Let me start by introducing you to a scene from *The Simpsons*.

MARGE [sings]: How many roads must a man walk down before you can call him a man?
HOMER: Seven.
LISA: No, dad, it's a rhetorical question.
HOMER: Okay, eight.
LISA: Dad, do you even know what "rhetorical" means?
HOMER: Do I know what "rhetorical" means?

On this little scene, the whole premise of the book you hold in your hand hinges. Do you know what rhetorical means? Because you should. And if Homer Simpson, one of the greatest everyman figures of our time, can make a joke about rhetoric, you can be assured it is not a subject that needs to be intimidating.

So what is rhetoric? Rhetoric is, as simply defined as possible, the art of persuasion: the attempt by one human being to influence another in words. It is no more complicated than that. You
are probably accustomed to thinking of rhetoric in terms of formal oratory: the sort of public speeches you see politicians make on television, CEOs make at annual meetings, and priests make on Sunday mornings in church. True, that is, when rhetoric is at its most visible—that’s when rhetoric puts on a dinner jacket and polishes its dancing shoes. But that is only one part of a huge area that the term covers.

Rhetoric is a field of knowledge: that is, something susceptible to analysis and understanding in the same way poetry is. Just as people studying poetry talk about anapests and caesuras and catalectic feet, people studying rhetoric have learned to recognize and name some of the ways in which rhetorical language behaves.

But rhetoric is also, and primarily, a practical skill—what one of its earliest and most important theorists, Aristotle, described as a technē, which is the root of the words “technical” and “technique.” Rhetoric is directed at a practical goal; it’s a means to an end.

Rhetoric is hustling, and our forefathers knew it. For fifteen centuries or so, the study of rhetoric was at the center of Western education. To be able to recognize rhetorical techniques, and to have them at your command, was a central accomplishment of any educated man (they were men, then, mostly—sorry).

It was right that it should be so. The business of state had at its heart, as it still has, two institutions: the courts and the machinery of government—and the practice of rhetoric was central to both. Yet it was and is present wherever there is language.

Inasmuch as the twentieth century—aka the Century That Rhetoric Forgot—paid much attention to rhetoric, the subject having been colonized largely by speech theorists, structural linguists, and literary critics, it was to point out just that: to note the intrinsic “rhetoricality” of all language.

Literary theorists and philosophers, you see, were initially intoxicated by the idea that language was ambiguous. Then they grew suspicious that it might be ambiguous for a reason: that metaphorical and figurative language could be serving the interests of Power. Then they wondered if, perhaps, the very nature of language itself was to be metaphorical and figurative and—important word here—“unstable.”

Finally they concluded—to quote John Bender and David E. Wellbergy, who offer a good example of the sort of high-sounding nonsense they talk—that

rhetoricality . . . manifests the groundless, infinitely ramifying character of discourse in the modern world. For this reason, it allows for no explanatory metadiscourse that is not already itself rhetorical. Rhetoric is no longer the title of a doctrine and a practice, nor a form of cultural memory; it becomes instead something like the condition of our existence.¹

In other words, language was Not To Be Trusted. But then, Aristotle could have told them that.

What I hope to do in this book is to give you the basics of rhetoric: to trace how people have taught, practiced, and thought about it from its ancient origins to its twenty-first-century apotheosis. I shall tell the stories of some of the great figures in its history—the heroes and villains of the persuasive arts. Men like Cicero, Erasmus, Adolf Hitler, and John F. Kennedy. I’ll explain why George W. Bush wasn’t so much of a doofus as all that, and why Winston Churchill wasn’t always the great orator that posterity remembers.

I shall equip you with a working knowledge of the technical vocabulary. An alphabetical glossary at the back of the book
will give definitions and examples of the various terms, though I’ll try to make clear, too, what each one means as it comes up in the text. More important, I hope to give some understanding of the principles that underlie those terms. I’ll attempt to give a sense of how arguments prosper and founder: for the technical study of rhetoric is, at root, no more than a systematic way of doing that. Along the way I’ll look at some of the great and not so great speeches of this and other ages, and take you through some of the more interesting byways of the Western mind.

By the end, in a word, you should get it. And even if you don’t become a rhetoric nerd, you will be able to watch the keynote speeches at political conventions on TV and you won’t just be able to say, “What a preposterous lying oily-faced scoundrel that politician is!” (Okay, you probably won’t use that phrase if you live in America, but you get the idea.) You will add, with a sophisticated eyebrow hoist: “Do you think he could go ten seconds without using another anaphora? Anyone would think his copy of Lanham stopped at A.”

I won’t talk in detail, for the moment, about the tropes and figures that make up the rhetorician’s box of tricks. Let’s instead start with a broad view. Underlying the whole project of this book is, I hope, the awareness that practically any speech act can be understood, one way or another, as rhetorical—either in and of itself, or in the context of its utterance.

Let me give an example of the latter. If I say, “Tony has genital warts and halitosis.” That is a statement of flat fact—or, at least, purports to be. But it can become more or less rhetorical depending on the context in which I utter it.

Context One: I am a doctor’s receptionist, reading my employer the results of a patient’s tests. Here, the phrase is as close to neutral as you will find. There may be a bit of an edge in “halitosis,” but I’m essentially conveying information without the urge to persuade. If it has the effect of persuading the doctor to take the afternoon off, that’s incidental. If, mind you, I were a highly unprofessional receptionist—and while delivering the diagnosis, I clutched my throat and stuck out my tongue—we’d perhaps be straying into the region of epideictic rhetoric: the rhetoric of praise and insult.

Context Two: I am a prosecuting attorney in family court, attempting to unseat the defendant’s claim that not only is he a virgin, but he was at a dental hygienists’ appointment at the time when he is alleged to have fathered a child with Miss X. In this context, I’m trying to persuade my audience of something about the past. This falls into the realm of judicial or forensic rhetoric: the sort of rhetoric most commonly found in the courtroom.

Context Three: I am Miss Y’s friend. We are in a nightclub. After a baker’s dozen Bacardi Breezers she is starting to make sheep’s eyes at Tony, the open-shirted smoothie throwing disco shapes at the other end of the bar. Fearing disaster, I offer a word to the wise. My aim is not to convey information, but to make going home with Tony seem like a less attractive prospect. (And, perhaps, going home with me like a more attractive one.) Again, I seek to persuade: and my concern is not with the past or with the present, but with the future. This is what’s called deliberative rhetoric—and if it’s useful in nightclubs, it is even more useful in politics.

So much for Tony. So much, too, for the division of rhetoric into epideictic, forensic, and deliberative—I’ll return to that presently. For the moment, the point I mean to make is that rhetoric means a whole lot more than formal, stand-at-the-podium
oratory—it twines its tentacles into every corner of daily life and sprinkles its fairy dust into the most mundane of conversations. (Tentacles? Fairy dust? It is, as I suggested, a many-splendored thing.)

Rhetoric is language at play—language plus. It is what persuades and cajoles, inspires and bamboozles, thrills and misdirects. It causes criminals to be convicted, and then frees those criminals on appeal. It causes governments to rise and fall, best men to be ever after shunned by their friends' brides, and perfectly sensible adults to march with steady purpose toward machine guns.

And it is made of stuff like, well, the paragraph above. It is made of linked pairs—"inspires and bamboozles," "persuades and cajoles." It is made of groups of three. It is made of repeated phrases. It is made, as often as not, of half-truths and fine-sounding meaninglessness, of false oppositions and abstract nouns and shaky inferences.

But it is also made of ringing truths and vital declarations. It is a way in which our shared assumptions and understandings are applied to new situations, and the language of history is channeled, revitalized, and given fresh power in each successive age.

The technical language of rhetoric can seem forbidding. *Auxesis, homoteleuton, paralepsis, mesozeugma* . . . it looks to the casual reader like a glance across the labels of those miscellaneous firewaters you collected over half a decade's vacations on the Greek islands. But these technical terms, like those drinks, are actually tremendous fun once you get started with them. You won't soon forget a big night on the *epicheireme*. But they aren't anything in themselves. They are simply a way of describing a set of tricks and turns that already exist.

/Your parents used rhetoric on you from the first moments of your life, and as soon as you were able to form words, you started using it right back at them. Your schoolmates, your workmates, and your chat partners in the dark back rooms of the Internet are using rhetoric. Your priests and your politicians, your television announcers and your commercial breaks are using rhetoric. You have been using rhetoric yourself, all your life.

After all, you know what a rhetorical question is, don't you? We're all familiar with the way in which people ask questions to which they don't expect an answer: "Am I talking to myself here?"; "Could this new jacket look any more cool?"; "Why did I think having two children would be a good idea?"

That is, when you think about it, rather an abstruse way to use language. Why not just say: "Nobody's listening to me," "My new jacket looks very cool," or "My life has been ruined by these screaming brats?"

So embedded in everyday language is this strange flourish—this question aimed at nobody—that we scarcely notice it. In the very sentence I used to query the construction—that is, the one before last—I quite accidentally used it again.

And there it is: when we think we're speaking plainly, we're in fact filling our every sentence with rhetorical trickery. All of us are rhetoricians by instinct and training.

So it is small wonder that those terms—used unconsciously, understood instinctively—stun our language to this day. When you hear someone has delivered a "paean of praise," a "panegyric," or a "eulogy" to something, you're hearing terms from rhetoric.

*Don't answer that.*
Even Derek Zoolander—in the glorious film that bears his name, a male model of surpassing stupidity—knows his stuff. Almost. "A eugoogalizer: one who speaks at funerals," he tells a reporter he suspects of looking down on him. "Or did you think I'd be too stupid to know what a eugoogaloy was?"

When you hear words like "parenthesis," "apology," "colon," "comma," or "period"; when someone talks about a "commonplace" or "using a figure of speech," you’re hearing terms from rhetoric. When you listen to the most bumbling tribute at a retirement party or the most inspiring halftime talk from a football coach, you are hearing rhetoric—and the basic ways in which it works have not changed a jot since Cicero saw off that treacherous fink Catiline. What has changed is that, where for hundreds of years rhetoric was at the center of Western education, it has now all but vanished as an area of study—divvied up like postwar Berlin between linguistics, psychology, and literary criticism. Even in universities, it is seen as a quaint and rather prissy minority interest.

So though rhetoric is all around us, we don’t see it. Indeed, it’s precisely because it’s all around us that we don’t see it. Explaining rhetoric to a human being is, or should be, like explaining water to a fish.

In the previous few paragraphs, I’ve used *auxesis*, *antithesis*, *chiasmus*, *digressio*, *apostrophe*, *erotesis*, *epistrophe*, *hendiadys*, and *argumentum ad populum*. There’s even a bit of *polysyndeton* coming up. (Not to mention *occultatio*; *prolepsis*, I’ll be getting to later.) And yet—at least I hope I’m safe in saying so—it reads more or less like . . . well, English.

It isn’t an academic discipline, or the preserve of professional orators. It’s right here, right now, in your argument with the insurance company, your plea to the waitress for a table near the window, or your entreaties to your jam-faced kiddies to eat their damn veggies.

Like the fish in its water, we can and do swim in rhetoric unthinkingly. But there is so much you miss out on if you don’t stop to think about it. Understanding rhetoric makes you better able to appreciate its wonders and pleasures, it equips you better to use it yourself, and it equips you to see through the next smooth-talking rascal who wants to sell you double-glazing.

But it’s even more than that. To think about rhetoric is to think about something central to the foundation of our politics, to the DNA of our culture, and to the basic workings of the human mind.

We don’t use language to pass on information flatly and to no purpose. We exchange information because it is either useful or delightful—because it does something for us: it gets us out of trouble or into bed.

We use language to cajole and seduce, to impress and inspire, to endear and justify. Language happens because human beings are desire machines, and what knits desire and language is rhetoric. To think about rhetoric—let’s go back to my poor, not-wishing-to-be-bothered-with—all-this fish for a minute—is to get that bit closer to being able to see the fishbowl.

And think, for a second, about what rhetoric—in its basic sense of one person trying to persuade another person of a truth or of an ideal—has achieved. What has rhetoric ever done for us? Well, it has brought about all of Western civilization, for a start.

What is democracy, but the idea that the art of persuasion should be formally enshrined at the center of the political process? What is law, but a way of giving words formal strength in
the world, and what is the law court but a place where the art of persuasion gives shape to civil society? And what, in any society where one person or group exercises power over another—which is to say any society at all—is the instrument of that power but words?

Robert Mugabe and the late Kim Jong-il were not physically stronger than the people they governed—Mugabe's a doddery old thing, and even I wouldn't have had much trouble sticking the stack-heeled North Korean despot over my knee and giving him a good spanking—but they controlled the language. They positioned themselves—another central rhetorical idea—in a system of shared assumptions and shared fears.

When Shakespeare has his King Harry steal among the men before Agincourt, and thunder his exhortations at the gates of Harfleur, we are to understand that what made the difference here was the effect of his words. And that's not poetic license. Battles have been joined and averted, imperial powers seen off, and half the globe colonized by rhetoric. Gandhi never picked up a sword. Karl Marx never used a gun.

"WWJD?" asks the acronymic evangelical bumper sticker: "What Would Jesus Do?" We know what he did. He talked to people. That, and nothing else. He was crucified not because he bore arms against the Roman Imperium, but because they didn't like the way he was talking. The same goes for every religion of the book.

The thing is, the near-invisibility of rhetoric as an object of study in the modern age has had an unfortunate and unanticipated effect on the way we view it. It is, where we notice it working on us, profoundly mistrusted.

In realist painting, fiction, and filmmaking, it's commonly said that you strive for "the art that conceals art." You don't want the viewer to be distracted by a pencil line you've failed to erase, or a too-intrusive author, or the display of a digital watch peeping through the fur at King Kong's wrist.

Your poem may be a Petrarchan sonnet put together like a steel trap—but you'll be admired more for it if it reads nearly like prose. This is, for the most part, the temper of the times.

So it is with oratory. We swallow the high style on certain occasions: at times of national grief or historic change, but for the most part we prefer plain speaking. This is a relatively recent development: for centuries people regarded oratory, be it in a sermon or in the law courts, as a form of entertainment in itself.

It's a commonplace in the theater that were most of us to see one of the greats of the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century stage deliver his Hamlet we would simply fall over laughing. It would seem implausibly stagy and histrionic. Even Laurence Olivier, to the eyes of today, looks like a colossal ham. Look at the film of his Othello. The camera zooms in, and—with his face covered in black shoe polish—Olivier booms and grimaces and rolls his eyes like a cartoon minstrel.

This description is not meant to disparage the actor. A modern audience's reaction is in part a shift from the age when acting meant being able to project both your voice and your gestures to the dimmest-eyed and deafest-eared spectator in the furthest corner of the auditorium—of an age before the intimacies of television and the wonders of amplified sound. But it is also a shift in style.

So it is, also, with rhetoric. Those rolling Churchillian periods seem to belong to another historical era. Routine political exchanges in the Houses of Parliament—and the setup in the UK, with questions going back and forth across the despatch box, already promotes a more conversational style—are
more commonly games of ping-pong than exchanges of mortar fire.

But the plain style to which we’re accustomed is no less a rhetorical strategy than the high style that will strike us as hammy or false. What seems to you "rhetorical" today is, for the most part, rhetoric that isn’t working. Rhetoric has come to be understood as a byword for all that is insubstantial, untrustworthy, windy, and needlessly ornate. If you type the phrase “mere rhetoric” into Google you get 492,000 hits. “Just rhetoric” gets you 560,000 hits. And the strongest negative, “empty rhetoric,” earns more than 1.3 million hits—of which, as he entered the last year of his first term, well over a third were related to the search term “Obama.”*

I started writing this book just after Obama’s inauguration in 2009. As a one-time English literature student whose geeker hours had been spent not dropping acid in the college bar but poring through A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, I took an interest in Obama’s style of speaking. Here was oratory that proudly de-

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*This paragraph is a fine example of the sort of argument you find in rhetoric. As we shall see, Aristotle said that the way rhetoric works, and the way logic works, are fundamentally different. Logical arguments proceed by syllogisms: ironclad chains of deduction that lead you infallibly from a premise to an inference without so much as a peek break. The equivalent in the field of rhetoric is something called an "enjuyeme." Much more on this later, but it’s what you might understand as “fuzzy logic”: the affairs of the human world are not subject to the same black-and-white proofs as mathematical logic. In rhetoric, you may rest a “proof” on what seems likely or reasonable. And here’s where there is room for maneuver. Google hits are a reasonable finger-to-the-wind measure of things. But they can be deceptive, too. I discovered this to my cost when in a Guardian article about the late Bill Hicks—complaining of the vocabulary of “naked religious devotion” in which devotees describe him—I observed that “if you Google ‘Bill Hicks’ and ‘prophet’ you get 47,000 odd hits.” The online comment thread below—stuffed, I consoled myself, with tragic Hicks cultists—pointed out that if you Google “chicken” and “creosote” you get 503,000 hits, that if you Google “albumen” and “sumptuous” you get 9,750 results, and that “disappointingly Sam Leith testicles returns only 3,870.”

clared itself as oratory—and yet seemed neither old-fashioned nor quaint nor affected. And it certainly didn’t seem irrelevant. In fact, it looked as if it was quite literally going to change the world.

When I wrote a longish newspaper article on the subject, I worried the number of recondite-seeming Greek terms might put readers off. As it turned out, nobody seemed to find the article indigestible—indeed, it seemed to touch off an appetite for this little-considered area of knowledge. The idea for the book in your hands is what came out of it.

So cast your mind back to that moment. It’s a good place to start. The story of Barack Obama’s campaign for the presidency is a great instance of both the power of rhetoric and the power of hostility to rhetoric.

It was, arguably, Obama’s oratorical poise and fluency on his feet, more than anything else, that propelled him first past the far better funded and organized favorite, Hillary Clinton, to win the Democratic nomination. And as “Yes We Can” fever swept America, the Republicans—led by the less fluent John McCain* and the folksy but gaffe-prone Sarah Palin**—were put on the defensive.

What is interesting is that in very short order Obama found himself under attack not for his policies or for his voting history—but for his very ability to speak clearly and articulately and movingly. It seemed that, though we expected politicians to make speeches, we didn’t like them to be too good at it. A distinctive and consistent line of attack emerged from his political enemies. Even Hillary Clinton sought to slight him as a man who just "gives speeches."

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*A man who once called his wife a “cunt” in public.

**A woman who . . . oh, you know the drill. Insert your own examples.
The critic James Wood wrote a funny and penetrating short piece on the subject, in The New Yorker magazine in October 2008, entitled "The Republican War on Words." Wood quoted two prominent Republicans. Phyllis Schlafly, whom he ungenerously described as a "leathery extremist," was quoted speaking of her admiration for Sarah Palin on the grounds that "she's a woman who worked with her hands," whereas Obama was "just an elitist who worked with words." Another Republican, Rick Santorum, said that Obama was "just a person of words" and added that "words are everything to him."

Invoking both a historic current of American anti-intellectualism and a residual Puritan idea that "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," Wood diagnosed "a deep suspicion of language itself."

The argument—and it went all the way up to Obama's presidential rival John McCain, who repeatedly accused his opponent of "parroting words"—was that words themselves were the enemy, and that Obama's care in their use marked him as intrinsically untrustworthy. By contrast, Sarah Palin defended John McCain from criticism by dismissing "an unfair attack, there again, on the verbage [sic] that he used."

Palin's implication was that Obama's well-chosen words served to conceal his essence (bad), and that McCain's ill-chosen words likewise served to conceal his essence (good). How, then, was the voter to divine the true essence of either man except through his words? Here, I suspect, we leave the province of politics and enter that of theology.

As we'll see, there is a very strong tradition indeed—a tradition that goes back to Plato—of hostility to rhetoric. It is seen as the tool of demagogues and liars. But the terms in which that mistrust is couched are invariably, well, verbal. Senator McCain and his supporters didn't start campaigning in sign language, or posting homemade Sculpey models of Republican superheroes into the mailboxes of voters.

He and his team continued to make speeches, send out leaflets, fund television and radio advertisements, canvass supporters by phone and email, and all the rest of it. They simply did it less successfully than Obama.

Being anti-rhetoric is, finally, just another rhetorical strategy. Rhetoric is what the other guy is doing—whereas you, you're just speaking the plain truth as you see it. Some of the great orators of history, men like Forrest Gump and Yogi Berra, have made that strategy their main selling point.

You might well seek to do the same thing. But you'll use that particular technique far more ably if you understand it as just that: one technique among many. And if you can understand what the other guy is doing, you'll be all the better equipped to go on the attack and expose his fancy-schmancy rhetoric for what it is.

Knowledge, it has been said, is power. And rhetoric is what gives words power. So knowledge of rhetoric equips you, as a citizen, both to exercise power and to resist it. As W. H. Auden wrote in "September 1, 1939," "All I have is a voice / To undo the folded lie." The folding of the lie and the undoing of it are both accomplished through rhetoric.

Still not convinced? Let me try to persuade you.

*You don't come in third in the Miss Alaska pageant just by sitting there looking pretty.
RHETORIC THEN AND NOW

Let's start by thinking about where we are now—and then going back to the question of how we got there. We may no longer study or teach rhetoric in anything like the way our ancestors did, but many more of us rely much more heavily on it than ever before. Consider the conditions in which, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we live. Our commerce, our politics, our cultural and social lives are all rhetorical to an extraordinary extent.

As the collar of the average Western worker made its journey from blue to white over the course of the last century, the value of the persuasive arts for career advancement has grown in proportion. Politicians like to tell us that we live in "a knowledge economy," but they might just as well call it a rhetoric economy. The rhetoric handbooks of our age are now to be found in the business sections of bookshops—books that promise to teach the would-be tycoon how to manage up and manage down with the appropriate people skills, how to shape a company's ethos, how to get your message across.
The great forward gallop of industrial capitalism has brought new tasks for the rhetorician’s tool kit, too. The advertising industry throughout its development (and, in our age, the related industries of PR and marketing) has been stuffed with highly figural language and with appeals to ethos and pathos. What is a jingle but a sound bite applied to commerce?

Meanwhile, the Internet, probably the single most important human invention since the printing press, takes the whole process a step further. Persuasive communication is no longer the preserve of professionals—be they politicians, broadcasters, or advertisers. Anybody with a hooked-up computer can now communicate remotely and instantaneously—through the spoken word or through the written—with a potential audience of millions. Blogs and video-logs, and the online arguments in comment threads and chat rooms, have spawned new tropes and figures, and new uses for the old ones. We live, thanks to the reach of our technologies, in perhaps the most argumentative age of any in history.

And thanks at least in part to those technologies, we’re seeing the tentative spread of democratic institutions in areas that have lived for years under dictatorships or near-dictatorships. Pro-democracy movements all over North Africa and the Middle East have made themselves felt in what has been called by some “the Arab Spring.” People in Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya, by pushing for democracy, are arguing, in effect, for the right to argue. A more democratic world—and one with the legal institutions that go hand in hand with democracy—is a more rhetorical one.

And that is, funnily enough, exactly where this story begins: two and a half thousand years ago. Not an Arab Spring: but a Syracusean one.

A prosperous city-state on the east side of the island of Sicily, Syracuse had been muddling along for years under a succession of tyrants. “Tyrant,” in the classical context, just means absolute ruler—though five will get you ten they were tyrants in the modern sense also. But in 465 BC the last of these tyrants—one Thrasybulus—was overthrown in what appears to have been some sort of popular uprising.

Imagine, if you will, the sudden descent of democracy on an unprepared population. Just as in Iraq after Saddam Hussein’s downfall, or as in Russia in the first days after the revolution, the evaporation of an established order left a power vacuum. There was looting and appropriation. Ad hoc pockets of power developed, and local thuggery thrived. Who would secure property rights? Who was in charge?

In Syracuse, tradition has it that a man called Corax—who, according to some sources, had honed his persuasive arts as a courtier to the previous tyrant Hieron—charged in and helped bring about some semblance of order.

Coming into the assembly, where all the people had gathered together, he began first to appease the troublesome and turbulent element among them with obsequious and flattering words. After this, he began to soothe and silence the people and to speak as though telling a story, and after these things to summarize and call to mind concisely what had gone before and to bring before their eyes at a glance what had previously been said.

These things he called “introduction,” “narration,” “argument,” “digression,” and “epilogue.” By means of them he contrived to persuade the people just as he used to persuade a man.¹
The various accounts that survive, though sketchy, broadly agree that Corax was the first person to set down precepts for the art of persuasion. He’s credited with discerning the different parts of an oration—how to open your speech, advance your arguments in an orderly fashion, and close the deal—and with teaching his methods to others. He is also—and the importance of this is not to be brushed aside—seen as having grasped the essential notion that in rhetoric you are dealing with likelihood rather than certainty: there is room for argument, and it is precisely in that room for argument that the art of persuasion flourishes.

Corax’s name is frequently mentioned alongside that of a sidekick—a colleague or pupil called Tisias. Indeed, in some accounts they seem to be more or less interchangeable, and one fifth-century account has Corax as pupil and Tisias as master. But let’s follow the rough consensus and suppose Tisias was the pupil and Corax the master.

Tradition has it that they fell out over the terms of Tisias’s instruction. Corax agreed to take Tisias on as a pupil, and the deal they struck was what may have been the first no-win, no-fee agreement in legal history. It went as follows: if Tisias won his first case, then he’d pay Corax the agreed fee for his services. If Tisias lost his first case, however, then Corax would waive his fee on the grounds that his instruction had been useless. Having received his course of instruction as promised, Tisias, in an apparent attempt to cheat his master, avoided going to court at all. Finally, Corax was forced to sue him for the outstanding money.

In court, Corax argued that if judgment were to be awarded in his favor, then obviously he should be paid his money as you’d expect. He went further, though, arguing that if the case went against him, then Tisias would have won his first case—thus undeniably fulfilling the terms of their agreement . . . meaning that he’d have to stump up Corax’s fee too. Either way, Corax ingeniously argued, he would have to be paid.

Tisias argued the exact opposite. A judgment for Corax, he said, would mean that he, Tisias, had lost his first case: so, by the terms of their agreement, he need not pay a fee. A judgment in his own favor, naturally, would indicate that the court deemed he had discovered the arts of rhetoric despite, rather than because of, Corax’s instruction. Either way, Corax could go whistle for his fee.

This was a new one on the law courts of fifth-century Syracuse. So the judge pondered long and hard—and then threw both men out, with the words “Kakou korakas kakon oon,” which translate as, “Bad crow, bad egg.” These survive in the Latin proverb Mali corvi malum ovum—an immemorial testament to the discovery that it is possible to be too much of a smart-ass.

Who was Corax? The answer is murky. Most of the sources for the story of the Corax versus Tisias dustup in court are Byzantine—that is, very much later—and though Plato knew of a Tisias and Aristotle mentions a Corax, there’s not much on either of them in the ten centuries between their own lives and the fifth century AD.

A scholar named Thomas Cole, however, published an ingenious speculative essay in 1991. Corax’s name—giving extra piquancy to the judge’s joke—means “crow” in Greek, and Cole starts out arguing from common sense. Corax is overwhelmingly likely, he says, to have been a nickname. Ancient Greek
parents were no more prone to call their sons “Crow” than modern ones—and would anyone called “Crow” have the brass neck to teach the art of public speaking for a living?

It was natural for contemporaries to associate the chatter of crows with a loud, inept, cacophonous racket (a Pindar poem premiered in 476 BC, when Corax was a boy or young man, compared bad poets to squawking crows), so the chances are that Corax’s name came after he embarked on his chosen profession, rather than before.

“The epithet may have been totally derisive and contemptuous, or derisive and affectionate at the same time,” writes Cole. “The question cannot be answered. But if one asks what Corax was called before he got his new name, the answer is almost inevitable: Tisias.”

Here is Professor Cole’s “aha!” moment: Tisias and Corax were one and the same. He accepts that many won’t be persuaded of his conclusion, but he insists that, even if unprovable, it seems fitting: “What more appropriate fate for the putative founder of the entire rhetorical tradition, with the centuries-long study of figural speech it incorporates, than to be finally revealed as nothing more—or nothing less—than a figure of speech himself?”

What Corax began, Gorgias took out into the world. A native of Leontini, a Sicilian town just up the coast from Syracuse, Gorgias was born somewhere between 480 and 490 BC and lived to the ripe old age of 109.* We don’t know much about his life or career, and there’s speculation, but no evidence, that he learned directly from Corax.

*His pupil Isocrates lived to 98. Rhetoric is good for you.

But we do know that in 427 BC, early in the Peloponnesian War, he emigrated to Athens and took rhetoric with him, setting up shop as a teacher and presiding over a sort of big bang in the subject. Within a generation Athens would be stuffed with teachers and practitioners of rhetoric.

The “sophists”—colleagues, rivals, and imitators of Gorgias—were what you might think of as the spin doctors of the Attic golden age. They taught well-heeled Athenians how to construct speeches and sway audiences. There also grew up a whole class of speechwriters, or logographoi. Since litigants were required to represent themselves in court, those who could afford to do so would buy a speech from a professional. So Athens became the center of a burgeoning rhetoric industry, and with that came an increasing interest in systematizing the art.

Why did rhetoric catch on so rapidly in Athens? Well, for a start, here was a place just getting used to a radical and unprecedented experiment with democracy. It was only in the early fifth century BC that the popular assembly became the central repository of power in the Athenian state, and the oligarchies and tyrannies that had preceded it, pretty much by definition, weren’t fertile ground for the growth of public speaking. But now the principle of persuasive speech was at the heart of government. Those aristocrats who regretted the waning of their influence saw a chance to claw some back, if they could master the skills required to dominate the assembly.

What was that assembly like? It little resembles the representative democracy we recognize today, so it’s worth making a brief sketch of how it worked. At the time Gorgias arrived in Athens, there would have been maybe 300,000 people living in Attica. Male citizens of age, who were entitled and expected to vote in
the general assembly, made up no more than a quarter of the total adult population. Slaves didn’t get votes. Women didn’t get votes. **Metics**, or resident aliens like Gorgias himself, didn’t get votes.

In order to vote, you had to be there in person, so those citizens who lived outside town were also, effectively, disenfranchised. In practice, therefore, power was concentrated in the hands of a small metropolitan elite.

There were three main bodies that comprised the Athenian government. The first was the general assembly, or **ekklesia**, which consisted of any male citizen who had completed his military training and reached adulthood.

This being a direct rather than a representative democracy, membership of the **demos**, or sovereign body, was by right rather than by election, and every decision was taken on a one-man, one-vote basis. If you didn’t turn up, you didn’t have a voice.

The decisions of the assembly were enacted by an executive body called the Boule, or council of five hundred, which contained the closest thing ancient Athens had to members of congress. Its members were selected by lot, with each of the ten Attic tribes sending fifty men to the council.

The Boule had little or no power, however. Basically, it was the job of the council to supply the assembly with any information it needed—and then to scurry back to the various tribes, spread the good word on any decisions made, and ensure that those decisions were enacted. Beneath them, a system of magistrates selected to serve by lot was used to carry decisions through.

The third part of the picture is the law courts. Here, ancient Athens resembles a modern democracy even less than in the previous particulars. For if its democracy looks less democratic than ours, its courts look far more so.

There already existed a sort of council of elders, called the Areopagus,* which consisted of senior ex-politicians and functioned as an aristocratic court of appeal. But by halfway through the fifth century BC—again, not long before Gorgias arrived—its judicial function had mostly been usurped by the Heliaea,** which was open to absolutely anyone. Any adult male citizen, that is, was eligible for the 6,000-strong jury pool. And, presumably for what nowadays we would call lulz, everyone turned up.

Forget twelve good men and true. The average size of a jury in the Heliaea was around 500, and the court wasn’t even considered a quorum without a jury of 201 (rising to 401 in cases involving substantial sums). On at least one occasion, all 6,000 jurors heard a single case. These jurors, though they sat under oath, were subject to no regulation or review or supervision or appeal. And the state didn’t exercise a monopoly on prosecutions, either: any citizen could bring a case against any other citizen—thus giving rise to a succession of nakedly political or grudge-motivated trials.

It was a bear pit: an endless procession of vexatious litigants and political opportunists settling personal scores in front of a shouting, hooting, uncontrollable rabble of, um, jurors. This was the closest thing one could get to institutionalized trial by lynch mob. Athenian juries were notoriously partisan and notoriously eager to convict—showing a chippy preference, too, for cutting the wealthy and prominent down to size.

No wonder the idea of learning how to talk round a large mass of people was something that Athenian aristocrats—traditionally

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*So named, supposedly, because it met on a big rock above Athens. **Pagonis** means “big rock.”

**So named, supposedly, because it met in the sanctuary of the sun god, Apollo Heliaeas.”
the political class, and one bloodied but unbowed by the advent of democracy—got interested in. They were buying what Gorgias and the sophists were selling.

But no sooner had rhetoric established itself than anti-rhetoric did the same. The same claims that you see made today were established then: that rhetoric is nothing but a collection of low tricks designed to confuse and bamboozle an audience into thinking the weak argument is the stronger. In his comic play *The Clouds*, Aristophanes, writing in 420 BC, lampooned rhetoric as the art of weak reasoning, "which by false arguments triumphs over the strong." Personifications of "Just Discourse" and "Unjust Discourse" take the stage to slug it out. As the play's protagonist concedes, the pupils of Unjust Discourse are the occupants of all the positions of power and eminence in the city.

Plato had a less sarcastic but more forceful opposition. Plato didn't trust democracy. And because he saw how easily the mob could be swayed—he was traumatized by the judicial murder of his teacher and hero Socrates—he didn't trust rhetoric. He also regarded as suspect the instrumental nature, and murky methods, of rhetorical persuasion—which, by contrast with the strict logic of philosophical inquiry, they are.

In this Attic roughneck politi, you can think of Plato—with his radical idealism, intellectual rigidity, and hatred of the mob—as a sort of ancient precursor to Conservative MP Enoch Powell. His most sustained attack on rhetoric comes in his dialogue *Gorgias*, where he imagines Socrates giving the eponymous rhetorician the third degree.*

*Socrates first leads Gorgias up the garden path, enticing him to agree that "rhetoric is the artificer of persuasion, having this and no other business, and that this is her crown and end."

"Do you know any other effect of rhetoric over and above that of producing persuasion?" he asks.

Gorgias concedes, "No: the definition seems to me very fair, Socrates; for persuasion is the chief end of rhetoric."

Gorgias's brother Herodicus is a doctor, and the former attests that when trying to persuade a patient to submit to a course of treatment, his oratory is far more effective than his brother's medical expertise. Here, Socrates pounces. The oratory, in this case, is more effective on an ignorant audience than a well-informed one, is it not? And the orator need know nothing of medicine himself, hmm?

**Socrates:** Then, when the rhetorician is more persuasive than the physician, the ignorant is more persuasive with the ignorant than he who has knowledge? Is not that the inference?

**Gorgias:** In the case supposed, yes.

**Socrates:** And the same holds of the relation of rhetoric to all the other arts; the rhetorician need not know the truth about things; he has only to discover some way of persuading the ignorant that he has more knowledge than those who know?

That has continued to be the central complaint against rhetoric ever since: that it gives the plausible ignoramus or the self-interested dissembler—the knave or the fool—power over the good and the wise. It is, in consequence, a cousin of the arguments made against democracy itself.
The fact that "sophistry" has a bad name these days is down to Plato. The sophists—of whom Gorgias was one of the first examples—were essentially just private tutors who trained Athenian aristocrats in philosophy and rhetoric. And to the Athenian political class, they became indispensable.

Gorgias and the other sophists taught and worked haphazardly, but there would come a greater man. The Newton of rhetoric—the one person whose work in this department overshadows the whole history of the subject—was, of course, Aristotle.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was the first great systematic statement of how rhetoric works, and I draw on both its arguments and its structure throughout this book. Aristotle definitively identified the three branches of oratory—judicial, deliberative, and epideictic—and the three persuasive appeals—ethos (the speaker's self-presentation), pathos (the attempt to sway emotion), and logos (the intellectual argument)—that mingle in them. Those triads have proved enduring.

Aristotle was also the midwife of rhetoric's place in the liberal arts—making it an object of systematic study and finding a place for it in his system of thought. Rhetoric was, for Aristotle, dialectic's wayward cousin: having as its method not "this therefore that" but "probably this so likely that," and as its object not knowledge but persuasion. Rhetoric, he said, was a *technē*: a practical skill. It was teachable.

Aristotle was a pretty astonishing figure. Not only did he lay the foundations for all subsequent study of how poetry and drama work, but he more or less invented formal logic, knocked off the basis of the scientific method, produced significant advances in political theory, ethics, zoology, and for all I know invented skateboarding on a Wednesday afternoon when he had nothing better to do.

Born in 384 BC, he was the son of the personal physician to the king of Macedonia. Raised as an aristocrat, he was dispatched to the academy in Athens at the age of seventeen to study philosophy under Plato and spent two decades there. For most of that time, as far as we know, he was a straight-down-the-line Platonist.

That is why, on the face of it, it is rather odd that he ended up being the great scholar of rhetoric—and, for that matter, the great scholar of poetics too. As I've said, Plato mistrusted rhetoric—as he mistrusted poetry and drama. Rhetoric smears butter on the philosopher's spectacles, kicks sand in his face, and allows the demagogue to stroll off with the girl (or boy, as the case may have been).

Aristotle was a disciple of Plato, and to start with, this seems to have been his position too. But Aristotle was also a practical man. Plato had a mathematician's sensibility—his investigations into reality took place in the mind alone. Aristotle's investigations were a bit more hands-on: when he wanted to know what the inside of an octopus looked like, he grabbed a scalpel and opened one up.

Around the time of Plato's death—possibly in a huff because he wasn't asked to take over the running of the academy from the boss; possibly because Macedonians were, for political reasons, getting less and less popular in Athens—Aristotle shipped out of Athens.

It was not until 335 BC—when, among other things, Athens was once more safe for Macedonians—that he returned, aged fifty, and founded his own school there, the Lyceum. By the time he came to produce it, *Rhetoric* answered a directly practical problem. Aristotle needed to attract pupils—and while his rival Isocrates was teaching rhetoric, the Lyceum needed to be able to compete. Necessity, you might say, was the mother of invention.
The *Rhetoric* itself is, in many ways, a bit of a mess. It wasn’t a book prepared for publication—but seems rather to have been a collection of notes for the lectures Aristotle gave his students, or notes taken by those students at the lectures. Stylistically, it is of Spartan—well, Attic—bareness. It doesn’t have the structural elegance of the work of later handbooks, and it’s written to instruct rather than to impress. But, obscure though it is in parts and repetitive though it is in others, it is filled with wise and interesting things.

The *Rhetoric*\(^4\) gives us Aristotle as the austere, wan, sometimes amused observer of a fallen world: one where the young are foolish and the old mean-spirited, where most people will commit the crime if they think they can get away with it, and where slick and knavish operators can all too easily put one over on the general public. Nuggets of keen observation and odd tidbits about the ancient world glint in it, too. Reading it, for instance, you learn that, among the Spartans, long hair in a man is a mark of nobility: “as a sign of a free man, since it is not easy for a long-haired man to perform any manual task.”* You hear of Polycrates, who delivered a panegyric to the mice that saved the Egyptians from an invading Assyrian army by gnawing through the enemy’s bowstrings. And you hear how Gorgias, when a swallow sat on his head, rebuked it: “Shame on you, Philomela!”** (The remark, Aristotle says drily, “would have been excellent in a tragedy.”)

All those enjoyments are incidental. The key thing is that it is halfway to being a handbook: here is not an academic exercise, but a course of instruction in the basic principles behind the successful composition of speeches. It included a list of specimen arguments, explained how an audience could be swayed, and discussed everything from how to discredit a hostile witness to how best to modulate your voice when speaking. But while it is halfway to being a handbook, it is halfway to being something else too: it is an attempt to formulate a theory of rhetoric and give it a philosophical place in the world. Aristotle sought to rescue rhetoric from its place as a purely instrumental art: the highest rhetorical accomplishment, for Aristotle, was an expression of *arête*, or virtue. As he put it: “Character contains almost the strongest proof of all.”

Rather than teach a series of tricks and tips for momentary success in speaking, as any catchpenny sophist might, Aristotle sought to form a coherent view of why those tips and tricks worked. If other rhetoric teachers were driving instructors, Aristotle was a mechanic: he didn’t just want to know where the accelerator was—he wanted to understand what went on under the hood.

So when you grasp what Aristotle’s about—that his theory of rhetoric is also essentially a theory of human nature—you cannot but find yourself in awe. Both the means and the ends of rhetoric, Aristotle finds, participate in the deepest human questions. He says the object of deliberative rhetoric, for instance, is “happiness”—and he therefore sets out to establish what constitutes the good. In relation to judicial rhetoric, he investigates what we mean by justice and fairness. And at every turn he is attentive to the notion that what is said needs to be fitted to the audience that hears it—and so everything from what is plausible in terms of motive, to the aesthetics of prose style, falls under his work’s purview.

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*I know: odd, isn’t it?  
**In Greek legend, Philomela was transformed into a swallow by the gods.
Aristotle shines, in other words, because he was the first person really to grasp that the study of rhetoric is the study of humanity itself.

So what came after? It belongs to a different, far bigger and more scholarly book to trace in detail the development of rhetoric and theory between the ancient world and the present day. But it's worth including a thumbnail sketch, I think. If you can't wait to get to the nuts and bolts, by all means skip ahead. But I think to fully understand how things came to be as they are, it helps to get a sense of the history. Think of the classical tradition of rhetoric as a river: as it flows forward to the present day, it takes several twists and turns, and in some places it plunges underground. This is not figural: Aristotle's works spent a couple hundred years in a cellar in what's now western Turkey before someone dug them out in the first century BC. And thus it took over two hundred years after his death, in the fourth century BC, for his mantle to be assumed by Cicero.

Cicero, though he followed Aristotle, may not even have known his work firsthand. Cicero was the great eminence of the Roman age—a lawyer, a politician, and so not only Rome's greatest theorist of rhetoric but its greatest practitioner. He was followed by the Spanish-born Quintilian, who wrote the magnificently punchy and pragmatic Institutes of Oratory—looking wistfully back to the master—in the first century AD.

Confusingly, the other great Roman text to survive is Ad Herennium—which was roughly contemporary with Cicero, and was for centuries wrongly attributed to him. Thanks in part to that wrong attribution, Ad Herennium was the most popular handbook right through to the Renaissance. Shakespeare was most probably taught from it.

But before we reached Shakespeare, we had to get through the Dark Ages—when, no doubt, people communicated well enough in grunts, snarls, and the clanging of axes, but nobody was paying too much attention to Aristotle's theories of metaphor. Fortunately, the Islamic world had its eye on the ball, and most of the classical texts we have now were preserved in Arabic translation. The early-medieval Renaissance saw them translated back out of Arabic and returned to the West.

Over the centuries that followed, there were two key influences on the way rhetoric developed: Christianity and the written word. Classical texts were wrestled into a Christian worldview as scholars like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas sought ways to claim the ancients as Christians avant la lettre. And, of course, in the shape of sermons, Christianity provided regular formal occasions for public speaking. We had a form of deliberative oratory whose aim was the winning or keeping of souls, rather than the good in public policy; and in theodicy—the justifying of the ways of God to man—and other aspects of Christian apologetics, you can see, if you like, the judicial and epideictic aspects of Christianized rhetoric.

The importance of written, rather than spoken, transmission is also pervasive. The main mutation was the growth of the ars dictaminis: a body of received wisdom about letter-writing that followed the classical canons of rhetoric and applied them in epistolary form. By Renaissance times, rhetoric had become so centrally embedded in the culture as a habit of mind that it shaped the way all knowledge was approached. Johannes Kepler's 1601 Apologia Pro Tychone Contra Ursam, for instance, is

*Some historical simplification has been necessary for reasons of space.
an immaculate judicial oration—on the subject of astronomy. Sir Philip Sidney’s 1580s _An Apology for Poetry_ is given the seven-part form of a classical oration.

In _Love’s Labour’s Lost_, Shakespeare has Berowne complain, “Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise, / Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation, / Figures pedantical; these summer flies / Have blown me full of maggot ostentation.” That makes plain not only that formal rhetoric’s “three-piled hyperboles” and “figures pedantical” were familiar to Shakespeare, but that he could have anticipated them being familiar enough to his audience to elicit a groan of recognition.

And so they would have been. In Shakespeare’s day, rhetoric was one third of a basic education. The grammar school curriculum consisted of grammar, logic, and rhetoric—a three-part system of knowledge called “the trivium” that was regarded as the foundation of learning. It underpinned the more difficult “quadrivium”—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—that students went on to learn; all seven subjects taken _in toto_ being the so-called liberal arts. This had been the outline of an education since medieval times.

The division of the liberal arts is not accidental; it articulates a coherent system of thought. The three arts of the trivium relate to the mind, and the four of the quadrivium to matter. Sister Miriam Joseph* categorizes the relation of the trivial arts as follows: logic is concerned with the thing-as-it-is-known; grammar is concerned with the thing-as-it-is-symbolized; rhetoric is concerned with the thing-as-it-is-communicated. She calls rhetoric “the master art of the trivium.”

In the Renaissance, the art of rhetoric overlapped substantially with the arts of drama and poetry—not only because of their formal congruencies in terms of rhythm, sound effects, metaphor, and whatnot, but because those seeking to put language at the service of power were courtiers of an absolute monarch rather than citizens of an Athenian democracy. Poetry and drama were deeply involved in networks of patronage: praise-poems, sucky-up dedications, scurrilous broadsides, and vicious “flytings” of one’s rivals.

A window into that world comes in the work of George Puttenham (c. 1530–1590), author of a 1589 book called _The Arte of English Poesie_, which is widely regarded as being “the central text of Elizabethan courtly poetics.”

In the preamble to the first book of the _Arte_, a history of poetry, Puttenham is clear “How the poets were the first Philosophers, the first Astronomers and Historiographers and Oratours and Musiciens of the world”:

> Vtterance also and language is gluyn by nature to man for perswasion of others, and aide of them selues [. . .] and poetry is] more eloquent and rethorickall then the ordinarie prose, which

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*Yes: a woman! And, yes: a nun! I know many of you will have despaired of coming across much of either in this volume, but there she is. Sister Miriam Joseph (1898–1982), born Agnes Lenore Rauh, was an American nun. Before she entered the novitiate, she trained as a journalist. Most of her adult life was spent teaching in the English faculty of a Catholic university. Inspired by a lecture from a visiting professor from the University of Chicago on “The Metaphysical Basis of the Liberal Arts,” Sister Miriam attempted to reinstate the old-style trivium as a compulsory course for freshmen English students. She went on to write a PhD dissertation on the effect of formal rhetoric on Shakespeare’s language, and remained an evangelist for the use of the trivium in education. She’s the author of _The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric—Understanding the Nature and Function of Language_ (1937).
we use in our daily talke: because it is decked and set out with all manner of fresh colours and figures, which maketh that it sooner inveigleth the judgement of man, and carieth his opinion this way and that, whether soever the heart by impression of the ear shall be most affectionately bent and directed [. . .] So as the Poets were also from the beginning the best persuaders and their eloquence the first Rethoricke of the world.

So when Puttenham wrote about poetics, he was also writing about rhetoric. And what he’s chiefly remembered for is a heroic attempt to domesticate the figures and tropes of classical oratory by giving them English names and English examples. The results never completely caught on—but they endure as a historical curiosity of some idiosyncrasy.

He lists 121 figures, and divides them according to a taxonomy that’s highly serviceable today:* grouping them according to the type of thing they did. So he talked about “auricular figures” and “sensible figures”—that is, tweaks of language that help a sentence appeal better to the ear; and those that affect its argument—and subdivided those into figures that worked by “disorder,” “surplusage,” and “exchange.”

*Alliteration* gets called “Like Letter,” for instance. *Synecdoche*—using a part to recall the whole, like when you call a car “a set of wheels” or bark “all hands on deck!”—is renamed “Quicke Conceit.” *Erotema* is “The Questioner.” *Zeugma*—the figure where a single verb governs a number of subjects, as in “he put out the cat, his cigar, and the light”—gets called “Single Supply.”

*Hyperbole* is the “Loud Lyer” or “The Overreacher.” *Antiphrasis*, the sarcastic use of a word to mean its opposite—“take Einstein, over here”—is called “the Broad Floute”; and *myterismus* (an insult which comes with an accompanying gesture: “I fart in your general direction”) is Englished, magnificently, as “The Fleering Frumpe.”

Sometimes Puttenham’s terms are practical; sometimes, more fanciful. *Epizeuxis*—the repetition of a single word again and again without anything in between—“howl, howl, howl!” or “break, break, break”—puts us appositely in mind of wall-to-wall carpets when Puttenham calls it “The Underlay” (or “the Cuckow spell”).

From our vantage point, the project of giving English names to the classical figures of speech looks quixotic at best: something like George Bernard Shaw’s attempt to rationalize English spelling, 1970s feminist campaigns for “herstory” and “womyn” to enter standard usage, the Académie Française’s doomed crusade against Anglo-Saxon loanwords, or the hope that Esperanto might become the world language.

But at the time, it might even have looked sensible. After all, the Latin terms survive more or less in free variation with the Greek, and Puttenham’s English equivalents are abundantly charming—albeit that charm is conditioned by a certain quaintness. We’re the richer for his backing this horse, even if it was the wrong one.

The great joke about Puttenham, though, is that he survives not only for his work on rhetoric but as an instance of its effectiveness. It would be easy to assume—and for many years people did—that the author of *The Arte of English Poesie* was as

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*Indeed, a version of it is one way you can search the absolutely invaluable online resource Silva Rhetoricae (http://rhetoric.byu.edu/) or “Forest of Rhetoric.” You can look up Greek, Latin, and English names for the figures—and also browse by groups: figures “of Amplification,” “of Balance,” “of Overstatement,” and what have you. I can’t recommend this site, maintained by Dr. Gideon Burton of Brigham Young University, too highly.*
It was said of Puttenham that he was “full of brables of sub-
tyll practises and slanderous devyses ... overconynyng in de-
facinge of truthe, by wordes and speache eloquente and in
invencon of myschieffe verie pertfytte.” That’s not meant in a
nice way; but could there be a better epitaph for a rhetorician?

Outside the realm of courtly poetry, the handbook tradition
continued to thrive. The rhetoric scholar Brian Vickers says that
around two thousand rhetoric books were published between
1400 and 1700. The emphasis on rhetoric as part of an education
didn’t stress originality. School was very repetitive and boring: you
were expected to memorize sententiae (wise sayings), and go
through Ovid’s Metamorphoses or similar revered texts identifying
the rhetorical figures and marking them in the margins (Milton’s
own copy of Orlando Furioso is marked up in just such a way).

The eighteenth century saw something of a shift of emphasis
to delivery, with “elocutionism” taking root as a formal disci-
pline on its own. Teachers and written manuals proliferated,
concerning themselves with the correct dress, stance, gesture,
and vocal modulations of the orator, and—as Pygmalion, in
1912, indicates—the link between elocution and social class still
had an iron grip on British society more than a century later.

One of the forgotten eminences of the eighteenth century
was the Scottish teacher and minister Hugh Blair (1718–1800),
whose Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres went into 130 edi-
tions and was in print for more than a century. Admired by Jane
Austen, Dr. Johnson, and David Hume, Blair edited the first
Scottish edition of Shakespeare and a forty-four volume uni-
form edition of the English poets. He was described three de-
cades after his death as having had “so much taste and talent
that his mind bordered on genius.”

*That only came to an end when his wife happened to find her, and wrote to
Puttenham crisply: “I haue in my custodie a damsell chosen by you as she con-
fesseth for yor owne toothe.”
In his work on rhetoric, Blair applied a fresh tweak to tradition—emphasizing the importance of individual genius and the cultivation of taste over “servile imitation of any author whatever,” and the written over the spoken word.

But he was with Quintilian in believing that there was a vital connection between virtue and rhetorical accomplishment. “Speech,” as he wrote in his Introduction, “is the great instrument by which man becomes beneficial to man; and it is to the intercourse and transmission of thought, by means of speech, that we are chiefly indebted for the improvement of thought itself.”

His warning about bad or phony rhetoric, I think, could do with being revived:

The graces of composition have been employed to disguise or to supply the want of matter; and the temporary applause of the ignorant has been courted, instead of the lasting approbation of the discerning. But such imposture can never maintain its ground long. Knowledge and science must furnish the materials that form the body and substance of any valuable composition. Rhetoric serves to add the polish; and we know that none but firm and solid bodies can be polished well.

The other thing the eighteenth century saw, of course, was some radical shifts in the style of government. The French and the American revolutions both saw more or less tyrannical polities overtaken—at least on paper—by forms of representative democracy. The extent of their impacts, to adapt Zhou Enlai, it is still too soon to assess—but as the idea of democracy came into fashion in the West, there came with it a surge in the importance and effectiveness of rhetoric as a tool of political influence. We saw representative assemblies modeled, to a greater or lesser extent, on those of the ancient world. In some sense, things had come full circle.

In schools and universities, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the study of rhetoric pushed aside. Its association with the classics, which in the twentieth century were themselves disappearing from curricula, did it no favors; and its territory was gradually colonized by more modern, more scientific-seeming disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, and literary criticism. But, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, the practice of rhetoric continued to burgeon and spread—and it continued to behave in ways that were directly susceptible to the old tools of study and understanding. Those tools are set out in more detail in the chapters that follow.

The one thing that you won’t find much of in the history of rhetoric, incidentally, is women. Of course, women from Elizabeth I to Emmeline Pankhurst have from time to time given blistering speeches. But it is true that rhetoric has generally been a boys’ game. Men were not only the ones, in Western society, most likely to be in the jobs that gave occasion for speeches; they were, with very rare exceptions, also the ones educated to give them, and the ones whose speeches were most likely to be written down.

Indeed, the point at which schools stopped teaching traditional rhetoric was around the point at which they started teaching women. And the point at which women came to be not only enfranchised, but welcomed into the legislatures, courtrooms, and boardrooms of the modern world . . . was near enough the point at which our long history of understanding and consciously thinking about rhetoric sank beneath the waters of Lethe.
So it goes. But those great social earthquakes mean that, even if we regard the high watermark of male rhetoric as being behind us, we can say with certainty that we are now living at the dawn of the great age of rhetoric by women. With Margaret Thatcher as our Cicero, we have much to look forward to.