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Curbing Janus

Historical Perspectives on Ambiguity as a Rhetorical Device

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Abstract ISHR

Curbing Janus

-Historical perspectives on ambiguity as a rhetorical device.

Following the so called *linguistic turn* the ambiguity of language has surfaced as a theme in many academic texts. When we consult historical sources on the subject of ambiguity, we also find it as a recurring catalyst and focus of study. But in prescriptions for *rhetorica utens*, we find strong recommendations against ambiguity, and a conception of it as sophistry. In Aristotle we find ambiguity as a family of logical fallacies in the *Sophistical refutations*, and in *Rhetoric* the use of ambiguous language is dismissed as a device to hide that the orator has nothing to say, or as a trick of oracles (1407a-b). Quintilian firmly rejects ambiguity by naming *perspicuity* the “first virtue of composition” (*Institutio Oratoria* 8.2.22). Where ambiguity is discussed as having positive uses, such as where *ad Herennium* IV:67 discusses *emphasis*, its use is qualified to only those cases where it can be used ... unambiguously. Much later, in George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* however, we find a more allowing view. Puttenham recommended that *amphibologia* is avoided *unless* it is used “for the nonce and for some purpose” (III.XXII.218). More recently, beginning in the 20th century, scholars have studied ambiguity as a productive rhetorical strategy under the umbrella term *polysemy*.

In this presentation, I focus on the evaluations of ambiguity as a rhetorical device through some important historical treatises on rhetoric. I test the hypothesis that the valence of ambiguity as a rhetorical device in a treatise is related to the extent that it dichotomizes rhetoric and poetics, with the goal showing that the cultural views on art as political influences the conception, and valence of rhetorical ambiguity.