CHAPTER FOUR

PLATO

The importance which the art of words had acquired in Athenian democracy prompted Plato to take an interest in and write about rhetoric. His severely critical attitude, which has done much to make rhetoric an object of suspicion and diffidence both in ancient and modern times, was based on a compound of political and personal, as well as philosophical and epistemological, reasons. For Plato it was unacceptable that in the domain of rhetoric the mutability of opinion (δόξα) should prevail over the certainty of truth and science (ἐπιστήμη). As an adversary of democracy, he denounced what was one of the constituent elements of this regime. To his eyes, the perversity of the link between rhetoric and politics had been for ever laid bare by the failure of the speech in his own defense delivered by Socrates at the trial that ended in his death sentence.

All the work of Plato is characterized by his opposition to the Sophists, depicted as charlatans purveying the illusion of being able to educate all men. In particular, he saw their claim to be good at public speaking, and at teaching others how to do this, as totally false. Plato was responsible for the equation, often taken over by modern scholars, “Sophistry” and “rhetoric”. Indeed on several occasions he made a point of assimilating the figure of the rhetor with that of the Sophist.

Plato's preoccupation with defining the art of persuasive speaking and delimiting its field of application was motivated in part by his wish to establish an antinomy between the positive image of the philosopher and the negative image of the Sophist-rhetor, and to distinguish between the disciplines practiced by each. Thus there are numerous passages in the Platonic corpus which propose classifications for forms of discourse in prose, by analogy with the classifications for poietical forms.

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1 One of the leading historians of Greek thought, Gomperz (1912), maintained this equation, arguing that the new factor in the Sophistic movement was the educational ideal of rhetoric or εὖ λέγειν. However, recent studies have demonstrated that the assimilation of “Sophistry” and “rhetoric” does not in fact have sound historical bases and was largely influenced by Plato’s approach. Cf. e.g. Noël (1998).

2 Grg. 465c; cf. 520a; Hp. Min. 368d–e; Hp. Ma. 281a–b, 282d; Prt. 312d.
In a passage in the *Laws* in which he laments the license that has crept into the “poetry accompanied by music” (μουσική) with respect to the traditional norms, Plato presents a list of the forms of lyric poetry.³ In ancient times, he says, the μουσική “was divided into various species and forms” (κατὰ εἴδη τε ἑαυτῆς ἄττα καὶ σχήματα). There were hymns (ὕμνοι) addressed to the gods, lamentations (θρῆνοι), paeans (παίωνες), dithyrambs (διθύραμβοι), and citharoedic nomes (κιθαρῳδικοὶ νόμοι).⁴ It was not permissible to ignore these distinctions or contaminate the different species (οὐκ ἐξῆν ἄλλο εἰς ἄλλο καταχρῆσθαι μέλους εἴδος).⁵ The political authorities enforced this convention and the public listened in silence without disturbing the performance with whistling or applause. How different things were now, Plato complained: the new poets yielded to an enthusiasm worthy of the bacchantes and sought success with a public that had become turbulent and convinced of being a good judge of poetry, mixing up the distinctive traits of the various species in their performances.⁶

In taking this nostalgic look back to the poetry of the past, Plato describes it as divided up into genres—the Greek term is εἴδος (“species”)⁷—which were distinguished on the basis of the possession of constant structural features (σχήματα). His presentation suggests that the operation of naming such genres—and thus assigning the specific quality of each—was not his own work; rather, he was drawing on distinctions sanctioned by tradition. A first indication of this surely lies in his use of the past tense for all the verb forms used to indicate the act of denomination (ἦν, ἐπεκαλοῦντο, ἐκάλεσεν, ἐκάλουν, ἐπέλεγον). The same interpretation is suggested by a fragment, regrettably incomplete, of Pindar who, at the end of the archaic

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³ In conformity with the term μουσική it would be more correct to speak here of “melic”. The Greeks distinguished between the iambic poetry composed primarily in the iambic meter and generally used for invective; the elegy, which included compositions in the elegiac distich; and the melic (from μέλος, “song”) or lyric poetry in the true sense of the term, composed in a variety of meters sung or chanted to the accompaniment of the lyre. It became customary to refer to all poets as “lyric” among Latin writers from the Augustan age onwards (cf. the use of *lyricus* in Horace, Ovid, Quintilian). See Gentili (2006) 57–58; Pfeiffer (1968) 182–183.

⁴ A similar list is found in the *Ion* (534c–d) where the dithyramb, encomium, hyporchema, epic, iamb and paean are cited, but there is no mention of the hymn.

⁵ *Lg.* 700a–c (T. 18).


⁷ On the use of the term εἴδος to indicate “genre” cf. Part III chap. 16.2.1.