call *doxa*; they exist within social communities, not individuals.
 - Hence, opinions are not personal.
- As such, opinions are neither unchangeable nor easily dismissed by others.

The Role of Ideology and the Commonplaces

- Ideologies are coherent sets of assumptions, beliefs, and values that human beings use to understand themselves, others, and the world around them.
 - Ideologies exist in language.
 - Human beings hold multiple and often contradictory ideologies.
 - Ideologies are unavoidable, as human beings are partial creatures.
- Ideologies are not right or wrong, or true or false; they simply exist and are often simply accepted.
- The various statements and other bits of knowledge from which ideologies are constructed are what the ancients called commonplaces.

- Commonplaces were meant to be stored, catalogued, and retrieved so that one could eventually construct propositions and proofs with them.
- Contested commonplaces become issues in rhetoric (what we might call controversies).

The Role of Situation

- The ancients believed that human beings should be active in their communities; they called this the *vita activa*. Those who were not active were called *idiotes* (the root for our word *idiot*).
- Rhetoric always occurs within a situation and within a community.
- A rhetorical situation has several elements: issue, rhetor, audience, historical context, various social and cultural contexts, etc.
 - When these elements change, so does the rhetorical situation. Hence, what worked before may not work again because the situation will be different.
- Rhetoric, then, highlights the situatedness of human beings; in other words, we are not neutral or objective.

The Role of Language

- Ancient rhetoricians did not view language as a reliable reflection of thought.
- Instead, they appreciated the power of language and its ambiguity; they understood language communicates itself, not things themselves.
- They did not value clarity, coherence, and correctness the way we do; rather, they valued copiousness.

Note: This handout is based on chapter one of Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999).