

## *Introduction*

This book explores the relationship between rhetorical theory and the production and reception of Imperial Roman poetry. While scholarship has typically constructed the history of Roman poetry as one of progressive hybridization by rhetoric, I examine instead, and ultimately question, the very notion of rhetorical influence on which this paradigm is built.<sup>1</sup> My work differs in this way from previous studies of the issue, which have generally taken the form of lists enumerating technical elements of style and arrangement that any given poet is said to have “borrowed” from rhetorical critics.<sup>2</sup> Instead, this study fundamentally shifts the approach to the ancient evidence: rather than taking rhetoric as a self-contained discourse whose norms infiltrate literary culture, I argue that it is more fruitful to focus on the cultural *relevance* of this intellectual divide and its articulation in Roman culture. Part I looks at the role of poetry and the poetic in rhetorical theory.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 1 traces key thematic moments in the rhetorical tradition, in the context of which the problematic relationship of difference and similarity between rhetorical and poetic discourse is evoked and discussed. I argue that starting from the first attested rhetorical text, Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*, definitions of the nature and scope of rhetoric have always hinged on variously argued points of similarity to and difference from poetry. Tracing the history of this debate from Gorgias’ definition of poetry as speech with meter (*Hel.* 9) to Isocrates and Aristotle’s

<sup>1</sup> On the rhetoric of rhetorical influence in Classics, see Farrell (1997), calling for a shift away from the traditional system of framing the interaction of rhetoric and poetry as the study of “rhetoric in epic,” i.e. of “elements of an alien discursive system that have somehow made their way into the epic genre” and Fox (2007) 377–80.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Decker (1913); Billmeyer (1932); Bonner (1966); Highet (1972); Dominik (1994); Helzlsouer (1996). This approach has also been influential outside Classics: e.g. Joseph (1947) or Vickers (1968).

<sup>3</sup> My use of the term “poetry” is intentionally loose. Because of its pivotal role in the hierarchy of genres and in rhetorical education, epic has naturally the lion’s share in the case studies of this book. Yet, in addition to the fact that rhetorical sources use poetry as an encompassing term, in Part I, Virgil and Ovid are engaged with as poets who transcend the boundaries of one genre.

insistence on mimesis, not meter, as the defining characteristic of poetry (*Poet.* 1451b11), to Cicero and Quintilian's recognition of the kinship of orator and poet, I approach the competing claims of affinity and difference between poetic and rhetorical discourse as different aspects of rhetoric's complex strategy of self-definition.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the role of the poetic in two key Roman rhetorical texts from the early Empire: the *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae* of Seneca the Elder and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*. These writers ostensibly disavow the improper use of ornate and poetic devices, in the case of Seneca the Elder constructing deviant rhetorical discourse of declamation as a dangerous approximation to poetry. At the same time, Quintilian's textual presentation of the orator and of rhetorical practice is thoroughly informed by poetic, especially epic, models. Quintilian's adoption of epic models and intricate deployment of poetic metaphors in constructing both his would-be orator and his own authorial persona betray a complex desire to compete with and strive for the social and cultural authority of poets at a time of decreased public standing for orators and their teachers. A close reading of these sources reveals that rhetorical discourse is constructed by these writers as a hybrid ambiguously related to poetry, which it both mines as a source of examples and disavows as foreign.

While Part I aims to complicate our view of what counts as "rhetorical" in antiquity and to explicate the role of poetry in definitions of the art of rhetoric, Part II moves on to poetic texts. Moving away from the traditional focus on stylistic elements deemed "rhetorical" in poetic texts, I look instead for the poets' own perspective on the role of the rhetorical medium.<sup>4</sup> My focus here is figures of orators in Roman epic. I argue that, through these embedded scenes of rhetorical performance, Roman poets commented on and even challenged cultural narratives found in rhetorical texts. This form of self-conscious generic commentary is already evident in Virgil whose placement of the figure of the orator in the very first simile of the *Aeneid* puts rhetoric's difference from and similarity to poetry center stage. From Virgil's orator in the storm to Cicero's and Caesar's public speaking in Lucan, I read the orators of Roman epic as ironic figures who can be seen to disappoint and contradict models of behavior for the *bonus orator* found in rhetorical texts:<sup>5</sup> instead of arousing an emotional storm, the orator quells one, or, worse, is depicted as falling victim to the

<sup>4</sup> See Rebhorn's approach to Renaissance literature as a form of dramatization of contemporary rhetorical ideas in Rebhorn (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, see Tarrant (1995).

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elements unleashed by the poet's art. My analysis, however, further insists that definitions of what counts as poetic or rhetorical were deeply provisional and contested. Thus, while in clinging to words as opposed to deeds, demagogues such as Thersites, Drances and Cicero breach the epic code, qua verbal performers they are repeatedly associated with the authorial voice.<sup>6</sup> As hybrid figures, these "poetic rhetors" show that, not unlike rhetorical writers, poets were interested in distancing their art from the rhetorical medium while simultaneously staking a claim to it. In my reading, far from being the victims of influence, Roman poets were aware of and reacted to the cultural narratives found in rhetorical sources.

Part III concludes the book by focusing on one of the best attested and yet utterly vilified and understudied ancient traditions of rhetorical analysis of poetry: starting from the second century CE, whether Virgil was to be considered an orator or a poet was one of the key issues in the reception of his work, as is attested by discussions in Florus and Macrobius but also in Servius and Tiberius Cl. Donatus. Rather than belittling this approach as reductive, I look at the work of these ancient critics as evidence of a mode of engagement with the Virgilian epic that is both micro-rhetorical, mining the Virgilian text for examples of rhetorical principles, and macro-rhetorical, treating both text and the critical interpretation thereof as epideictic performances. This analysis of *Vergilius orator* undermines the predictable charge of anachronistic "rhetoricizing" that is typically leveled at these sources, not only by pointing to the continuity between these and prior rhetorical reading practices but also by showing how these defensive rhetorical readings help to shape a new relevance for the Virgilian classic.

Ultimately, this book argues that the standard narrative of rhetorical influence should be replaced with one of self-conscious struggle for cultural supremacy fought between poets and rhetorical theorists. In my reading, rhetorical theory has always used poetry as a (largely negative) foil against which to define its own authoritative use of language, at the same time as it has tapped into the cultural and metaphorical resources of poetry to characterize its emotional and stylistic power. In turn, far from being passive recipients of inherited rhetorical taxonomies, the poetic texts that I explore in the book react to the cultural narratives found in rhetorical works and respond with new narratives that question and undercut rhetorical theorists' take on the genealogy of their art. The resulting picture is one of dynamic confrontation between rhetoric and poetry, of competing

<sup>6</sup> See Hardie (2012) 126–49.

claims and counterclaims about authoritative speech, cultural status and priority.

My approach is necessarily selective in coverage, as no one single study could reasonably claim to examine every aspect or instance of “communication” between Roman poets and the rhetorical tradition. Rather, I have preferred to focus on select case studies in the hope of suggesting how we could replace the narrative of rhetorical influence with one that would do more justice not just to the complex traffic between rhetoric and poetry but also to the critical awareness of ancient readers. Furthermore, this study is selective in its goals as well as in its focus. My central concern is the discourse of rhetorical influence as it pertains to Roman *poetry*. My discussion of the ancient critics – Seneca the Elder, Quintilian, Macrobius and Servius – focuses on the role of poetry in the construction of rhetorical theory and on poetry as rhetorically constructed discourse. My discussion of poetic texts is centered on the poets’ response to this discourse. By necessity, my analysis does focus on how rhetorical texts construct their own (nonpoetic) speech versus poetry. Mine, however, is not a study of poetry or poeticisms in prose texts; nor does it address the question of rhetoric’s “influence” on prose, although I hope that my conclusions will be of use to those working on these related questions.<sup>7</sup> In my reading, rhetoric and prose are not synonymous. Certainly, rhetorical theory is written in prose and it is without question that rhetorical texts and rhetorical education shaped writers of the various genres of Roman prose. Yet the focus of my work in so far as it pertains to Roman prose is firmly on rhetorical sources, their construction of poetry and the poets’ response to rhetorical readings.

In this way, this is fundamentally a study of ancient reading and reception practices, not of style.<sup>8</sup> Thus I define “rhetoric” *narrowly* as “rhetorical theory” – the set of stylistic and compositional prescriptions for persuasive discourse found in Greco-Roman rhetorical texts – and “rhetorical influence” as the (allegedly one-way) traffic between rhetorical texts and Roman poetry. For the purpose of this study, the term “rhetoric” refers to the historically specific cultural production of the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition. This definition is undoubtedly more limited than some. For example, as we have just seen, it excludes rhetoric understood as the elements of style and register that belong to prose (e.g. Cicero) and

<sup>7</sup> Leaving aside issues of practicality and feasibility, the presence of rhetorical elements in prose texts, particularly historiography, has been well studied by Wiseman (1979) and Woodman (1988).

<sup>8</sup> For example, this work does not claim to fill the gap in our knowledge of the difference between the style of formal speeches and that of narrative in Roman epic: Horsfall (1995) 232.

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less frequently to poetry. In addition, this study neither departs from nor accepts at face value ancient definitions of rhetoric as persuasive discourse – rather, it interrogates them. Mine, that is, is not a “rhetorical reading” of Roman poetry as I make no attempt to describe and evaluate poetic texts according to the categories of Roman rhetorical theory, as a Quintilian or Servius would have done in an effort to underline and catalogue elements in poetry geared toward persuasion (i.e. rhetoric).

To the contrary, my interests revolve around ancient attempts to define rhetoric and poetry and contestations to these definitions. To pursue the issue further: if we allow ourselves to be guided by Aristotle’s famous definition of rhetoric as “the art of discovering in any given situation the available means of persuasion” (*Rhet.* I.I.1355b10–11), we may very well be justified in labeling any poetry or elements thereof that are geared toward persuasion as “rhetorical.”<sup>9</sup> In so doing, we would be following in the steps of the ancient rhetorical theorists who clearly considered such elements of interest to their art. The drawback of this approach is that we pay attention only to the perspective of rhetorical theorists and overlook the responses and rebuttals coming from the poetic tradition. To give one example, taking the persuasion/goal-oriented genre of, for example, the *paraklausithyron* as “rhetorical” assumes the priority of definitions offered by rhetoricians. Yet, as we will see, from Horace’s definition of the goal of poetry as a mixture of pleasure and utility in the *Ars Poetica* to Renaissance definitions of poetry as a superior form of rhetoric, poetry has repeatedly been defended as the primitive and original form of persuasion.<sup>10</sup> Thus, at different times throughout history, poetry has been defined as instructive or civilizing discourse and speech designed to inspire action and poets thought of as “from the beginning the best persuaders and their eloquence the first Rethoricke of the world” (George Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie*, 1589). Similarly, as we will see, to assume that declamatory motifs in poetry are “rhetorical features” ignores not only that those motifs are more often than not grounded in and illustrated from poetry but also that declamation was labeled as “poetic” to begin with (see Chapter 1, “Poetry as Epideictic: *Voluptas* and *Ostentatio*”).

My project is not unique (nor does it claim to be) in observing the traffic between poetry and rhetorical texts. The question that preoccupies my

<sup>9</sup> See the illuminating analysis of Propertian elegy as “rhetorical” persuasion in Reinhardt (2006) and esp. 200, where he states as his goal to “suggest ways of looking at Propertius through the eyes of a student of rhetoric.” On the productive gap between rhetoric as persuasion and rhetoric as self-conscious markers of oratorical forms, see the remarks in Carey (2013).

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 1.

work is how such “communication” was framed, represented and envisaged by ancient audiences. By delving deep into the Roman usage of these categories, I suggest that the standard approach of isolating certain elements in poetry as “rhetorical” is ultimately anachronistic: whereas for the modern reader certain elements are firmly “rhetorical” by virtue of their role in the history of Western rhetoric, Roman readers contested these definitions and the extent to which, for example, ornaments of style could be considered a poetic or rhetorical phenomenon, and persuasion the prerogative of rhetoric or poetry. In my reading, rhetorical theory is interesting not as a system of classification that poets follow or depart from but rather as a powerful cultural lens through which poetry is viewed, read and sometimes disowned as a rhetorically constructed genre. In revisiting the standard narrative of rhetorical influence, my aim is to bring the conflicted and layered perspectives of ancient readers on these questions to our understanding of Roman literary culture.