

Frank Speech and the Psychology of Shame in Athenian Oratory

Authorities both ancient and modern generally understand *parrhēsia*, “frank” or “free speech,” as discourse of a spontaneous, transparent, and minimally rhetorical character. I would like to complicate that picture. Focusing on the political oratory of fourth-century Athens, I shall argue that the whole process of advertising and validating one’s “straight talk” — one’s *parrhēsia* — needs to be recognized as an effort to influence reception, and therefore as inherently rhetorical. Applying the insights of social psychology to key passages from Attic oratory, I analyze *parrhēsia* as *ingroup criticism* posing *social identity threat*. Viewed thus, an orator’s avowedly frank speech reveals how it seeks to leverage collective shame all the while that it negotiates resistance.

First, *parrhēsia*’s counterintuitive rhetoricity. Foucault, with ample support, reads *parrhēsia* as discourse shrinking the distance between inner thought and overt expression to zero — speech stripped, then, of rhetorical masking or packaging (12–21; cf. Dem. 10.76; Arist. *Rh.* 1382b19–20; *Eth. Nic.* 1124b29–30; Saxonhouse 92; Sluiter and Rosen 8–11; Carmignato 34). If nothing else, that impresses on us *parrhēsia*’s ideological valence as minimally rhetorical. It does not, however, stop us from seeing *parrhēsia* as a kind of rhetorical posturing, a “persuading though manhood,” to quote Roisman (268–75). Yet to understand *parrhēsia* as both message (the unvarnished truth) and medium (the orator’s sincere persona as rhetorical filter) at best equivocates, at worst, leaves a parrhesiastic style looking like yet another rhetorical dodge.

To overcome that difficulty, I view rhetoric as not simply surface ornament or packaging, but social outreach forging connections and structuring reception. Approached thus, *parrhēsia* and its risks — those of being ignored or worse (Dem. 3.30–32; *Exordia* 15; Isoc. 8.14; Pl. *Ap.* 31e; Ar. *Ach.* 370–373, 649–651; Foucault 15–19; cf. Carter) — reveal aspects on which social psychology sheds light. Thus to voice criticism of the group to which one belongs, to play, in other words, a role very much like that of parrhesiast, can be to alienate listeners by threatening their collective self-esteem, what psychologists term social identity threat. Hence tactics whereby ingroup critics validate credentials and negotiate resistance (Branscombe et al.; Hornsey), tactics much in evidence in ancient sources. So, for instance, Demosthenes, berating listeners as willing victims of flattery, in one speech insulates their core sense of self by alleging not them but their past laxity to have been conquered (3.3–5), in another, validates his critique through a carefully structured litany of patriotic credentials (8.21, 24, 32, 69–72). Note, too, the use of deviant derogation (Hutchison et al.) to cultivate a shared sense of what “we” are not — or should, at least, strive not to be ([Dem.] 13.15–19). Thus we see how *parrhēsia*, when leveraging shame, carefully stage-managed the persuasive work it sought to do. Yet without this element of shame, of perceived threat to self-definition, *parrhēsia* loses its teeth. We need, therefore, to understand it as, in practice, inherently rhetorical: a tricky exercise in psychology and reverse psychology all at once.

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