Conceived right from the origin as a productive art which offers instruction as to how to compose speeches, during the Hellenistic and Imperial Ages ancient rhetoric developed a second vocation, i.e. as critical theory which studies, interprets, comments on, and evaluates past works of oratory—and also, with a certain frequency, works which were not strictly oratorical—often in order to provide models for imitation. These two axes for the discipline are summarized in the opening words of the Hermogenes’ On Types of Style. He declares that the treatise has a dual utility: it makes it possible to “evaluate the style of others” (τὸ τὰ τῶν ἄλλων εἰδέναι κρίνειν), and at the same time must be of aid to “someone <who> wished to be the craftsman of fine and noble speeches himself, speeches such as the ancients produced” (καὶ αὐτὸς τις γενέσθαι βούλοιτο λόγων ἐργάτης καλῶν τε καὶ γενναίων καὶ παραπλησίων τοῖς τῶν ἀρχαίων). The chief object on which the rhetoricians exercise their vocation of criticism and commentary are the ancient authors (τῶν ἀρχαίων), in the name of the idea, which predominated in Imperial Greek culture, that the finest period of literature was the Classical age.

In terms of rhetorical criticism, the notion of genre and the division into genres are of great importance. To be able to proceed to the description and evaluation of works of oratory it is indispensable to classify them: the three Aristotelian genres are the tool used for classifying the logoi.

The major classificatory epoch was inaugurated by the Alexandrian philologists, who inherited the methods of codification elaborated by
Aristotle and his school. Because of the regrettable disappearance of this abundant activity, our knowledge of it is restricted to few relics that have survived in the form of fragments, and of material, often anonymous, recorded by later grammarians, scholiasts and lexicographers. Callimachus’ Πίνακες (“Tablets”) provided a universal classification of literary works according to genre, and a similar operation of classification by genre is indicated by the denomination ὁ εἰδογράφος attributed to the Apollonius who directed the library of Alexandria after Aristophanes of Byzantium. For the Alexandrians the description of the structures of the ancient literary production and its minute classification were a preliminary to the editions that they produced of these works. We can recall, by way of example, the organizational principles underlying the publication of the lyric poets: the odes of Pindar, Bacchylides, and Simonides were divided up into εἴδη according to the content and context of performance, i.e. into hymns, paeans, dithyrambs, epinicia and so on; in the case of Alcaeus the classification was based on the subject, whereas the collection of Sappho’s compositions was organized by meter or alphabetically by *incipit*. Moreover the phenomenon of drawing up, by means of a selection procedure, the “canons” or lists of “chosen” (ἐγκριθέντες) authors recognized as “classics” in a certain literary genre also dates from the Hellenistic Age.

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3 We know that the Peripatetics, as well as performing a fundamental function in collecting and organizing the doctrine of the master, devoted themselves to a lively activity of literary criticism, known to us in most cases only through the titles. Cf. Rispoli (1988) 87 ff.

4 On the activity of Alexandrian philologists see the reconstruction of Pfeiffer (1968) 87 ff.


7 Epinicia, for example, were further distinguished according to various local festivals in the case of Pindar, or according to athletics specialties in the case of Simonides.

8 Pfeiffer (1968) 184.

9 Sappho’s compositions were organized either according to meter (thus Harvey 1955 p. 159), or alphabetically (thus Pfeiffer 1968 p. 218).

10 There is no ancient use of the term “canon” in this sense (although there is the Greek word κάνον, “rule” or “norm”). D. Ruhnken introduced it in his *Historia critica oratorum Graecorum* (1768), borrowing the term from Christianity. The canons have played a “destructive role” in the sense that they ensured the preservation of the works judged to be the best or, conversely, consigned to oblivion whatever they did not include. Cf. Worthington (1994b) and Pernot (2005) 37.

11 The operation of selecting and registering the names of authors in the lists was indicated by the verb ἐγκριθεῖναι, and the authors chosen were called ἐγκριθέντες. The corresponding Latin term is *classicus*, which, from the original politico-military meaning, comes to designate “first-class writers”, cf. Pfeiffer (1968) 206–207.