

A Sophistic Pattern of Persuasion

In *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*, Susan Jarratt argues that the ancient Greek sophists existed at a time when human society was shifting from *mythos*, an uncritical acceptance of tradition as represented in myths and stories, to *logos*, a system of logical analysis allowing access to certain truth, as represented in Plato and Aristotle (31). Jarratt introduces *nomos*, or “custom-law,” as a third term (41). She sees the sophists as using *logos* (words and logic) to challenge traditional *mythos* in order to renegotiate *nomos* (cultural values and beliefs). Her model for this process is found in Gorgias's "Encomium of Helen," in which he argues that Helen of Troy is blameless because she acted as she did for one of four reasons: she was fated by the gods, abducted by force, persuaded by speeches, or conquered by love. Gorgias invokes the myth of Helen and uses words and arguments to challenge her bad reputation among the Greeks, influencing social attitudes toward women in general at the same time.

This sophistic triad of terms—*mythos*, *logos*, *nomos*—can be a productive alternative to the better known Aristotelian appeals of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. The advantage of the sophistic perspective created by these terms is that it directly addresses social values (*nomoi*), a factor that the Aristotelian terms tend to obscure.

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Concept	Description
<i>Mythos</i>	A story that nearly everyone in a community knows that serves as a reference point for community values and behavior.
<i>Logos</i>	Any kind of persuasion that uses words including logical arguments, but also stories, images, poetic language, incantations, etc. <i>Logos</i> connects <i>mythos</i> to <i>nomos</i> .
<i>Nomos</i>	The unwritten social rules, expectations, and values of a local community concerning behavior, responsibilities, boundaries, rights and other social customs. <i>Nomos</i> is what everybody thinks is proper.

Nomos

Nomos (the Greek plural is "*nomoi*") encompasses the unwritten social rules, expectations, and values of a local community concerning behavior, responsibilities, boundaries, rights and other social customs. *Nomos* is what everybody thinks is proper, a set of agreements that may be in part unspoken and unconscious. Of course, even in a local situation, *nomos* is always open to renegotiation and change. In the past, such change was slow.

Today, technology has made it possible for individuals in widely separated communities to write, speak, and see each other with great immediacy, across cities, states, countries and continents. This immediacy could lead to greater understanding of different communities and cultures, but it has also led to clashing *nomoi*. We are in a world that has gone from isolated tribes and nations to global civilization in a handful of decades. Electronic media, cheap air travel, and disparities in economic opportunity ensure that we keep crashing into each other with vastly different languages, religions, morality, values and traditions, so that one can succumb to culture shock in one's own country. The sophists were really the only ones in ancient Greece who experienced this kind of clash because they were itinerant and traveled from city-state to city-state.

So people today are shocked by what they read and see from outside their community. They think, "How can they do that? How can they think that? Are they even human? Something must be done about them!" The problems our world faces are more related to clashing values than to misunderstood facts. Logical argument succeeds only when there are shared values.

Mythos

Nomos is rooted in *mythos*. The sophists had Greek myths in mind--the Iliad and the Odyssey, stories about Greek gods such as Zeus, Hera, Apollo and Athena, and Greek heroes such as Hercules. Today, we know those myths, but they are not the ones that are relevant to our own culture. Instead we think about such things as the Founding Fathers, the Frontier, the American Dream, and Santa Claus. We also have movies, such as *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*, that create their own mythology. For the purpose of utilizing the concept of *mythos* in a modern context, I want to define it broadly as "A story that nearly everyone in a community knows that serves as a reference point for community values and behavior."

Logos

Aristotle uses this term to refer to logical argument, but it literally means "words." For the sophists, any kind of persuasion that used words was logos. That would include logical arguments, but also stories, images, poetic language, incantations, etc. In this context, *logos* is the bridge between *mythos* and *nomos*. A typical move is to invoke a *mythos* (such as Helen of Troy) then use words to change the audience's perception of the myth for the purpose of altering how the community feels about a particular issue. So it's 1) invoke *mythos*, 2) deploy *logos*, 3) change *nomos*.

Applying the Concepts

This *mythos-logos-nomos* pattern is actually quite common in modern speeches, op-eds and other articles. In a review of David Silverman's "This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving," Philip Deloria writes

The challenge for scholars attempting to rewrite Thanksgiving is the challenge of confronting an ideology that has long since metastasized into popular history. Silverman begins his book with a plea for the possibility of a "critical history." It will be "hard on the living," he warns, because this approach questions the creation stories that uphold traditional social orders, making the heroes less heroic, and asking readers to consider the villains as full and complicated human beings. Nonetheless, he says, we have an obligation to try.

Both Silverman, the writer, and Deloria, the reviewer, invoke the myth of the first Thanksgiving, describe the historical record and the history of the transformation of the holiday to serve particular ideological purposes, and then recommend a changed view. Deloria's review is titled, "The Invention of Thanksgiving: Massacres, myths, and the making of the great November holiday," Deloria asks, "So how does one take on a myth? One might begin by deconstructing the process through which it was made."

Deloria points out that almost none of the traditional Thanksgiving story is true. However, the real point is not to confront a myth with the facts. Rather, it is to change attitudes toward Native Americans in the present. Deloria notes that current politicians want to treat Native Americans as a racial group and disavow the political relationships established by treaties. That is the part of *nomos* that Native American groups are trying to change.

Different Myths of Love

In "Romantic Regimes," Russian-born Polina Aronson describes coming to the United States as a young exchange student and learning about American ideas of love from a stack of Seventeen magazines. She realized that the American concept of love was entirely different from the Russian concept. Later she became a

sociologist and characterized the American version of love as the "Regime of Choice" and the Russian version as the "Regime of Fate." She writes,

The Seventeen girl was trained for making decisions about whom to get intimate with. She rationalised her emotions in terms of 'needs' and 'rights', and rejected commitments that did not seem compatible with them. She was raised in the Regime of Choice. By contrast, classic Russian literature (which, when I was coming of age, remained the main source of romantic norms in my country), described succumbing to love as if it were a supernatural power, even when it was detrimental to comfort, sanity or life itself. In other words, I grew up in the Regime of Fate.

She writes that these romantic regimes are "systems of emotional conduct that affect how we speak about how we feel, determine 'normal' behaviours, and establish who is eligible for love – and who is not." In other words, a myth of love determines *nomos*, what the society thinks is normal for love. Different myths create different norms. Clearly if a Russian girl and an American boy fall in love, they are going to have trouble negotiating this difference.

Possible Writing Assignments

1. Select an article that follows the *mythos-logos-nomos* pattern and write an analysis of how the myth is represented, how it is connected to a particular aspect of *nomos*, and how the writer develops arguments that might change the attitudes of the community.
2. Choose an aspect of the *nomos* of your community that you think should be changed, invoke a myth that supports this attitude, and use stories and arguments to debunk or reinterpret this myth to support the change you have in mind. Examples of *nomos* might include attitudes toward same sex marriage, attitudes toward LGBTQ people, racial stereotypes, gender discrimination, etc.
3. Research the history and background of a common current myth. How did it begin? Why did it develop in the way that it did? What effects does the myth have on current society?

Works Cited

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