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A Symposium on Rob Goodman’s *Words on Fire: Eloquence and Its Conditions*

*Joy Connolly, Matthew Landauer, Cary J. Nederman, and
Torrey Shanks, with a response by Rob Goodman*

Rob Goodman: *Words on Fire: Eloquence and Its Conditions* (Cambridge University Press, 2022, Pp. 224.)

Introduction

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Words on Fire returns to the classical tradition of rhetoric to recover the central place of eloquence in political thought. Political rhetoric generally assumes an asymmetrical relationship between speaker and audience, but the classical tradition also developed resources to render this relationship more equitable. One such resource is the conception of the rhetorical situation as one of vulnerability on the part of both speaker and audience. However, this conception is increasingly threatened by “algorithmic” practices of political rhetoric that shield elite speakers from exposure to risk, as well as by the overcorrecting reaction to this development seen in the demagogic rhetoric of “unfiltered” spontaneity.

Turning to the classical tradition of eloquence can help us reconstruct an alternative to both of these troubling tendencies. I call this alternative “spontaneous *decorum*” (10). This combines qualities associated with spontaneity, because it welcomes risk and uncertainty as part of public deliberation, with qualities associated with decorum, because it is conceived as inherently stylized, artificial, and set apart from ordinary speech.

Part 1 considers the development of this model of eloquence in classical antiquity, with an emphasis on Cicero and his interlocutors. Chapter 1

addresses Cicero's resistance to the systematization of rhetoric and contrasts it with the more rationalized model of speech developed by Julius Caesar. Chapter 2 focuses on Cicero's enlistment of the Athenian orator Demosthenes in his defense of decorous, adaptable, and polyvocal speech. A postscript to part 1 addresses the questions raised by Quintilian and Tacitus about the viability of Ciceronian rhetoric after the demise of the republican politics that shaped it.

Part 2 investigates ways in which more recent writers have worked to translate Ciceronian rhetoric into modern institutional settings. Chapter 3 focuses on Edmund Burke's role in the eighteenth-century reception of classical eloquence and investigates his provocative claim that disruptive speech can act as a spur to sound political judgment, even under rule-bound, constitutional government. Chapter 4 explores the means by which Thomas Babington Macaulay attempted to revive the ancient conviction that history is a branch of rhetoric, arguing that his incorporation of oratory into historiography was an effort to depict and promote practices of political judgment that he saw as increasingly endangered by the emergence of mass politics. This chapter also contrasts his historiography with the resolutely antirhetorical method of Alexis de Tocqueville.

Chapter 5 considers how Carl Schmitt constructed the contemporary "crisis of parliamentary democracy" as a rhetorical crisis, and how his proposed solution—the assimilation of rhetoric and ritual—informed the illiberal turn in his thought. It concludes that a more nuanced conception of ritual action can help us retain what is worthwhile in Schmitt's account of speech as ritual without following him to his authoritarian conclusions.

The conclusion shows how thinking in terms of rhetorical relationships and the ongoing rhetorical "risk shift" (7) can illuminate contemporary debates on political polarization. I argue that polarized citizens are engaged in deficient but self-protective forms of listening, and that this behavior is a justifiable response to a broken rhetorical bargain.