

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Rhetorical Prolepsis And The Dialectical Tier Of Argumentation



In contemporary studies of argumentation, no development is more important than the decline of the formal deductive model and the rise of informal logic. The formalist perspective, dominant through most of this century, holds that an argument consists of propositions related to one another as reason or reasons to a conclusion. Thus, Irving Copi, in a classic formulation of this concept, defines an argument as “any group of propositions of which one is claimed to follow from the others, which are regarded as providing evidence for the truth of that one” (Copi 1961: 7). Conceived in these terms, arguments exist in isolation from their contexts and are to be studied in terms of the formal relationships between reasons and conclusion. Their social and political dimensions are set to the side. Over the past several decades, in a broad interdisciplinary and international movement, the formalist approach has been criticized by scholars interested in developing a more flexible and more socially responsive approach to argument. Proponents of this approach do not deny the existence and significance of formal structure, but they insist that form alone is not adequate to give a realistic account of how arguments work. From this perspective, argument should be studied through an informal logic that considers the motives, goals, and social contexts that condition the process of arguing. Thus, Trudy Govier, defines argument as “a set of claims that a person puts forward to persuade an audience that some further claim is true” (Govier 1987: 1).**[i]** On this account, and in contrast to Copi’s position, arguments are used for and by people; someone is trying to do something to others, and the agents and audiences involved in this activity are essential rather than incidental to the nature of argument. An important corollary of this approach is that arguments must be studied within two tiers. The first tier relates to core structure and yields a formal account of an argument as a product. But this tier cannot account for rational persuasion, the goal of argument as process, since arguments actually surface within a competitive field.

As Ralph Johnson has explained, the participants in any argumentative situation “know that there are objections to the Arguer’s position. Indeed the Arguer must know this herself and so it is typical to attempt to diffuse such within the course of argument. If she does not deal with the objections and criticisms, then to that degree her argument is not going to satisfy the dictates of rationality.... Hence if the Arguer really wished to persuade the Other rationally, the Arguer is obligated to take account of these objections, these opposing points of view, these criticisms” (Johnson 1996: 354; see also Walton 1990). In short, beyond the structural level, an argument must engage a dialectical tier in which it competes with other arguments for rational assent.

On Johnson’s account, argumentation must be dialectical if it is to be rational, and the dialectical process entails positioning and structuring arguments within a controversy. This view explicitly stresses the agonistic dimension of argument and implicitly recognizes its grounding in social situations, and both of these features indicate a strong affinity between dialectical argumentation and rhetoric. In fact, Johnson’s description of the dialectical tier in argument seems to echo one of the traditional precepts of rhetorical lore – the figure of thought most often called *prolepsis*.

It is no surprise that Johnson and other informal logicians fail to note the connection between prolepsis and their own work on dialectic. Prolepsis is an ancient and persistent item in the rhetorical lexicon, but it occupies an obscure and seemingly technical place within that lexicon, and over time, it has been called by different names, defined in strikingly different ways, and divided and sub-divided into a labyrinth of even more technical terminology (see Dupriez 1991: 355-56.) Nevertheless, the basic idea conveyed by the figure is quite simple, and once we strip away the technical baggage, we can hardly miss the affinity between the strategy it indicates and the dialectical interest in argument expressed by informal logicians. Prolepsis is a figure of anticipation; in using it, the speaker or writer anticipates and forestalls objections (Lanham 1991: 120), or as Abraham Fraunce puts the point in plain, old Elizabethan English, prolepsis occurs “when we present and meet with that which might be objected and do make answer to the same” (Fraunce 1950: 100). This concern about identifying and responding to objections is closely related to Johnson’s view of how dialectical arguers proceed.

In noting and emphasizing this affinity between prolepsis and the dialectical concept of argument, I do not mean to suggest that the two are equivalent. A

strategy for producing particular arguments has a much different status than a philosophically derived norm for evaluating argumentation in general. Nevertheless, I think it significant that informal logicians, as they come to grips with the social dimensions of argument, invoke ideas that connect rational processes with strategic considerations and with aspects of the traditional rhetoric of persuasion. The relationship between rhetoric and argumentation has become an issue of some significance in recent years (Wenzel 1987, 1990; Hansen 1997), and a careful consideration of rhetorical strategies like prolepsis might offer a concrete basis for specifying this relationship. In what follows I want to make a tentative first step in that direction.

My own study of the rhetoric of oratory also encourages this effort. As I have read and reread the texts of canonical orators such as Demosthenes, Cicero, Burke, and especially Lincoln, I have become increasingly impressed by the way that they construct and position themselves within a universe of discourse. The eloquence of these authors, I have come to believe, is, in some part, a function of their skill in representing, framing, and resolving controversies within the boundaries of a single discourse. This skill entails the development of an effective voice in multi-vocal contexts, and therefore I think of it as a matter of dialogic placement. As the term dialogic suggests, dialectical argument is only part of this process; other elements, especially the imaginative use of language, are also required. Nevertheless, a dialectical sensibility – a well developed capacity to recognize and encounter argumentative objections – seems a necessary condition to achieve this rhetorical skill.

Rhetorical figures, perhaps because of their traditional association with style, have received scant attention from contemporary students of argumentation. **[ii]** Yet, in the canonical oratorical texts, such figures appear prominently and recurrently as strategies of dialectical placement. Prolepsis is the most obvious figure of this type, but there are a number of others including:

1. *prosopopoeia* in which a speaker gives voice to an inanimate object or a person not present and constructs a dialogue in which the personified other raises points that are answered or refuted (Quintilian IX.2.30);
2. *correctio* in which a speaker articulates a point and then retracts it through self-correction (Lanham 1991: 42); and
3. *hyperbole* in which a speaker makes a plausible case for an exaggerated argument supporting her position so as to encourage acceptance of a weaker but still sufficient argument concerning the same position (Lanham 1991: 87;

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 290-91).

In all these instances, the figure works “dialectically” by placing an argument within a field of arguments. These figures often have additional functions as they help position the speaker in reference to other, competing speakers- and thus they may become strategies of dialogic, and not just dialectical, placement. But the argumentative function is an important part of the dialogic process, and the study of how these figures work in oratorical texts should offer some insight into the practical workings of argument at the level of the dialectic tier.

Of all the orators I have studied, I have found that Lincoln uses these figures the most often and with the most telling effect. Eventually I hope to conduct a detailed study of how they function in his prose, but in this paper, I have only enough space to analyze one text - an early speech in the corpus of Lincoln’s oratory. This text offers a useful example of how prolepsis operates rhetorically and suggests some of the complex ways in which rhetorical functions merge with aspects of dialectical argumentation.

The “Address to the Young Man’s Lyceum,” delivered on January 31, 1838, is one of the earliest of Lincoln’s speeches for which we have a reasonably complete text. The speech is of interest for many reasons (see Jaffa 1982: 183-235, Thurow 1976: 20-37, and Forgie 1979: 55-88), but I want to concentrate on just one characteristic - the way that Lincoln positions his own ideas, arguments, and sentiments in relation to his audience. This effort to encompass the audience is a hallmark of Lincoln’s rhetoric, and in his later, more famous, and more subtle speeches, Lincoln’s texts seem to absorb the audience and context in an almost seamless performance (see Leff 1988, 1997). In the “Address to Young Man’s Lyceum,” the same rhetorical sensibility appears, but it is executed less skillfully and is easier for the critical reader to detect, and the most obvious tactic Lincoln uses is a prolepsis.

The theme of this address is “the perpetuation of our political institutions,” and in the introduction, Lincoln argues that the threat to existing institutions does not come from outside sources but from within the American community. Specifically, he maintains that the threat takes the form of disregard for law and resort to “the wild and furious passions” of the mob as substitute for the “sober judgment of Courts.” Instances of this “mobocratic spirit” are so many and so far spread throughout the country that Lincoln claims it would be tedious to recount “the horrors of all of them.” Instead he refers to two instances, one in Mississippi, the

other in St. Louis, to illustrate his point.

In making the point, Lincoln presents a complex rhetorical development that incorporates both argumentative and stylistic features. Because of its argumentative complexity and because of the importance of its wording, I need to quote extensively from the passage in question: In the Mississippi case, they first commenced by hanging the regular gamblers: a set of men, certainly not following for a livelihood, a very useful, or very honest occupation; but one which, so far from being forbidden by the laws, was actually licensed by an act of the Legislature, passed but a single year before.

Next, negroes, suspected of conspiring to raise an insurrection, were caught and hanged in all parts of the State: then, white men, supposed to be in league with the negroes; and finally, strangers, from neighboring states, going thither on business were, in many instances, subjected to the same fate. Thus went on this process of hanging, from gamblers to negroes, from negroes to white citizens, and from these to strangers; till, dead men were seen literally dangling from the boughs of trees upon every road side; and in numbers almost sufficient to rival the native Spanish moss of the country, as a drapery of the forest.... [In the second case in St. Louis] a mulatto man, by the name of McIntosh, was seized in the street, dragged to the suburbs of the city, chained to a tree, and actually burned to death; all within a single hour from the time he had been a freedman, attending to his own business, and at peace with the world....

But you are, perhaps, ready to ask, 'What has this to do with the perpetuation of our political institutions?' I answer it has much to do with it. Its direct consequences are, comparatively speaking, but a small evil; and much of its danger consists, in the proneness of our minds to regard its direct, as its only consequences. Abstractly considered, the hanging of the gamblers at Vicksburg, was but of little consequence. They constitute a portion of the population, that is worse than useless in any community; and their death, if no pernicious example be set by it, is never a matter of reasonable regret with any one. If they were annually swept from the stage of existence, by plague or small pox, honest men would, perhaps, be much profited by the operation. Similar too, is the correct reasoning in regard to the negro at St. Louis. He had forfeited his life, by the perpetration of an outrageous murder, upon one of the most worthy and respectable citizens of the city; and had he not died as he did, he must have died by the sentence of the law, in a very short time afterwards. As to him alone, it was well the way it was, as it could other-wise have been. But the example, in either

case, was fearful.... Thus by the operation of this mobocratic spirit, which all admit is now abroad in the land, the strongest bulwark of any Government, and particularly those constituted like ours, may effectually be broken down and destroyed - I mean the attachment of the People. Whenever this effect shall be produced among us; whenever the vicious portion of the population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and thousands, burn churches, ravage and rob provision stores, throw printing presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure, and with impunity; depend upon it, this Government cannot last (Lincoln 1989: 29-30).

The first step in this development is a vivid description of the horrors of mob action in the two instances. With that phase completed, the audience might expect Lincoln to press on to his conclusion. But he does not. Instead, he invokes prolepsis and raises an objection to the emerging logic of his position: "But you are, perhaps, ready to ask, 'What has this to do with the perpetuation of our political institutions?'"

In response to this question, Lincoln distinguishes between the direct and indirect consequences of mob action. The direct consequences, he asserts, are not so horrible, and he proceeds not simply to raise an objection to the cases he cited but to present them in a different light, to reframe them through a different set of terms. Note that in the Mississippi case, the gamblers, in the first version, are engaged in a lawful, if somewhat disreputable business, but in the second, they are dismissed as "worse than useless," and their deaths, other things being equal, would occasion "no regret with anyone." "Similar too," Lincoln adds, is the case of the "negro at St. Louis." In this restatement of the case, the mulatto named McIntosh becomes a nameless "negro", and while in the first description he had been a "freeman, attending to his own business, and at peace with the world," he now emerges as an outrageous murderer who had he not "died as he did, he must have died by the sentence of the law in a very short time afterwards."

Lincoln completes the prolepsis by refuting the objection he has just formulated. For this purpose, he considers the indirect consequences of vigilante justice and argues that mob rule always sets a fearful example. Once set in motion, it proceeds through its own momentum, punishing the innocent as well as the guilty, and continuing "step by step, till all the walls erected for the defense of person and property of individuals are trodden down, and disregarded." These outbursts encourage the lawless in "spirit to become lawless in practice," and they demoralize good citizens who seek to abide by the law but who must lose

faith in a government unable to protect them. In the end, the “mobocratic spirit” breaks and destroys the strongest bulwark of a free government – “the attachment of the People.”

In one sense, the passage that I have just summarized takes the form of a simple prolepsis. Lincoln states a position, then raises an objection to it, and ends by refuting the objection. But something more than that is also at work. This rhetorical development not only moves through a sequence of propositions, but it also orchestrates the emotions of the audience. Lincoln begins with a warning against mobocracy phrased so as to illustrate its horrors concretely and vividly. Then, he does not simply raise an objection, but he seems “to give in to the prejudices of the audience” (Thurow 1976: 26), as he re-presents his examples in language that justifies the mob and turns anger against its victims. And finally he surmounts both of his earlier perspectives through sober consideration of the remote, indirect consequences of mob action. In short, Lincoln seeks to move the audience from anger against the inhumanity of the mob, to vicarious participation in its energy, and then to an elevated position from which it might control either one of these emotional responses.

This development dramatically enacts one of the main themes of Lincoln’s text. Repeatedly and with special emphasis at the end of the Address, Lincoln maintains that the nation can be preserved only through rational means. While passion once helped form America, it “will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense” (Lincoln 1989: 36). The section on mob rule embodies this principle. It demonstrates that a merely emotional reaction against mob rule offers no remedy to the problem of disrespect for law. Such a response is hardly better than the emotions that drive people to mob action, since, in both cases, passion controls our response to a specific situation. What is needed instead is the discipline of reason and a habit of mind that turns from the direct emotions of the moment to rational considerations of long-term and indirect consequences. And this discipline is embedded in the rhetorical action of the text. What we witness is not the destruction of an opposing position but its absorption into a synthetic perspective. Lincoln accommodates his audience by elevating it, and in the process, he turns prolepsis into a strategy for transcendence.

Viewed in the context of Lincoln’s oratorical career, the Lyceum Address foreshadows a notable feature of his rhetoric – the scrupulously careful placement of his own ideas, arguments, and sentiments into a social context; his own

position emerges in and through a network of controversy, and it is constructed a way that seems to subsume rather than to destroy or dismiss alternative positions. Consequently, his rhetoric typically works to highlight and celebrate controversy by embodying it and directing it toward a synthetic end; the competition of rival arguments evolves toward a point where cooperation seems possible and desirable.

In his later speeches, this tendency is developed less obtrusively and more skillfully than in the Lyceum Address. The sequence of literal objection and response conveyed through prolepsis is displaced by other dialogic figures. This development culminates in his most famous speeches, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, where prolepsis (the correction of someone else) gives way to *correctio* (self-correction). But the evolution of Lincoln's dialogical sensibility is a topic for another paper.

In this paper, I hope to have illustrated the complexity of prolepsis and its relevance for those interested in the dialectical tier of argument. The Lyceum Address reveals that prolepsis is not simply or necessarily a technical instrument of rhetorical style; it can become a complex principle that coordinates the logical, emotional, and stylistic dimensions of a discourse while it also positions the discourse within a field of controversy. Prolepsis, then, functions as a figure of dialogic placement since it negotiates the interplay among language, argument, audience, and context that is central to rhetorical practice.

Finally, I want to return to the issue of the relationship between rhetoric and argumentation that I raised earlier in this paper. My study of prolepsis emphasizes an important affinity between rhetoric and dialectical argumentation: Both operate in the medium of controversy, and to achieve their ends, both must engage opposing positions. But the rhetorical task, as I have tried to sketch it, entails management of elements that extend beyond argument *per se* and that enter into the social conditions surrounding it. Thus, Lincoln does not simply place his argument in context. He also constructs a persona for himself and orchestrates the sentiments of his audience. These rhetorical concerns represent a controversy in relation to the speaker and the social\political positions he occupies. Because it is designed as an intervention in the social context itself, rhetoric seeks not just to present and position arguments but to influence the conditions that affect reception of arguments. Hence, whereas dialectic deals with competing arguments within a field of rational controversy, rhetoric ultimately deals with relationships among arguers within a field of social interaction.

It is this distinction between argument and arguer that I consider as a key to understanding how rhetorical action may be distinguished from dialectical argument. But to support this hypothesis, I would have to argue at greater length and to inquire into many more instances than the one I have considered in this paper. For the moment, I can only hope that the hypothesis is sufficiently plausible to justify further inquiry into the dialogic and dialectic dimensions of argument, and more specifically, that it might stimulate scholars to take a fresh look at the figures of rhetoric, to examine them in terms of how they are manifested in actual cases, and to consider how they might help us develop a thick conception of rhetorical argumentation and its connection with informal logic.

NOTES

i. In later editions of this book Govier has modified this definition. In the fourth and most recent edition (1997: 2), she writes that: 'An argument is a set of claims that a person puts forward in an attempt to show that some further claim is rationally acceptable.' This later definition does not differ as obviously and dramatically from Copi as her earlier one, but the basic difference persists.

ii. An exception in this respect is Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 168-179. But as they approach the figures argumentatively, they insist on bracketing their stylistic dimensions. For reasons I hope to make clear later in this paper, this categorical distinction between style and argument overlooks the complexity of the way the figures operate in practice and occludes some interesting and productive questions about the relationship between dialectical argument and rhetoric. These limitations may account for the failure of other argumentation scholars to pursue the line of inquiry opened by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca.

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