CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RHETORIC TO ALEXANDER

The Rhetoric to Alexander is the sole example that has come down to us of the abundant production of the first rhetorical treatises (τέχναι ῥητορικαί).¹ It makes a considerable contribution to the reflection on discourse genres in the doctrine of rhetoric, and merits particular attention in our inquiry.

In the medieval codices, the Rhetoric to Alexander is identified as the work of Aristotle and preceded by a prefatory letter accompanying its dispatch by Aristotle to his disciple Alexander the Great. But by the end of the humanistic era, grave doubts were being expressed concerning Aristotle’s authorship, and today this is rejected by virtually all philologists,² for a number of reasons.

In the first place, in spite of a series of affinities, there are significant differences in terms of both quality and intent between the Rhetoric to Alexander and Aristotle’s Rhetoric. The former is a practical handbook displaying the pragmatism of a professional rhetorician and the influence of the skeptical relativism of the Sophists. Aristotle’s treatise, on the other hand, places rhetoric in a broad conceptual framework together with politics, dialectics, ethics, and anthropology.³ He uses the ideas bequeathed by tradition but integrates and adapts them to this framework, something that is totally absent from the Rhetoric to Alexander. It would be difficult to explain why Aristotle should have composed two works on the same subject, above all works that resemble each other in some aspects but actually take diametrically opposite approaches.

In the second place, too little credit has been given to the prefatory letter, a document which shows clear evidence of having been composed later on and mixes reminiscences of Aristotle, Plato, and Isocrates with elements of biographical and doxographical traditions whose authenticity is suspect.⁴ Lastly, the Rhetoric to Alexander does not figure in the

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¹ On the first τέχναι ῥητορικαί cf. supra n. 252.
² The Aristotelian paternity was contested by Erasmus of Rotterdam in the praefatio to his edition of Aristotle, published in Basel in 1451.
³ Cf. Part II chap. 8.
⁴ Chiron (2002) XLVI dates the letter to the 2nd century AD. The authenticity of the letter has recently been defended by Velardi (2001) 103–130, who attributes it to Anaximenes.
earliest catalogues of Aristotle’s works such as the one given by Diogenes Laertius.⁵

Once Aristotle’s authorship had been rejected⁶ scholars began to discuss the treatise’s date, attribution, textual status, and homogeneity. The discovery of the Hibeh papyrus (PHib 26)⁷ containing fragments from chapters 1–4 has established with certainty that it dates from the 4th century BC.⁸ On the other questions, however, the debate is still ongoing, and since they directly involve the presence and significance of the genres we shall discuss them here, starting from an examination of the contents of the treatise as we know it.

7.1 Incipit and Structure of the Treatise

The Rhetoric to Alexander begins in medias res, dividing discourses into γένη and εἴδη:

τρία γένη τῶν πολιτικῶν εἰσὶ λόγων, τὸ μὲν δημηγορικόν, τὸ δὲ ἐπιδεικτικόν, τὸ δὲ δικανικόν. εἴδη δὲ τούτων ἕπτα, προτρεπτικόν, ἀποτρεπτικόν, ἐγκωμιαστικόν, ψεκτικόν, κατηγορικόν, ἀπολογητικόν, καὶ ἐξεταστικόν, ἢ αὐτὸ καθ’ ἑαυτὸ ἢ πρὸς ἄλλο. τὰ μὲν οὖν εἴδη τῶν λόγων τοσάττα ἄριστα ἕστι, χρησόμεθα δὲ αὐτοῖς ἐν τε ταῖς κοιναῖς δημηγορίαις καὶ ταῖς ἱδίαις ὁμιλίαις

There are three genres of political speeches: demegoric, epideictic, and judicial. Of these there are seven species: exhortative, dissuasive, encomiastic, vituperative, accusatory, defensive, investigative (either itself by itself or with another species). That is how many species of speeches there are, and we use them in public speeches to the assembly, in legal pleadings over contracts, and in private conversations.⁹

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⁵ Diogenes Laertius 5.22 ff. On the antiquity of the list of Diogenes Laertius, said to go back to sources predating the edition and organization of Aristotle’s works carried out by Andronicus of Rhodes, cf. Moraux (1951) 17–192 ff. The Rhetoric to Alexander is mentioned in a list of works either lost or of dubious authenticity in the Appendix to the Vita Hesychii, also known as Appendix Menagiana.

⁶ There is also discussion of when the Rhetoric to Alexander was attributed to Aristotle. Cope (1970) 401, followed by Chiron (2002) XLV, believes that the falsification of the letter and the consequent attribution of the work to Aristotle date from the 3rd century AD.

⁷ PHib 26 edited by Grenfell-Hunt (1906).

⁸ The dating of the PHib 26 to the 3rd century AD (ca 285–250 BC) gives as terminus ante quem 300 BC. The mention (1429b18) of the Corinthian expedition to Sicily to aid the inhabitants of Syracuse under attack from the Carthaginians, 344–343 BC, represents the terminus a quo.

⁹ 1421b5–14 (T. 37).