



ORAL TRADITION

Festschrift for John Miles Foley

This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65th birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).

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The Metonym: Rhetoric and Oral Tradition at the Crossroads

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Metaphor is the glamor trope, getting all the attention in literary, linguistic, and philosophical circles (for instance, Lakoff and Johnson 1980). However, metonymy, the figure of association, may actually be the more important element to explain how human language and thought connect. The honoree of this Festschrift has demonstrated the centrality of metonymic referentiality to oral traditional aesthetics and noetics. Metonymy is also a concept in rhetorical studies, but generally has not been viewed as central to the rhetorical enterprise of persuasion. By adopting John Miles Foley's work as a lens through which to view the rhetorical function of metonyms, this article demonstrates that perhaps metonymy is of much greater significance to rhetoric than previously thought.

The Metonym in Oral Tradition

Oral-formulaic theory, until the publication of Foley's *Immanent Art* in 1991, seemed to portray the oral traditional artist not as an artist at all, but as a technician who put together ready-made structures—epithets, lines, type-scenes, and the like—into relatively standard packages. Because the conventions and quality of oral traditions appear so different from literary works, scholars struggled to understand how great works of literature such as the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, or countless others birthed from oral traditions could have developed from such a process. Foley, instead of asking how such works came about in spite of their origins, turned the question around—could the conventions of oral traditions be the *source* of artistic power rather than a limitation to be mitigated? The answer is, of course, yes, and his scholarship identifies metonymy as the key to oral traditional art.

Foley defines metonymy as “a mode of signification wherein the part stands for the whole . . . a situation in which a text or version is enriched by an unspoken context that dwarfs the textual artifact” (1991:7). For example, the epithets in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* are not simply structural elements strung together, providing a one-to-one correspondence between word and object. Rather, they serve as a portal to a larger, complex meaning inherent in the tradition. For example, “‘grey-eyed Athena’ would serve as an approved traditional channel or pathway for summoning the Athena not just of this or that particular moment, but rather of all moments in the experience of audience and poet” (1995:5). In a traditional context, the epithet is not only a convenient metrical unit, but a metonymic shorthand that allows the poet and the audience to

access a rich, complex signification inherent in their common experiences. The performance is not merely a passive event for the audience, but an opportunity for co-creation of meaning with the poet through the vehicle of the metonymic referent. The performance, in other words, is not only an aesthetic event, but a *rhetorical* event, as the performer, in a manner of speaking, persuades the listening audience to participate in and agree with his/her way of directing the communal experience.

The Metonym, Rhetorically Speaking

We can trace the rhetorical study of metonymy back to the ancient Greek rhetoricians, who considered it one of the major tropes. However, the ancients tended to define metonymy rather vaguely, depending on examples to communicate its meaning (Arata 2005:65). Metonymy, like most figures and tropes, was thought to be decorative, a feature of style enhancing the beauty of a speech but adding little to the content. More recently, rhetoric has recognized the cognitive function of metonymy, starting with the work of Kenneth Burke (1945:503), who identified metonymy as one of the four master tropes that play a role in discovering truth (along with metaphor, synecdoche, and irony). In other words, a metonym is not merely a literary embellishment, but represents the associative process that underlies much of how human beings access and create knowledge. As a persuasive tool, metonymy allows a rhetor to tap into shared associations with his or her audience.

The previous sentence is a useful, albeit reductive, definition of the Burkean concept of rhetorical identification. For Burke, “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (1969:55). Essentially, Burke believed that human beings are naturally alienated from one another. The rhetoric of identification is an attempt to create connection and eliminate the division. Metonymic referentiality can be viewed as a type of identificatory rhetoric—the oral traditional poet not only creates complex, traditional meaning by the use of recognized epithets, but he also creates a commonality with and among listeners. Using and understanding the associative meanings of the epithet demonstrates that an individual belongs to this traditional community. An outsider wanting to belong must come to understand not just the words, but their associative meaning. An outsider seeking to move this audience rhetorically can do so by effectively tapping into the same metonymic system of reference used by the oral traditional poet, by identifying himself or herself with the values and assumptions that the audience traditionally associates with these words.

Tradition as Rhetoric

When I present the concept of metonymic referentiality to students in various courses in rhetoric or literacy studies, I ask them to tell me the story of the three little pigs. Most students can easily string together the appropriate phrases and sequence of events: houses of straw, sticks, and bricks; “little pig, little pig, let me (come) in;” and so on. This example clearly illustrates to

them how the structural aspects of an oral tradition allow the oral poet, with no recourse to writing, to string together long poems. But more is required to understand how these features create meaning, which is the essence of metonymic referentiality. Meaning is also the necessary element for such features to work as rhetoric.

Recently, when one student said, “and then a wolf comes in,” another student quickly corrected, “no, it’s a *big bad wolf*.” The second student’s correction is crucial. A wolf is just a large snarly dog; a *big bad wolf* is a metonymic reference to a tradition of fairy tales. Because children in the United States grow up experiencing multiple stories of big bad wolves, the sum total of every single example is evoked by the use of the familiar phrase. The idea is so ingrained that for the metonym to work, one does not even need to be telling a fairy tale. The phrase can easily be transferred to a different rhetorical context; a politician, for instance, could label an opponent a “big bad corporate wolf” who threatens working class jobs. Because of the audience’s traditional associations with the phrase “big bad wolf,” the charge resonates not only in the situation of the speech, but taps into the emotions of fear and threat to innocence represented by the wolf in the fairy tales. “Wolf” by itself can certainly work rhetorically; metaphorically, it embodies the image of a dangerous and predatory animal. But the full phrase “big bad wolf” works on a much deeper level by creating a cognitive pathway to the fairy tale tradition, perhaps long forgotten on a conscious level, but easily accessible through the familiar metonymic trigger.

More importantly, the echo of the fairy tale tradition in the rhetor’s use of metonymy is an attempt to establish a connection between the rhetor and the audience. The politician’s speech is not, strictly speaking, a traditional performance. However, the invoking of a traditional construct is a powerful rhetorical act that seeks to unite speaker and audience, to create a sense that they are indeed a community because they have a common referent from which to draw. The metonym attempts to create a shadow-tradition to convince the audience that they and the speaker have that shared experience. It says, we speak the same language, we understand each other, and we are united as a community in this moment. Thus the politician’s “big bad wolf” metonym is not only a pathway to associations of the fairy tale wolf, it is a pathway to the much more significant subconscious notion of the shared traditional experience itself, Burkean identification at its deepest level.

Conclusion

The rhetorical need to create community by metonymically tapping into shared experience has never been more apparent than in the information age. Russ Willerton (2005:10-11) demonstrates that visual images (so important in a multimedia world) with a metonymic reference to their theme, such as an apple on a desk to represent education, are easier for designers to convey and for their audiences to understand. The shared associations allow a visual shorthand for the designers that functions similarly to those used by the oral poet or the rhetor. The success of any blog or Internet discussion forum relies on a group of individuals who are complete strangers in real life to form an online community, with an emerging language that expresses the shared assumptions and values of that community. Ask any long-term participant in

the Chronicle of Higher Education's forum discussions about "hu." On the surface or to an outsider, it's a simple gender-neutral pronoun. Metonymically, in this community, it's a word to use if you are spoiling for a fight—it invokes a long (in Internet terms) history of arguments about its use and appropriateness.

Foley's groundbreaking work on The Pathways Project (2011-) demonstrates that ancient modes of communication and performance have much in common with those of the Internet age. Redefining the place of interaction for a performer or an Internet user as an Agora, or marketplace, Foley compares oral traditional performance and Internet interaction in ways that productively elucidate both. In terms of the metonym, "oWords" (oral traditional units of thought) and "eWords" (electronic units of thought) are shown to function similarly in creating idiomatic, community-dependent pathways to meaning. The key similarity, however, is in the lack of closure. Unlike a text that is static and contained, both the o-performance and the e-performance are open-ended, dynamic, and changeable. This characteristic of Internet communication is vital for scholars of rhetoric to note. It affects the choices made by a rhetor, who must adapt persuasive techniques to this changeable medium. More importantly, it enables the understanding that those choices are rooted in oral traditions—an essential part of human communication and communal identity formation that predates the formal study of rhetoric by millennia.

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