

# STYLISTIC SANDCASTLES: RHETORICAL FIGURES AS COMPOSITION'S BUCKET AND SPADE

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For all a rhetorician's rules teach nothing but to name his tools.

— Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*

Aposiopesis? Metalepsis? Zeugma? What did my students think when first introduced to these and other terms? I know because they told me. “How do you expect us to remember them? They’re all *Greek!*” I replied that I did not expect they would remember them, not all of them, at least not for very long. I confessed that I didn’t remember all of them either. “But do we really use them?” All the time—far more than you realize—was my early and repeated assurance until it became clear that, just like the discovery delighting Moliere’s bourgeois gentilhomme—that he had been speaking prose his whole life—my students acknowledged they have been performing rhetorical figures by the dozens for much of their life. I emphasized that I was simply providing names, albeit unfamiliar names, for verbal effects abundant in everyday language as well as in literary and academic prose. I hoped to convince them that there is much to be gained from being on formal terms with antonomasia or synecdoche and recognizing them as useful tools for their own acts of composing.

For my students in “Go Figure,” an elective course in style centered in rhetorical figures, meeting *litotes* and *polyptoton* was akin to being transported by time machine (or “magic treehouse”) to scenes of classical rhetorical education. Such scenes are strikingly different from the modern composition classroom, where terms such as *enallage* or *homeoteleuton* are at best a footnote. What I did was not so very strange, I think. Efforts in time travel are in keeping with pedagogical initiatives such as Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee’s *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, a textbook inspired by the pioneering work by Edward P. J. Corbett in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. If any difference is to be noted in my approach from these, it is in the realization that the figures—the tropes and schemes of classical rhetoric—need not be reclaimed,

exactly. To the contrary, the figures are alive and well, as they have always been, if also occluded by current models of writing instruction. More than a subject of antiquarian interest, I argue, rhetorical figures remain a vital, but undervalued, resource for composition pedagogy. Their utility is particularly evident in a multimodal era, when textual, oral and visual performance have become open to new understanding.

This chapter expands on this reasoning to imagine a place for rhetorical figures in contemporary composition. It does so, first, through a reading of style in rhetorical tradition focused on the role of *ornament* (the broadest term for figurative elements of language) and, second, through an account of a recent course on figures for what light it sheds on possibilities for a figure-rich pedagogy. In brief, I propose that approaches to composition through style will be most fruitful if ornament is brought into conjunction with other stylistic virtues of clarity, correctness and propriety.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE FIGURES

In her magisterial account of the figures in *Rhetorical Figures in Science*, Jeanne Fahnestock observes that what would later come to be understood as ornament in a merely decorative sense was first appreciated in more forceful terms, when rhetoric was a phenomenon of speech more than of writing. As Fahnestock explains, the earliest notions of *ornamentum* are not reducible to present-day notions of embellishment. Rather, ornament was closer in meaning to “armament,” akin to the “gear” a foot soldier carries into combat (1999, p. 18). In military terms, a well-prepared rhetor is not only appropriately dressed for the occasion but fully equipped for a mission. One meaning of ornament that bridges decorative and functional notions is the insignia that mark one’s military rank and station. If the canon of invention can be likened to an arsenal from which arguments are drawn and the canon of arrangement (in Greek, *taxis*) likewise imagined as a tactical deployment of those arguments in the field, the various figurative devices may be analogized to the thrusts and parries by which one engages an enemy in close quarters.

I appreciate these martial conceits for rhetoric in their emphasis on effective use of force. This chapter, however, offers a more playful image for style in its pairing of bucket and spade—tools for building stylistic sandcastles. Although couched in symbols of child’s play, my concerns are equally serious as those animating Fahnestock’s investigation of figurative devices in science. Despite the gradual eclipsing of a once lively figurative tradition, the figures offer a vibrant pedagogy of ornament. Powerful tools for constructing

arguments, the disappearance of figures from the composition classroom at all levels of the curriculum comes at a significant loss to fluency, and with that loss a corresponding loss of agency. Fortunately, their reappearance—through a return to a pedagogy of ornament—is not something difficult to achieve.

I read this loss of a “feel” for figures in composition as symptomatic of style’s ongoing marginalization. It has much to do with anxiety about the status of “literary” language in relation to scientific and technological discourse. It likewise has to do with the perceived status of composition studies in relation to other academic disciplines. For the figures can be seen as rhetoric at its most trivial or cosmetic. Or old fashioned—so many Latin and Greek terms! As Keith Rhodes observes in this volume, style-centered pedagogy risks being labeled uncool or “stodgy” (“Styling”). Rhodes is correct that the contemporary dismissal of style, conceived as a focus on writing at the sentence-level, has typically been expressed as critiques on *clarity* or *correctness*—virtues turned to vice through excess. Similar critiques can be leveled at belletristic notions of *grace* or writing “with style.” My approach to ornament moves in a different direction entirely.

For on close inspection, the figures represent opportunities to connect students to a felt sense of writing (and speaking and designing) as rhetorical performance. By way of *hypophora*, the figure of reasoning by question and answer: Why bother teaching the figures when students cannot write clearly and correctly? Because the figures are crucial to a fully developed rhetoric of style. Without them, effective writing remains elusive. By some combination of imitation, instruction, and instinct, successful communicators acquire a robust repertoire of figures appropriate to the contexts in which they compose.

I am by no means the first to call for a reinvigorated canon of style in the teaching of composition. One need only turn to recent accounts of style’s manifold practices and shifting fortunes in the rich collection of essays in T. R. Johnson and Tom Pace’s *Refiguring Prose Style* (2005) or in Paul Butler’s masterful *Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Study in Composition and Rhetoric* (2008) and T. R. Johnson’s provocative *A Rhetoric of Pleasure* (2003) to confirm that over the past decade scholars in composition have approached rhetoric’s central canon afresh. On a parallel track, Barry Brummett claims that style is now “the basis for a rhetoric that undergirds today’s *global* culture” (Brummett, 2008, p. xiii, emphasis in original). Style has become a contemporary *lingua franca*—a semiotic code or performative grammar of display in various modes, e.g., speech, dress, and habits of consumption. Brummett identifies in style a figural logic of performance. Thus are emerging paradigms of style heralded, in composition and in cultural studies, even as consensus has yet been reached

about specific pedagogies to enact a stylistic vision. Still, prophecies may be self-fulfilling when, the *zeitgeist* read accurately, incipient stirrings leveraged into concrete outcomes.

This is the situation with respect to composition as a stylistic art. The present moment is open to curricular revisions in ways that resonate with Brummett's cultural insight that style has acquired renewed rhetorical agency. This moment is not unlike previous moments, notably in the English Renaissance, when style assumes a character marked by energy and experimentation. Indeed, contemporary discussion of style's wax and wane seeks to make sense of the sources from which, in the subtitle of Paul Butler's *Out of Style*, this "reanimating" occur. Similarly, Johnson and Pace announce a "refiguring" of prose style. Both texts find warrant in notions of restoration, a "once and future" paradigm in which style again plays a vital role in rhetorical education.

I concur with these sentiments, even as I admit that such calls may be overly sanguine in their estimation of style's prospects for reanimation in the near term. Yet on the whole, I believe such calls to be warranted. Marginalized during a "process" era of composition studies, style may emerge "post-process" as equal partner with canons of invention and arrangement and, significantly, memory and delivery. In other words, renewed attention to matters of form and performance signal that style has something to contribute to composition beyond nostrums on clarity and correctness. My efforts in reanimating style or, in the words of Keith Rhodes, in "making style practically cool and theoretically hip" take this "refiguring" announced by Johnson and Pace literally, even though none of the essays in *Refiguring Prose Style* address figurative dimensions of language in a sustained way (this volume). Refiguring the figures addresses the contrast between their prominent role in classical rhetoric and their conspicuous absence today.

The most obvious and crucial difference between classical and contemporary contexts is performative mode—speech vs. writing. As Jay David Bolter and David Grusin observe, later media "remediate" prior media by "representation of one medium in another" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 45). Classical rhetoric largely imagines performance as speech even as the technology of writing transforms speech. Indeed, "style" (from the Latin *stylus*, a pointed tool for inscription) complicates neat distinctions in a remediated landscape as the English translation of Greek *lexis* and Latin *elocutio*—both terms for speech. The term "figure of speech" links the verbal and the visual in a dynamic pairing in which words perform acrobatic turns (tropes) and other visible patterns (schemes). The account of the figures presented here bridges speech and text, but also recognizes fluidity of mode.

## STROLLING THROUGH THE GARDEN OF ELOQUENCE

Amid calls for a stylistic renaissance, not all reanimated pedagogies are commensurate. If past is prologue, various rebirths of style will differ in their aesthetic, philosophical and political commitments, in their streams of inspiration, and in their agendas. What is most valued in prose and its encoding in specific curricula varies from context to context. Obvious though this may be, it bears mentioning when imagining room for figures in an expanded style curriculum.

Consider the focus on clarity in Joseph Williams' *Style: Lessons and Clarity and Grace*. This popular text is one response to a crisis in literacy exacerbated, Williams notes, by an unproductive emphasis on grammatical correctness and arbitrary conventions. Yet Williams' approach to style is not identical with that of Richard Lanham, whose *Revising Prose* resembles *Style* in its advice against nominalizations and for strong agent-action pairs in subject-verb relations. Despite similarities, the differing motivations of Williams and Lanham are evident. *Style* reflects Williams' background as a linguist—his PhD is from the University of Wisconsin—and its substantial debt to cognitive psychology. Indeed, Williams' stylistic precepts have an empirical basis in research on the efficient communication and retention of information.

By contrast, Lanham's *Revising Prose* (famous for its “paramedic method”) offers a decidedly political critique of language practices it would seek to remedy. In this respect, Lanham works in a tradition epitomized by George Orwell's celebrated essay, “Politics and the English Language.” But Lanham's concerns with style are broadly humanistic rather than narrowly political. Lanham goes after bureaucratic prose not for its inefficiency only, but for its vulgarity and dehumanizing character. He is far more explicit in articulating ethical concerns in drawing connections between our prose and our character. “The moral ingredient in writing, then,” Lanham writes, “works first not on the morality of the message but on the nature of the sender, on the complexity of the self” (Lanham, 1974, p. 106). Joseph William is likewise concerned with ethics. Recent editions of *Style* feature a final chapter on the “Ethics of Style.” Here, however, ethics refers to a writer's relations with an audience, rather than to a diffuse, if no less important, linkage between the activity of writing and character development. While these differences are not inconsequential, Williams' and Lanham's remedial projects are kindred spirits in many respects. For one, they represent style as a stage of composing that follows upon activities of invention and arrangement. Both *Style* and *Revising Prose* approach style an act of revision and of adapting to the needs of an audience.

While yet more radical differences in understanding and teaching style could be juxtaposed, my purpose is not to delineate motives and means in contemporary approaches to style. Rather, it is to note that surface similarities in style or in style pedagogy can conceal greater variability in the objectives of style, i.e., to what ends style or the teaching of style is directed. Indeed, variability across contexts and change over time are arguably style's most distinctive attribute. Certain things are *in style* and go *out of style*, only to come *back in style* again. We can speak of idiosyncratic styles as well as of style being a reflection of particular historical periods, social movements and cultural traditions. In lay terms, style is recognized as precisely those elements that vary from performer to performer, age to age, or situation to situation.

But what dimensions of style persist across multiple contexts and conditions? Notwithstanding variations in style, conceptions of style, and approaches to teaching style, a spine of tradition extends back more than two millennia. Largely Aristotelian, this stylistic tradition is still relevant, even dominant, in the present era. As noted at this essay's beginning, this tradition is centered in precepts of clarity, correctness and appropriateness. Style's traditional virtues (each with an attendant vice), continue to be represented as desiderata in countless textbooks. Yet to these a fourth may be added in the virtue of ornament (or force)—the domain of the figurative. Writing in Aristotelian tradition, Theophrastus (c. 370-c. 285 BCE) is credited with codifying these virtues in *On Style*, a lost treatise known to Cicero and thus a vital link between Greek and Latin accounts of style. In important respects, my approach is Theophrastean in seeking to square style's triangle by returning ornament to the stable of virtues.

From earliest days, ornament (in Latin, *ornatus*) has had a complicated relationship with style's other virtues. As the force produced through figuration, ornament links style with other dimensions of discourse, other canons of rhetoric. Leaning left, toward invention, ornament discovers appropriate form for arguments. Leaning right, toward delivery, ornament gives speech liveliness of expression and emotive force. As Jeanne Fahnestock observes in *Rhetorical Figures in Science*, the use of figures was especially associated in Ciceronian tradition with the grand style, the highest of style's three levels; by contrast, the plain style, the lowest level, was notable for a lack of verbal embellishment (1999, p. 19). Such associations suggest that the figures function *primarily* as vehicles for, or triggers of, emotion. However, Fahnestock points out, thinking about figuration this way, though widespread, obscures a more complex relationship between figures as tools for argument and figures as carriers of emotional affect. By way of example Fahnestock considers *aposiopesis*, the figure by which a speaker, overcome with emotion (e.g., anger or sadness), breaks off

speech in mid-sentence. In this instance, Fahnestock contends, dimension of *pathos* and *logos* of this performative gesture cannot really be separated (1999, p. 19).

Thinking about figures as the embellished expression of thought otherwise plainly expressed—what Fahnestock terms “value added theories” of figuration—papers over a productive tension between two ways of understanding the structural properties of figurative language: “artful” deviation from a norm such that figures stand out from a neutral ground and the characteristic way to express something (1999, p. 22). Surveying the range of theoretical perspectives on the figures, Fahnestock observes that “expressions available for a particular function [exist] on a continuum” rather than being distinct categories of “the literal and the figurative” (1999, p. 22). At the far end of this continuum are “iconic” expressions characterized by Fahnestock as “epitomes” (1999, p. 22). In other words, figures are “formal embodiments of certain ideational and persuasive functions” (1999, p. 22). As epitomes, figures are idealized forms representing some “line of reasoning” or a “condensed or even diagram-like rendering of a relationship among a set of terms” (1999, p. 24).

This notion that figures are inventional *topoi* made visible and hence forceful does much to re-establish their centrality and to explain their ubiquity in discourse of all types. Indeed, Fahnestock’s epitomizes *her* argument through the figure of oxymoron in the title of her book, *Rhetorical Figures in Science*, insofar as science is typically regarded as unadorned, even figure-free, discourse. If rhetorical figures such as *antithesis* (paired contrasts in balanced phrases), *gradatio* (stepwise amplification or progression) and *polyptoton* (repetition of words with shared roots) function as arguments in scientific discourse, *a fortiori* they do so in many other discursive domains.

Fahnestock emphasizes the argumentative dimension of figures—style in relation to invention. Chris Holcomb underscores their performative character as style in relation to delivery. In “Anyone Can Be President,” Holcomb argues that figures “do more than simply organize or cue other performative elements. They also constitute the performance as such. Working in oral discourse in concert with changes in pitch, volume, pacing, and gesture, the figures help define and manage relationships among speaker, listeners, and subject matter” (Holcomb, 2007, p. 74) Here, Holcomb draws attention to figures as sites of oral and bodily performance. As writing, the figures retain their association with embodied performance. Holcomb’s central observation is that the figures must be understood in their capacity to mediate social relations between speakers and audiences, between writers and readers. In this respect, the virtue of ornament is closely tied to the virtue of decorum, or appropriateness. For



Holcomb, then, the figures function as an amalgam of cultural form and social practice. This notion of style as “cultural performance” is the focus of Holcomb and Killingsworth’s essay in this volume (“Teaching Style”).

Having identified the ornamental dimension of style as simultaneously a matter of argument and performance, I have yet to address the vexed efforts to categorize the profusion of figures within rhetorical tradition in formal and functional terms. Efforts to do so begin with Aristotle’s account of style in Book III of the *Rhetoric*, the foundational text for stylistic analysis. Here, Aristotle presents the first definition of metaphor in semantic terms as a word-level substitution involving some deviation from ordinary or accepted meaning (1991, 3.2.6). From this proto-category of analogical reasoning and expression will develop the tropes involving some turn of phrase, including metonymy, synecdoche, simile and personification. Three hundred years later, the influential *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 90 BCE)—for centuries erroneously attributed to Cicero—provides the first comprehensive catalogue of the figures, sixty four in all. Here is the first effort to divide the figures between those that involve a departure in meaning at the word level, the tropes, and those whose effects depend on a deviation from expected or natural word order, the schemes (Greek *schemata* translates into Latin *figura*).

The *ad Herennium* is also the first effort to distinguish figures of diction (*figurae dictionis*) from figures of thought (*figurae sententiae*). The latter depends not on particular choice of expression but on performative functions, including description, comparison, *commemoratio* (dwelling on a point at length) and *diminutio* (understatement). Placing understatement with figures of thought, as the *ad Herennium* does, rather than with the tropes, where figures of distortion such as *hyperbole* or *litotes* have traditionally been placed, indicates how overlapping are these categories. Complicating matters further, the author of *ad Herennium* imagines the tropes to be a subset of figures of speech. Two centuries later, Quintilian, in his *Institutio Oratio* (c. 90 CE), places tropes into a category distinct from either the figures of diction or of thought.

Throughout rhetorical tradition, taxonomic relations continue to be contested and further categorizations proposed. Renaissance scholar Philip Melancthon, in *Institutiones Rhetorices* (1519), divides tropes into those based in words (e.g., metaphor, various forms of pun) and in larger units of discourse (e.g., irony, allegory) and also rearranges the schemes to include a major heading of *amplification* for figures that elaborate, qualify or digress to rhetorical effect. These multiple and conflicting efforts in categorization reveal the figures to be far more than a matter of embellishment to lend distinction to one’s speech.

In her essay “Aristotle and Theories of Figuration,” Jeanne Fahnestock reads Book III of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in light of subsequent treatments of the figures



within rhetorical tradition. Although Aristotle appears to say very little about the figures, apart from discussing metaphor, Fahnestock observes that Aristotle identifies three figures in metaphor, antithesis, and *energeia*, or bringing something before the eyes. She recognizes these figures as epitomes for what will later develop into categories of tropes, figures of diction, and figures of thought. In other words, Aristotle anticipates the broader bins of a rich catalogue of formal devices and performative moves. These bins correspond to “semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic components of discourse” identified, respectively in tropes, figures of diction, and figures of thought (Fahnestock, 2000, p. 127). Aristotle thus anticipates subsequent theorizing of figurative in recognizing early on that verbal effects are more than optional decoration.

Against this backdrop, a gradual dissipation of a once vibrant figurative tradition in the modern era, following a high water mark in the Renaissance, is all the more striking. Holcomb singles out as arguably the richest account of the figures Henry Peacham’s *Garden of Eloquence* (1590), which identifies over two hundred figures, insightfully analyzes their formal and functional properties, and considers the social dimensions of their use. After such careful tending to these “flowers” of rhetoric, the subsequent waning of the figures as a stylistic resource becomes symptomatic of rhetoric’s slow decline until more recent stirrings in the latter half of the twentieth century. What happened?

Isolating one factor among many in this development, Fahnestock points to the separation of invention from style in the de-coupling of topical patterns of reasoning and rhetorically expressive figures. Noting that the topics and the figures were once cross-fertilizing contributors to rhetorical aptitude, Fahnestock cites the disparate fortunes of metaphor, the prototypical *semantic* figure, and antithesis, the prototypical *syntactic* figure. In the modern era, metaphor emerges as *the* master trope to the near exclusion of other figurative devices. By comparison, the scheme of antithesis, an epitomizing form for contrastive reasoning, has lost much of its status over time as a valued figure. As a result, antithesis functions as a fine barometer for the eventual association of “the figurative” with poetic modes of discourse; for absent a scene of argumentation, antithesis seems merely a device for heightening contrast.

This separation of the structures of reasoning from the structures of expression reflects a broader historical development in which written language, especially in the medium of print, displace oratory as the paradigmatic mode of communication. Under the influence of Peter Ramus (1515-1572), rhetoric’s scope was to become much more limited with the reassignment of the canons of invention and arrangement to dialectical methods of reasoning. With print the canons of memory and delivery also atrophy, so that only style remains as a canon. Rhetoric becomes virtually synonymous with style, conceived in a

superficial sense as the dress of thought—artful spin. In this development, the figures, the most performative aspect of style, fare especially poorly and attain their status as a catalog of verbal embellishment.

It is possible to locate an historical and conceptual divide between rhetoric and composition by the perceived value of the figures. In the movement from rhetoric, conceived as training in the performance art of public speaking, to composition, understood as practice in conventions of written prose, the figures are slowly drained of their compelling force. As exemplified in the highly influential *Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* of Hugh Blair (1718-1800), prose style becomes associated with matters of taste, an elevation of the virtue of decorum, or appropriateness, as the divide between speech and text ever more widened. In the polite contexts of written discourse, the vast catalog of figures increasingly comes to be seen as irrelevant or, worse, indecorous. Shaking off an oral residue, written composition leaves the figures behind as an antiquated corpus (with a fearsome, foreign vocabulary) of stylistic devices. Once colorful flowers, the garden of eloquence turned to weeds.

In many respects, the figures are the last elements of classical rhetoric to fade away, not unlike that eerie smile of the Cheshire cat. The catalog of *vital* figures gradually contracted in response to changed circumstances in the production and reception of texts. In this shift from the production to the critical reception of texts, especially literary texts, the tropes, recognized as departures from literal meaning, became privileged over the schemes. Style became stylistics. This narrowing of the canon of style finds its apex in the notion of four master tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony) with priority assigned to metaphor as the paradigm of figurative as distinct from literal expression. Relatedly, the cleavage of poetic from persuasive discourse profoundly influences how the scope of composition is defined and, consequently, how style comes to be understood.

In many respects, recovery of a figurative pedagogy involves running this reel in reverse to reclaim the figures as dynamic elements of discourse for a multimedia age. In an era of montage and “remix,” rhetorical practices of ornamentation regain currency. The question, then, is what role can figurative pedagogy play when the print culture that has for so long defined stylistic conventions begins to yield to something new?

## THE RETURN OF THE FIGURATIVE: “GO FIGURE”

It may seem peevish to identify rhetorical tradition with the figures when much broader identifications are possible. In the wake of rhetoric’s reclamation

in the last century, the figures are a narrow slice of rhetorical pie. Indeed, rhetoric's recent rise to respectability and relevance comes about not by association with the figures but largely by moving beyond them (and beyond style, too) to reclaim invention, above all, as the heart of rhetorical inquiry. Even if one grounds composition in a rhetoric of style, there are many others ways to do so besides explicit, intensive instruction on the figures.

In this volume, William Kurlinkus emphasizes stylistic performance at the macro level through strategies of *ethos* writers use to engage readers ("An Ethics of Attentions"). Russell Greer similarly sets sights on the whole composition in dynamic relation to its parts ("Architectonics and Style"). And Denise Stodola reinforces the wisdom received from rhetorical tradition that practices of imitation at the sentence and passage level are indispensable aids to stylistic competence ("Using Stylistic Imitation"). To be clear, this essay, in concert with these other voices, imagines a place for figures in a *comprehensive* rhetorical pedagogy. It does so in the belief that the goals attendant to rhetorical education through style-focused pedagogies are most fully achievable when the figures are returned to a place of prominence.

Despite the availability of multiple frames for rhetorical pedagogy, the impulse to teach rhetoric through style, and style through figures, was one I embraced in "Go Figure: Style and Thought in Word and Image," offered as an advanced elective. Now having occasion to teach this course several times, I would do so again, as a course in its own right and as a laboratory for exploring the pedagogy of style. My experience suggests that a figure-based pedagogy may be productively integrated into a range of pedagogical contexts from first-year composition and beyond. As previously noted, imagining a (re)turn to the figures requires that one understand their absence in the first place. This absence persists. Despite rhetoric's return, even a perfunctory account of the figures is impossible to find in contemporary composition textbooks. One searches in vain for a treatment of *litotes* as an effective form of understatement, of *plote* as strategic reinforcement through repetition, or of persuasive strategies of impersonation through *prosopopoeia*. Exposure to the figures, if it comes, comes in encounters with a small number of critical terms for the close reading of literature. Students typically have heard of *metaphor*, but not *synecdoche*, *alliteration* but not *anaphora*.

Even so, the remediation of text and image in emerging forms of digital media and across multiple modalities will continue to trouble written discourse as a paradigm of literacy. As we engage composition in various performative domains, the resources of figuration (if not necessarily their classical terms) will regain currency. This will occur because a robust visual and digital rhetoric, like their oral and written counterparts, depends on employing figurative

resources in their semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic character as these resources are manifested in any performative domains. This presumption of relevance not only to a discursive past or present but, especially, to our discursive future served as warrant to this course on the figures.

Having taught courses in both prose style and in professional and technical communication with a strong emphasis in style—see Jonathan Buehl’s “Style and the Professional Writing Curriculum” in this volume—I discover that the figures are teachable in conjunction with other approaches, including the pedagogies centered on stylistic revision offered by Richard Lanham and Joseph Williams. In the case of “Go Figure,” I desired to put into practice a case eloquently made some time ago by Richard Lanham in *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (1974) and later in *Analyzing Prose* (2003). In these texts, Lanham calls for a return to the ludic, or playful, dimensions of language in writing instruction. I had my reasons for not calling the course “Fun With Figures,” but I took notions of play quite seriously in my goals for the course. It was necessary to do so given the daunting motivational hurdle: what to do about the arcane nomenclature? Indeed, only a sense of play can transport students to a time when the figures were alive and apply the insights gained from this experience to contemporary contexts.

I taught “Go Figure” twice, in 2007 and in 2010. In both iterations, I was amazed by how well students took to the challenge to learn new and confusing terms only to use them with increasing authority and insight. Their enthusiasm for the value of their new tools was eye-opening. Learning ten or twelve terms per week for the first half of the course along with their classification schemes proved less difficult than I initially imagined. Of course, this was possible because it is not the figures themselves that students had to learn, just their names. My students discovered have been meeting and using the figures all of their lives; they were only lacking a vocabulary.

Prior to the course, few had ever heard more than a smattering of terms they would encounter. As the course progressed, they routinely expressed surprise that they had not learned to assign useful names, whether in Greek, Latin or English, to seemingly ubiquitous phenomena. Indeed, my students were quite open to learning these terms, to puzzling through at times subtle distinctions between related terms, and to discovering new figures not found on venerable lists. They were eager to identify current instances of classical forms and to convince themselves that these rhetorical devices transcended language and era. They learned, for example, that *syllipsis*—a form of *zeugma* in which one word governs several others in unrelated senses (e.g., Alexander Pope’s “she stained her honor and her new brocade”)—was Greek in name only. They confirmed

their ability to invent novel instances of a figure once its form and function were understood. They could identify contexts in which a particular figure might be effective and also those contexts when it was not.

Beyond learning individual figures, my students came to realize that the figures constituted an open-ended, yet not arbitrary, set of linguistic moves. It was not long before class discussion gravitated quite naturally to questions of form and meaning. What, exactly, *is* a figure? When is something *not* a figure? How do figures *work*? Are certain figures unique to one language or culture? How many figures are there? Often, then, our efforts to categorize figures and describe their effects would lead to questions that required more than a simple *yes* or *no*. Often, we would discover that language is complex enough that several figures might be interacting in a given expression.

To achieve these insights on my part and theirs, a range of learning activities beyond introducing, memorizing, and recalling of terms was required. After all, what fun is that? And what transfer value? Among such practices were exercises in imitation along lines outlined by Denise Stodola in “Using Stylistic Imitation” and in *copia* as described in Tom Pace’s “*Inventio and Elocution*” as well as an engagement with compilation through use of a commonplace book (see Zak Lancaster’s “Tracking Interpersonal Style”). Beyond these activities, the course afforded opportunities for analytic inquiry by writing academic essays on figurative topics. To present a finer-grained account of the course’s multiple working parts, I will outline its major features.

## TEXTS

Both iterations of “Go Figure” opened with an introduction based on Arthur Quinn’s accessible, idiosyncratic *Figures of Speech: Sixty Ways to Turn a Phrase* (1995). An excellent text in many ways, *Figures of Speech* proved useful in the early weeks of the course. Clever thematic arrangements and witty commentary put students at ease and for the most part Quinn does not introduce too many terms at once. However, the examples Quinn draws upon to illustrate the figures, from the Bible, Shakespeare, and other literary sources, are rather limited in appeal. In the absence of a wealth of authoritative and accessible materials from which to choose, Quinn proved to be a reasonable point of entry.

Much of the material one might share with students can be found on a handful of websites, most notably Gideon Burton’s “Silva Rhetoricae: The Forest of Rhetoric” (<http://rhetoric.byu.edu>). (“Silva”) hosted by Brigham Young University. This comprehensive overview of classical rhetoric includes a deep

catalog of rhetorical figures and helpful classification schemes. Non-academic sites include Robert Harris' annotated catalog of figures at "Virtual Salt" and Jay Heinrich's "It Figures," a playful examination of contemporary uses of the figures through sardonic blog entries.

In both iterations of "Go Figure," we turned to primary texts from rhetorical tradition with short excerpts from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Quintilian's *Institutes* and Peacham's *Garden of Eloquence* as historical interludes. In addition, we read Jeanne Fahnestock's magisterial overview, "The Figures as Epitomes," the introduction to *Rhetorical Figures in Science* (1999). All of these texts are appropriately challenging, but in the context of upper-division language study, they provided a necessary intellectual framework.

In each iteration, we turned in later weeks to a deeper engagement of tropes. In 2007, we read George Lakoff and Mark Turner's *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (1989). In 2010, we read George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (2003). Each of these texts offered something distinct and valuable. *Metaphors We Live By* demonstrates how profoundly metaphor, and by extension all figurative thought, structures ordinary experience. My students appreciated its scope and intellectual heft and regarded it as an important book. *Metaphors We Live By* generated some of our richest discussions. Yet, on the whole, *More Than Cool Reason*, with its pronounced tilt to literary and stylistic concerns, holds greater promise for integrating stylistic theory and practice. It offers strategies for reading poetic texts structured by figurative devices such as simile or allegory. In general, English majors found *More Than Cool Reason* most valuable. Finally, in both iterations, we read Kenneth Burke's profound "Four Master Tropes." More than any other text, this essay communicated the indispensability of figuration to our ways of seeing things.

In 2010, "Go Figure" featured two additional texts to broaden coverage of style in composition beyond the figures. Chris Holcomb and Jimmie Killingsworth's *Performing Prose: The Study and Practice of Style in Composition* (2010) is among the most promising pedagogical treatments of style to date. A thorough, yet accessible, guide to stylistic analysis, *Performing Prose* proved a useful spine, especially with its exercises in style. Its treatment of the figures in separate chapters devoted to tropes and schemes among other topics allowed it to serve as a broad overview of prose style. Finally, Richard Lanham's *Style: An Anti-textbook* (1974) offered a philosophical perspective on our goals, particularly in its emphasis on going beyond precepts of clarity and efficiency in thinking about the virtues of style.

## ACTIVITIES

Daily activities of “Go Figure” were responsive to the range of stylistic exercises provided by *Performing Prose*, even before this text’s use in a second iteration. Such exercises draw on a classical tradition of style pedagogy re-introduced to modern audiences through Edward P. J. Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric and the Modern Student*. (This book’s unit on style is published by Corbett and Robert Connors as *Style and Statement*.) Central to this pedagogy are practices of imitation and amplification. Following in this tradition, we would on a weekly basis get inside various figurative devices through word-for-word and looser imitations and by efforts to generate figures on demand or impose figures on existing texts.

With a nod to Renaissance pedagogy, we turned to exercises in *copia*, or abundance, in the tradition of Erasmus, specifically his influential textbook, *De Duplici Copia Verborum et Rerum* (1512). As Tom Pace details in “*Inventio and Elocutio*,” Erasmus offers in *De Copia* practical means for achieving fluency in thought and expression. “Exercise in expressing oneself in different ways will be of considerable importance in general for the acquisition of style” (Erasmus, 1978, p. 302). As a culminating activity, “Go Figure” adopted Erasmus’ celebrated exercise in sentence variation, based on his own 200 variations (in Latin) of the sentence “Your letter pleased me very much.” Students in “Go Figure” were asked to compose 50, 100, or even 200 variations on a sentence of their choosing and, in doing so, demonstrate as many figurative elements as possible.

Beyond producing more varied sentences, we embraced opportunities to practice figurative techniques of balance, repetition, omission and contrast, among other moves. The object of these activities in “Go Figure” was to link style with invention and thereby internalize a stylistic repertoire upon which to draw in novel contexts in the belief that verbal fluency contributes to rhetorical dexterity. Students in “Go Figure” discovered that exercises performed independently of assigned papers help them employ stylistic elements more effectively in those papers. Indeed, most students wished they had been exposed to the figures and related exercises much earlier, when it might have better prepared them for the writing they did in college.

The most enjoyable activity was a Figure Journal featuring the figures as found objects. In each iteration of “Go Figure,” students compiled 25 to 30 entries illustrative of the range of figurative elements encountered in various media. In the tradition of commonplace books, students prepared individual entries for specific figures by providing an example, a definition, and a brief analysis of how



this figure worked in a given context. Twice each term, I collected these journals to read and grade, offering commentary or corrections to any misunderstandings. They were a joy to read because the examples were fresh and reflected increasing understanding of the figures as vehicles for creative and persuasive expression. Many students put great effort into compiling and designing this journal as a window onto popular media, literary texts, oral conversations, text messages and tweets, advertising rhetoric, religious discourse, etc. They drew from verbal and visual domains. In fact, in the final weeks of the course we turned specifically to figures in visual rhetoric, looking at tropes and schemes in political cartoons, print ads, websites and other visual texts. But for time, we could have explored visual figuration more extensively. Even so, this modest effort helped us to understand how figures perform across media and modes.

In the final activity of the course students completed individual projects with a six to eight page essay analyzing figurative language in a particular context. Among the more notable outcome of the course for me was the realization that the figures are productive sites of rhetorical analysis. Writing *about* the figures presents students opportunities for academic writing. Most recently, students wrote about strategies of *copia* in motivational speaking, centered on Vince Lombardi; on the use of color as metonymy in Irish rebel ballads; on the figure of paradox in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In the first iteration of "Go Figure," students addressed such topics as the satiric uses of antithesis in opinion pieces by Maureen Dowd; the use of anaphora in religious language; and the function of isocolon and homeoptaton, or rhyme, in Dr. Seuss. The point to be emphasized is that study of the figures generates intellectual curiosity and *practice* with the figures generates compositional fluency.

## GOING FORWARD

"Go Figure" was imagined as a deceptively easy way into rhetoric under the premise that overt attention to argumentation and invention was more difficult. Beyond the use of ornamentation as hook, "Go Figure" was premised on a belief that style is a legitimate and productive portal into rhetorical theory and practice. It posits that attention to formal and functional dimensions of style effectively engage latent interest in rhetoric among a generation of multimodal multitaskers.

Even so, I confess anxiety. Looking over my shoulder, I fear that representing rhetoric as the study of tropes and schemes implicitly endorses rhetoric's reduction to *mere* figuration. This anxiety extends to the place of style in

composition more generally, because one reason for style's marginalization is that style-centered approaches to composition are suspected of being reductive, overly focused on surface features of texts, too pedantic—in other words, not cool. (See Keith Rhodes' essay "Styling.") "Go Figure" was conceived as a "gut check" to see if there is sufficient heft in the figures to call for deeper engagement with them in other courses. I conclude from my efforts that there is more than enough substance—perhaps too much.

Bringing this account to a close, several points remain open to speculation. First, given that "Go Figure" is an upper-division elective and not a composition course *per se*, what possibilities exist for integrating its approach into composition courses, including in the first year of college? On the whole, I believe this approach to the figures travels well. A seminar model for composition might well choose style, including the figures, as a focus and employ many of the practices of analysis and writing outlined here. This is especially the case if the figures are brought into dialogue with other elements of style, including the virtues of clarity, correctness and appropriateness or the various levels of style. When offering the course a second time, I was conscious of the recent turn in composition to writing *about* writing as addressed in Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle's "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re) envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies'" (2007). Much as other efforts to make writing itself the topic of exploration in a composition course, writing *with* and *about* the figures fosters crucial metacognition and rhetorical sensibility. It also provides concrete benchmarks for students to measure their own development as practitioners of the craft of composition.

An entire semester in rhetorical figures is not really necessary, of course. The figures can be productively integrated into writing courses through judicious selection of, say, a half-dozen key figures to be introduced and practiced with each major unit or writing assignment. Building off exercises in copia and imitation, students can practice employing figures of substitution, omission, balance and repetition in their texts as they develop and revise drafts. One assignment might encourage *anaphora*, another *zeugma*. One unit of a composition course might feature the use of *gradatio* to reinforce chained reasoning across clauses or sentences or the use of *antonomasia* to refer to things by other than a proper name. Another might ask students to experiment with one or more figures of thought such as *adynaton*, the expression of inexpressibility, or *correction*, a strategic correcting of oneself. Indeed, students can be invited to highlight, interrogate, even celebrate, their use of specific figures when submitting or revising drafts.

Alternatively, students can embellish texts produced by peers and justify their choice of ornamentation. By such means of systematic exposure to, and practice with, the figures students may come to see speech and writing as performance in ways that other approaches to style do not allow. As the classical treatment of the figures long ago emphasized, rhetorical style pedagogy must foreground the performative dimension of discourse through hands-on experience with ornamentation as rhetorical force.

Finally, a figurative approach to composition that foreground performance opens onto different modes of communication and their interaction. As others in this volume observe, including Moe Folk (“Multimodal Style”), writing is but one mode of performance in a digital age. While figures are located in texts at the level of word, sentence and passage, as performative moves they structure information as well as shape interaction between rhetors and audiences. They are not restricted to verbal modes of speech or text. In addition, there are visual tropes and schemes that parallel their verbal counterparts to manage effects of balance, contrast, progression, etc. A figure is not *in the words* (or image), but the words (or image) *in the figure* (to use an *antimetabole*).

A figure-rich pedagogy for today must span performative modes and prepare students to communicate ornamentally across those modes. In this respect, the figures are an untapped resource—a working vocabulary (not an antiquarian catalog) for twenty-first century communication. To be clear: there remains great value in attaching names to the tools we use. That is the point of learning the names, not to *remember* them, but to *use* them. My experience teaching the figures is that they bring a level of energy and a sense of agency to the composition classroom like few other elements of style.

This is not to say that sentence-based pedagogies focused on matters other than the figures should cease to be a focus of the composition course. Far from it. Renewed attention to the sentence in response to the risk of its “erasure” (Connors) and the possibilities for its “remembering” (Myers) is consistent with my call for a return of the figures. A figure-rich pedagogy serves as an excellent and necessary complement to rhetorically-attuned sentence-level pedagogies, such as those represented in Nora Bacon’s *The Well-Crafted Sentence: A Writer’s Guide to Style* (2009). This, finally, is the point. The classical tradition developed a fully articulated theory of style, one that recognized an assemblage of virtues at work—or at play—in any rhetorical performance. To the extent that the figures remain marginalized, stylistic pedagogy will never be as robust as it could, and should, be. A modest investment in figuration—composition’s bucket and spade—has the potential for equipping our students to build some impressive sandcastles. Go figure.

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