English 309A: Principles and Practices I: Rhetorical Theory in the Classical Period

Professor Michael MacDonald
Office: HH 250
Office Hours: Monday 1:30-2:30 and Tuesday 10:00-11:00
Email: m2macdon@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca

According to Ernest Renan, the French historian of religion, inventing the art of rhetoric was the “only mistake the Greeks made.” One of the central aims of this introductory survey of ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric is to reveal the injustice of Renan’s charge. In order to situate the origins of rhetoric in its social and historical context, we will first explore the complex relationship between rhetoric and culture in Classical Greece (its law, science, theatre, politics, medicine, and philosophy). With this context in mind, we will then examine the appropriation of Greek oratory by the Romans, who viewed the pursuit of rhetoric as the loftiest ideal of human existence — and as the means to a “world-empire” (Cicero). By the end of the course it will become apparent that the invention of rhetoric, far from being a “mistake,” represents one of the Promethean achievements of Western intellectual history.

Texts
Selections from: Gorgias, “Encomium of Helen”; Anonymous, “Dissoi Logoi”; Plato, Phaedrus; Sophocles, Antigone; Aristophanes, Clouds, Lysistrata; Isocrates, “Antidosis,” “Against the Sophists”; Aristotle, Rhetoric; Cicero, Of Oratory; Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory; Saint Augustine, Confessions (photocopy), Shakespeare, Othello.

September
9 Introduction
15 Gorgias, “Encomium of Helen”
22 Sophocles, Antigone
29 Aristophanes, Clouds

October
6 Aristophanes, Lysistrata
13 Thanksgiving
20 Plato, Phaedrus
27 Midterm Exam: Aristotle, Rhetoric; Isocrates, Against the Sophists; Antidosis

November
3 Cicero, Of Oratory
10 Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory
17 Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine; Confessions
24 Shakespeare, Othello

December
1 Conclusion

Requirements
20% Weekly Responses (1 p.)
30% Midterm Examination
50% Final essay (10 pp.)
Attendance is mandatory