

Intermixti spiritus oris. The interface between rhetoric and poetry in Late Antiquity (from the age of Diocletian until Arcadius)

Introduction

The period between the reigns of Diocletian and Honorius was an important watershed both in the political and cultural evolution of the Roman Empire. In many ways this was a very dynamic period, full of creativity and vigour. One cultural domain that remained very vital indeed is the study of rhetoric, as is evidenced by the amount of theoretical reflection, and practical precepts, that has survived from the fourth century and its preceding and succeeding decades. The aim of this conference is to examine in what ways this major force within the literary field can help us to enhance our understanding of the literary and more specifically, the poetical production of this long century. Quite a bit of poetry was written but, some notable exceptions like Ausonius, Prudentius, Gregory Nazianzen or Claudian left aside, for the most part it remains a rarely studied, little understood and enigmatic body of work. We feel that the exploration of the poetical production of this period is often hampered by a priori conceptions that are seldom questioned, and by the fact that it is frequently studied exclusively as a part of social or religious history, using frameworks imported from other disciplines. Such approaches bring about various methodological difficulties. The aim of the conference is to investigate whether the interface between rhetoric and literary production might not prove to be a more promising and fruitful strategy. This approach, however, calls for reflection upon the function of rhetoric within the cultural field and the nature of its relation to literature and poetry. The main objective of this conference is to explore in depth this particular area.

Scope & aim

We would invite the speakers to address one of two basic topics that are intricately bound. The first focuses on the nature of rhetoric and its relation to literature, on a more conceptual level, whereas the second addresses the way this relation is manifested in the poetry of this era.

a/ How can or should we use rhetoric when approaching poetry: as a blueprint for composition and reception, or rather as an undercurrent, indicating the general nature of literature? What are the limits of this approach? Is it legitimate to posit a rhetorical tradition shared between east and west in an era of growing political separation?

We now consider the rhetorical schools also to be storehouses of cultural memory, ensuring the continuity and comprehensibility of the literary tradition. This work of remembering however also entails a specific need for forgetting and reimagining. How does this double function (conservative and regenerative, protecting and obliterating) operate within late antique schools? What information can we gather from the rhetorical treatises and the grammarian's commentaries? In what guise does the literary tradition appear? Is it possible to posit a collective, identity creating and normative function for contemporary literary production, similar to the one we claim for cultural texts in school contexts?

b/ The scarcity of contextual and other information regarding fourth-century poetical production perforce obliges us to 'stick to the texts'. Moreover, the shortage of reliable data concerning the authors of these texts makes an uneasy couple with the apparent lack of originality in the poems (e.g. 'traditional' genres such as pastoral or didactic poetry are revisited; many works are paraphrases or translations of earlier texts). This makes it hard to tackle as literature. How can a conception of an active and formative role of rhetoric be of help here, as opposed to applying 'rhetorical' as a mere means of assessment? Possible fields of enquiry are the following. Can we discover certain rhetorical compositional schemes? Can we consider e.g. the *progymnasmata* to be building blocks used in the poetical works? How does the multiform practice of *vertere* in a rhetorical context relate to the literary production?

This approach also entails questions of a more general nature. What are the implicit poetics we can try to tease out of these texts? Often this literature is presented using the dichotomy between (conscious) classicism and (aberrant) mannerism. Is the construction of a 'poetics of reuse' a valid way to transcend the limits of this dichotomy? What light could such a 'poetics of reuse' throw on the (constructed) nature of the perceived continuities in the literary field and how would this continuity relate to the discontinuity discernible in society? The above are, of course, but a few of the questions that confront the professional reader of fourth-century poetry.

The aim of this conference is to yield fruitful discussion, questioning some of our basic assumptions and offering a deeper insight into the complicated relation between rhetoric and literature in Late Antiquity. To this end we invite the participants either to address more reflective and theoretical issues or to offer more concrete readings of the texts under consideration in light of the aforementioned problems. We hope that this can open up new directions for future research.

Call

This conference will be held on 12-13 JUNE 2009 at GHENT UNIVERSITY (BELGIUM). We welcome contributions focusing on any of the topics proposed above. These should however fit in with the framework of the planned conference. The intended length of the papers is approximately 45 minutes. Participants are invited to send in a paper proposal of approximately 500 words as soon as possible and not later than 15 OCTOBER 2008. Please send your abstract (with contributor's name and complete mailing address, including e-mail) to Bert.Selter@Ugent.be or Yanick.Maes@Ugent.be. The programme committee will decide on the acceptance of abstracts by 15 DECEMBER 2008.

