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James J. Murphy's Contributions to Latin Rhetoric

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Introduction

Even a cursory review of James J. Murphy's *Curriculum vitae* reveals the impressive scholarly contributions that he has made to the study of Latin rhetoric. What is equally impressive is that his contributions to the wide-ranging field of Latin rhetoric are ongoing, that his CV is still a work in progress. At the time of this writing, Professor Murphy is 96 years old and still actively engaged in his research projects on rhetoric, unceasingly adding entries that further document his contributions to the history of rhetoric. That said, even while his "incomplete" CV does chronicle his publications, that listing alone cannot capture the full range of his contributions to the field of Latin rhetoric. The intent of this brief essay is not to complete but rather to complement that chronicle by providing an overview that captures the depth, the range, and the impact of his contributions to the study of Latin rhetoric. That is, we can begin to realize and appreciate his contributions not only diachronically from his early career beginnings, but also synchronically by looking at the topics within Latin rhetoric that he has undertaken and the ways that he has approached the study of Latin rhetoric.

From the very beginning of his scholarly career, James J. Murphy has both revealed and established historical connections in Latin rhetoric. Showing ties and relationships across time has been one of his major contribution to the study of Latin rhetoric. The reason for the significance of his contribution is that Murphy's scholarly efforts replaced the trend of a topical chronicling of individuals and works within the history of Latin rhetoric with a more representative continuity showing the causal relationship, impact and consequences of social, political and intellectual forces that shaped Latin rhetoric. In short, his work has taken that vast, complex and sustaining work in Latin rhetoric that has transcended centuries and crossed cultures, and provided a coherence that allows us to better understand what has been one of the most enduring, complex, and influential forces in education in the West.

Murphy's efforts to provide a thorough, scholarly explanation of the role and place of Latin rhetoric began early in his academic career. Prior to Murphy's scholarly efforts, as intimated above, the historical study of Latin rhetoric lacked diachronic coherence. That is not to say that impressive scholarship had not already been done, for the general work on Roman rhetoric, and the specific studies of prominent individuals such as Cicero, is indeed impressive. What was missing, as noted above, was a more macroscopic explanation of the range of Latin rhetoric in the West and an explanation of the nature and forces at work that accounted for Latin rhetoric's pervasive and enduring impact, not the least of which was the transition of Latin rhetoric from the Classical Period into the Middle Ages.

The Classical Traditions of Rhetoric and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric

Murphy's dissertation was an early effort to provide groundbreaking work that illuminated the important but unique contributions of medieval rhetoric: "Chaucer, Gower, and the English Rhetorical Tradition" (1956). While the title of his dissertation indicates that the work concentrates on British rhetoric, the dissertation itself reveals a clear and thorough analysis of Latin rhetoric in the shaping of early British rhetorical theory. Furthermore, Murphy showed that while medieval rhetoric was doubtlessly shaped and influenced by classical rhetoric, it was not a derivative, watered-down version of classical rhetoric but rather possessed a vibrant and enduring identity in its own right that was the consequence of responding to social and cultural needs. What Murphy also showed was that while medieval rhetoric had its own identity, that very identity (like classical rhetoric) was itself multifaceted. Murphy's early work revealed that the manifestations of the medieval arts of rhetoric were dramatically different than – but still tied to – its classical antecedents. What accounted for such changes and what connections existed between the classical traditions of rhetoric and the medieval arts of rhetoric in the Latin West? This question was the driving force for much of Murphy's most influential work. One of Murphy's most significant and enduring contributions to the study of Latin rhetoric centers on his explanation of the transition from classical to medieval rhetoric.

Murphy's early, groundbreaking scholarship in rhetoric untied the scholarly knot of how, why and when classical rhetoric ceased and medieval rhetoric began. His 1974 volume *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* identifies the dominant traditions of classical rhetoric in the West and illustrates well his efforts to account for the transition from classical to medieval rhetoric. Murphy recognizes four major traditions that had evolved into late antiquity. The first tradition was the Aristotelian/Platonic tradition that concentrated on a philosophical perspective examining the inherent nature and worth of rhetoric as a subject matter worthy of study. Since its inception in ancient Greece, and particularly its emergence in Athens, philosophical questions emerged challenging rhetoric's merits as a serious subject warranting the status of a discipline. This Hellenic-based tradition would have an enormous impact on the philosophical founding of Latin rhetoric by such rhetoricians as Cicero and Quintilian.

The second major classical tradition that Murphy identifies was the tradition of Cicero and Quintilian. This tradition, drawing from the Hellenic antecedents of such thinkers as those mentioned above, also stressed the rhetoric of Isocrates and concentrated on the development of the individual for a productive life and the inherent benefits of civic rhetoric. The nature of this civic tradition has been so clearly identified with Cicero that it became not only a dominant tradition of Roman rhetoric but synonymous with much of what was to become the dominant strain of Latin rhetoric in the West. In fact, this tradition would become so dominant in the West that it would be instantiated as a part of the trivium in the Middle Ages and endure for centuries as a foundation for higher education in the West.

In part, as Murphy revealed, the endurance of Ciceronian rhetoric in the West is credited not only to Cicero but also to Quintilian, whose detailed and comprehensive work

provided the basis for the application of civic rhetoric into the educational curriculum. It is important to note that although Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* was, for all purposes, lost during the Middle Ages, the remnants of its views and orientation had already been well established within Western thought and were so compatible with Ciceronian rhetoric that its impact persisted only to flourish with its re-discovery in the Renaissance by Poggio Bracciolini in the Fifteenth Century. In the latter part of his career, as we will discuss later, Murphy concentrated on research to make the benefits of Latin rhetoric understood in the history of writing instruction as well as a recently revised volume on the benefits of Quintilian's work for today's student.

The third tradition, the Sophistic tradition, had a major and pervasive impact on Latin rhetoric. It is important to observe that of all the traditions of rhetoric that Murphy identified in his early scholarship, the Sophistic tradition was the most pervasive; the impact of Sophistic rhetoric continued unabated in the Latin-speaking West as well as the Greek-speaking East. The tradition of Sophistic rhetoric was not only expansive, covering rhetoric throughout the Roman Empire, but also enduring, covering centuries spanning antiquity and well into the Christian centuries. In fact, the Sophistic tradition of rhetoric even enjoyed its own renaissance called the "Second Sophistic" by Philostratus, further ensuring its persistence and popularity from the second century B.C. onward.

It was out of this context that Murphy's early work, "St. Augustine and the Debate about a Christian Rhetoric" made such an important contribution to the study of Latin rhetoric. Many scholars, including Murphy himself, argued that St. Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* should be viewed as a response challenging the tradition of Second Sophistic rhetoric with a Christian alternative. Murphy's essay on St. Augustine revealed why this important church father's work helped to usher in medieval rhetoric in the West. St. Augustine's views on rhetoric, captured well in his *De doctrina christiana*, were a direct challenge to the Second Sophistic and became a paradigm for what would become a Christian Latin rhetoric in the West (Enos, Thompson *et al.*). Early church fathers, Murphy pointed out in his seminal article, opposed rhetoric largely because they had difficulty dissociating the pagan origins, secular orientation, and social influence of classical rhetoric from the *ratio* or systematic processes of rhetoric. Church leaders such as St. Augustine, however, were able to recognize that the processes of rhetoric could be severed from its pagan orientation and, in fact, re-applied to re-create a Christian rhetoric. Murphy's scholarship revealed that once church fathers recognized and accepted the views of St. Augustine and others, "pagan rhetoric" could become Christian rhetoric and respond to the needs of the medieval world, much in the same spirit as pagan rhetoric had done in antiquity. As Murphy showed, rhetoric survived and thrived in the West because it continued to meet societal and cultural needs; the sustaining features of rhetoric's adaptability and utility were the major factors that explain how rhetoric survived, thrived and evolved in the Middle Ages.

The fourth tradition of classical rhetoric that Murphy presented was the grammatical tradition. While this tradition has received the least attention from historians of rhetoric, it may have, in one sense at least, had the largest impact on Latin rhetoric. Numerous handbooks were available in antiquity that provided the fundamental structure of language, making wide-spread literacy possible and shared. The fact that these grammatical instruction manuals were in Latin in the West provided a uniformity of language-use whose implications and impact have not yet been fully realized. From these four traditions, we can see

that Murphy provided a macroscopic framework that explains well the transition from classical rhetoric to medieval rhetoric as well as the various manifestations of rhetoric throughout the Roman Empire.

Murphy's scholarship explained how and why classical rhetoric evolved from these four traditions to become the three medieval arts of rhetoric: *ars dictaminis*, *ars praedicandi*, and *ars poetriae*. The three medieval arts of rhetoric, as was the case in classical rhetoric, were a response to the social, political and religious needs of their age, respectively, the art of letter-writing, the art of preaching, and the art of creative composition and grammatical structure. Of shared importance, and as Murphy revealed, these manifestations of rhetoric were the foundation for the Latin-based rhetoric of the West. Murphy also published a companion volume that offered texts of these three *ars* (1971). The interest that Murphy generated from such works encouraged others to continue historical studies and soon scholars began to provide coherent histories of not only medieval rhetoric but also renaissance rhetoric. Murphy himself nurtured this study by identifying many prominent renaissance works that he chronicled both in bibliographical studies that made available the richness of Latin rhetoric in the Renaissance as well as individual studies of prominent, later figures such as Peter Ramus.

Latin Rhetoric and Writing Instruction

In addition to providing a macroscopic structure for the study of Latin rhetoric, Murphy's scholarship also made apparent the contribution of Latin rhetoric to education in the West. To this end, much of his work centered on the instruction of oral and written rhetoric. His edited volume, *A Short History of Writing Instruction*, especially the most recent (3rd) edition, provides (again) a coherence to the history of rhetorical instruction ranging from ancient to contemporary rhetoric. Murphy edited all three editions but his own concentration was in Roman rhetoric, which is apparent in his contributing chapter on writing instruction in Rome. This chapter complemented well Murphy's interest in Quintilian and how the importance of what Quintilian contributed still has merit in today's teaching of oral and written communication. It is in his study of Quintilian's contribution to rhetoric that we can best see another dimension to Murphy's range of contributions to Latin rhetoric. Murphy saw in the works of Quintilian not only the essence of the benefits of Latin rhetoric for Roman education but how Quintilian's works contribute to today's education. His most recent contributions to the teachings of Quintilian appear both in the 2016 special issue that he guest-edited for *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* (19.2) and in the masterful work that he co-edited with Cleve Wiese in 2016: *Quintilian: On the Teaching of Speaking & Writing*.

Conclusion

This short essay has attempted to provide the range and depth of James J. Murphy's contributions to the study of Latin rhetoric. We can see how his scholarship has not only

accounted for macroscopic trends that are evident in the study of Latin rhetoric, but also furthered our understanding of the contributions and impact of rhetoricians such as Quintilian. Finally, we have seen how Murphy has contributed to the study of Latin rhetoric by offering texts that can be used in the classroom, ones that not only show the historical significance of Latin rhetoric in the shaping of social thought and political action in the West, but also the direct applications of Latin rhetoric for today's teaching, so that students may benefit from effective communication skills through the teaching contributions of centuries of educators and practitioners in the West whose gifts continue to benefit the students of today as much as those of our history.

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