

Robert Wardy. *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and Their Successors*. Issues in Ancient Philosophy. New York: Routledge, 1996. Pp. viii, 197. \$55.00. ISBN 0-415-14642-9.

This book offers classical scholars very little on the actual, historical origins of rhetoric; rather, Wardy provides a purely "philosophical" reading of what he deems to be the problematic intellectual origins of the rhetorical project in the ontological/epistemological debates of Plato, Parmenides, Gorgias, and Aristotle.

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Whereas Parmenides (we are told) had conceived of *logos* as the rational argumentation that leads to Aletheia, Gorgias (the pivotal figure in this book) "strives to fuse all aspects of *logos*, irrational as well as logical, into a single overwhelming force" that (like poetry or magic) will attack and subdue the soul of the auditor through a type of "psychic rape" that "steadily erodes" and subverts the listener's autonomy. It is, for Wardy, a question, ultimately, of power. Plato, who has no positive "philosophy" to impart, responds to this challenge by privileging the *act* of dialectic, and by reinstating "all the polarities" that Gorgias had "occluded." After a discussion of Aristotle and others, the final chapter tests this problematic in a strange discourse on the gender of philosophy.

The book is clear enough and, for those who find this sort of thing persuasive, fairly well written. At least, the author tends to avoid jargon, and his theses strive to be imaginative. Throughout, meanings reverse, "juxtapositions" divide, and "polarities" "collapse." Yet the book is marked also by a facile, uncritical use of sources, and much a priori reasoning. The Greek alphabet (we are assured from the outset) is nowhere in evidence, and knowledge of the relevant bibliography is severely restricted. There is, accordingly, little close engagement with the actual texts under consideration and, in consequence, there are not a few outright errors of interpretation and fact. Clearly, this is not a carefully weighted monograph on the history of rhetoric per se but a treatise on certain contemporary concerns in hermeneutics—assisted or accommodated, as it were, by the ancient texts. Like many such works, interpretations are adopted more because they fit than because they are true. Sadly, then, Wardy's view of the birth of rhetoric, if we may quote from Antiphon, πιστότερον ἢ ἀληθέστερον σύγκειται.

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CW 92.1 (1998)

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