Inimitable sources: Canonical texts and rhetorical theory in the Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew Traditions

FILIPPOMARIA PONTANI

If anyone has ever, anywhere, set eyes clearly on rhetoric – the science of speaking well – so that he is capable of truly recognizing its face; and if that man then enters upon Scripture, of which we speak here, without either being half asleep or blinded by a cloud of malevolence, he is not wrong in saying that rhetoric is especially prominent there.¹

Not the Juris-consult, … not the Dialectic Theologist … not the Historian … not the Preacher … not the Grammarian …, not the Lexicographer …, not one of them is capable of treading those paths, or of obtaining any thing from the depths of these hidden truths, but he who has excelled in those two sciences, special and peculiar to the Qur'an, viz., the sciences of composing, and of understanding when composed, rhetorically and well-arranged sentences – … by a fixed resolution to acquire a knowledge of the word of God, and an ardent desire to have explained the miracles of His messenger.²

For each [of these twenty rhetorical ornaments] I cite an example from Arabic verse and juxtapose with it what I find in the Holy Scriptures, lest … it be said that the Arabic language is unique in these embellishments … and that our language is devoid of them.³

Homer, being a poet, sings in the panegyric genre of rhetoric, and obtains great praise in it, though of course he is also scientifically very well prepared in all the rhetorical delices.⁴

1. Introduction

The statements given here as epigraphs were formulated in the early twelfth century (the fourth slightly later, around 1180) by a monk, a scholar, a

² al-Zamakhshāri (1075–1144), Commentary on the Qur‘ān, preface (quoted from Nassau-Lees 1856, pp. 8–9).
⁴ Eustathius of Thessalonica (ca. 1115–95), Commentary on Homer’s Iliad 221.25–27 (van der Valk ed. [Eustathii archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis 1971–87]).
rabbi, and an archbishop, in such distant places as Cologne, Old-Urgench (present-day Turkmenistan), Spanish Castile, and Constantinople. Written by outstanding personalities, they all proceed from the same assumption, namely that one specific, canonical text (be it the Latin Old Testament, the Qur’an, the Hebrew Bible, or the Homeric corpus) represents a key, or indeed the key, to show and describe the workings of rhetorical discourse in the respective linguistic and literary system. Even more significantly, they all share the view that it is precisely by commenting on those canonical texts, or by selecting from them specific examples, that rhetoric can best be understood and learned, since not only figures, tropes, and genre markers but sometimes even codified rhetorical precepts happen to feature within the texts themselves.

The present chapter sketches the archaeology of the four statements, in an attempt to describe summarily the – often widely divergent – traditions lying behind them: In other words, it tries to assess the impact of canonical texts in the learned practice of conceptualizing rhetoric as a discipline in its own right; and “rhetoric” will be understood throughout as the science of “style and delivery,” in the Ramist sense of elocution and literary aesthetics, rather than as a full-fledged philosophical and ethical ideal or practice.  

As the study of “multicultural rhetoric” has recently begun to claim, this conceptualization surfaces sooner or later in a large number of cultures. For example, the idea that “neither in India nor in China did rhetoric become a separate discipline with a fully developed theory, its own logical structure, and a corpus of pragmatic handbooks” ought to be reconsidered: Xing Lu has shown how rhetorical consciousness developed in China between the fifth and the third centuries BCE, in a variety of forms that are often at odds with the Western tradition but can fruitfully be compared with it. For example, Han Feizi’s description of the techniques of public speaking does share some analogies with its (almost contemporary) Greek counterparts, if one makes allowance for the obvious differences in social order and cultural system, and for the ubiquitous link with ethical teaching in Chinese learning; even more conspicuously, who could deny that Liu Xie’s extraordinary Carving of the Dragons (late fifth century CE) represents a full-fledged rhetorical handbook, albeit articulated in categories slightly

5 Conley 1990, esp. pp. 128–33. On the relationship between “philosophical” and “literary” rhetoric see most recently the essays collected in Woerther 2009.
7 See Lu 1998 (more useful than Huang 2002), esp. pp. 272–87 and, for a balance of analogies and differences (the latter sometimes perhaps understated), 293–303.
different from ours? By the same token, Sanskrit treatises written since the eighth century CE (though most certainly relying on earlier material) devised a very refined and systematic analysis of poetical texts, devoting special attention to figures (alamkara) and style (guna), as in the works of Rudrata (late ninth century) and Mummata and Ruyyaka (both first half of the twelfth century, roughly contemporary with our four men).

We do not dwell here on these cultures (which are of course reciprocally related), because neither seems to ground rhetorical analysis in the engagement with only one canonical text, be it the Shi Jing or the Veda. However, choosing to limit our analysis to four major Mediterranean traditions, and to stick (if flexibly) to the idea of conceptualized rhetoric as an ars, should not be taken as an act of “Orientalism,” or as the reassuring gesture of finding – or not finding – in other cultures the intellectual patterns with which European classicists (such as I am) are most familiar. On the contrary, this move aims at reconstructing different epistemological paths leading to partly comparable results (the four statements we began with), and particularly at shedding some light on the mechanisms by which, in different traditions, the learned practices of rhetorical studies and rhetorical instruction (both descriptive and prescriptive, in Todorov’s terms) were at least partially envisaged and shaped around one canonical, possibly sacred, and more or less “inimitable” text. On a more down-to-earth level, we are concerned with the circulation of handbooks in scholarly and scholastic milieus, and with the relationship between these handbooks and the genre of textual commentary. On a deeper level, we get a glimpse of

8 Xie 1983 (esp. chs. 30–44); the essays collected in Cai 2001.
12 The Veda (on whose complex transmission and exegesis see also Visigalli, this volume) was perhaps involved in the rise of some early categories (Gerow 1977, pp. 220–23), but it did not eventually become the object of systematic treatises, as opposed to other species of the varied corpus of Indian poetry. The complex inquiries on the stylistic “flavors” of the Mahabharata carried out, e.g., by Anandavardhana in the ninth century (Tubb 1991) have a more ethical-philosophical than strictly rhetorical tone.
13 “A system of instructive rules, gained through experience (empeiria) but subsequently thought-through logically, for the correct implementation of a perfection-oriented repeatable action, that does not belong to the naturally inevitable course of events and should not be left to chance” (Lausberg 1998, p. 2). See Kennedy 1980, pp. 7–8.
14 Todorow 1989. We refrain, however, from dwelling on the function of sacred and profane texts across different medieval cultures; for promising hints in this direction see Grévin 2012, pp. 206–28.
how the selection of a foundational text for rhetorical purposes can affect (or proceed from) the ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity of the culture involved, and of how it can interact with coeval concerns in the domains of literary criticism, philosophy, and religion.

This descriptive approach, carrying all the limits of my background as a classicist with a superficial knowledge of Semitic traditions, is far from exhausting such a potentially wide topic; indeed, it might open up even more questions than it answers. But it will have a raison d'être if in the process some connections, analogies, and differences between various cultural traditions become apparent to the reader.

2. Eustathius

Toward the end of the twelfth century, in the last phase of the extraordinary cultural movement known in Byzantium as the Comnenian Renaissance, the archbishop Eustathius of Thessalonica, one of the most learned men of his time, completed what is by far the longest and most erudite medieval commentary on the Homeric poems. Being himself a professor of rhetoric in the patriarchal school of Constantinople, he obviously paid a great deal of attention to the tropes, the figures, and the stylistic peculiarities of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with a special focus on what Hermogenes (second century CE), perhaps the most influential theoretician of Greek rhetoric, called “ideas,” or “qualities of style,” as well as on the features that might inspire a mimetic practice on the part of modern writers and orators. However, Eustathius was by no means the first scholar to recommend the study of the poems for the purpose of teaching and illustrating rhetorical principles, or to consider Homer as the “father” of rhetoric: In both directions, he walked in the footsteps of a very old tradition, deeply rooted into the Hellenistic and the imperial ages.

The most detailed extant evidence for a rhetorical treatment of Homer is contained in a treatise wrongly ascribed to Plutarch, entitled *On the Life and Poetry of Homer II*, now generally dated to the early second century CE: The purpose of this text is to argue for the absolute excellence of the two epic poems in all sorts of disciplines, from astronomy to law, from grammar to

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16 On Hermogenes and Eustathius see Lindberg 1977, following Lehnert 1896. On Eustathius and Byzantine rhetorical mimesis see Nünlist 2012, along with Cullhed 2014, pp. 38–43, 49–54.
ethics.\textsuperscript{17} This admiration for Homer “the father of all,” not uncommon in Greek culture,\textsuperscript{18} is immediately concretized in a painstaking catalog of the stylistic devices found in the poems, which thus become touchstones of rhetorical skill much in the same way as Homer’s language and grammar were regarded by some ancient critics as the touchstones of \textit{hellenismos} (sound Greek).\textsuperscript{19} Tropes (\textit{tropoi}: deviations from “nature” in the use of an individual word) and figures (\textit{schemata}: deviations in the arrangement of words or in the cast of thought), but also broader stylistic devices (“economy” of speech, disposition of proems, ethical characterization, strategies to persuade crowds, suspense, compassion, etc.), could all be found in a paradigmatic form in one or more passages of the epics.\textsuperscript{20} This proved that Homer had consciously used them, paving the way for all subsequent writers, poets, and orators.

The idea that Homer’s poetry in its very wording and style (i.e., not only as a repository of myths and topics for rhetorical exercises)\textsuperscript{21} could be useful for orators composing their own speeches designed for the assembly, for the court, or for an epideictic performance was not an obvious one: For one thing, Homer is a poet, not a prose writer, and he uses a centuries-old language, far remote from Attic and never actually spoken by anyone. Still, there is a threefold rationale for the development of this idea, which explains \textit{inter alia} the crop of Homeric references in such distant works as Aristotle’s \textit{Rhetoric} (fourth century BCE, perhaps the first thorough systematization of the entire discipline), Hermogenes’ oeuvre (the discipline’s normative code throughout later Greek history),\textsuperscript{22} and Menander Rhetor’s influential \textit{Division of Epideictic Speeches} (third–fourth century CE).\textsuperscript{23}

(a) Homer’s poetry is as excellent as the best possible speech, because Homer is a champion of elocution and thus offers a model even to orators;\textsuperscript{24} his grandiloquence and thought surpass those of all other poets;\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{17} Hillgruber 1994, pp. 5–35; Keaney and Lamberton, in Ps.-Plutarch 1996, pp. 1–29.

\textsuperscript{18} E.g., Finkelberg 2003, Alexander 1998.

\textsuperscript{19} Pontani 2010, pp. 91–102; Siebenborn 1976, pp. 30–31, 88; Blank 1998; Boatti 2000, pp. 269–70.

\textsuperscript{20} Russell 1981, pp. 144–46 and n. 44.

\textsuperscript{21} On \textit{progymnasmata} and \textit{meletai} see, e.g., North 1952, pp. 17–18.

\textsuperscript{22} E.g., M. Heath 1995, Patillon 1997, Lindberg 1997.

\textsuperscript{23} E.g., Menander Rhetor 16 (pp. 200–02, Russell and Wilson ed. and trans. [Menander Rhetor 1981]): “Among the things in which the divine poet Homer has been our teacher, he has not omitted the form of the monody … We must therefore take our starting-points from Homer and elaborate them, grasping the general principle as the poet has transmitted it to us.” To demonstrate this one need only check the massive presence of Homer in the texts collected in Spengel 1853–56 and Walz 1832–36. On Late Antiquity see also Cameron 2004, pp. 344–45.

\textsuperscript{24} See Longinus, \textit{Rhetoric}, frag. 48 (pp. 197, 194–96, Patillon and Brisson ed. [Longinus 2002]).

\textsuperscript{25} Ps.-Plutarch, \textit{On the Life and Poetry of Homer II}, 161.
(b) prose is but an imitation of poetry, wherefore no one can deny Homer, who is a poet, pride of place in the rhetorical tradition;  

(c) Homer did in fact consciously intersperse his own poetry with rhetorical figures, because he wanted it to fulfill a didactic purpose. When Eustathius of Thessalonica denies this assumption in passing ("the poet does not intend to teach the art of rhetoric"), he does so in order less to undermine Homer’s validity as a teacher, in which he deeply believes, than to cautiously limit the scope of his teaching to general tools and ideas (i.e.: Don’t expect Homer to spell out one by one all the different techniques of speech).

These assumptions inevitably touch upon such crucial issues as the ancient views on the origins of rhetoric and the status of Homer as a *livre de culture*. To begin with, it must be stressed that whereas grammar as a discipline, though in many ways conceived and implied by Stoic scholars and early Alexandrian philologists, received its first codification in handbook form well into the Hellenistic age (first century BCE), rhetoric had a much older pedigree. Whichever date we choose for its rise, it is apparent that the great Athenian orators of the fourth century already displayed an increasing theoretical consciousness, and that by the age of Aristotle (that is, well before the foundation of the library at Alexandria) some of the main tools of analysis for rhetorical discourse were already in existence, no matter when exactly they acquired the shape of a handbook – probably not before the mid-fourth century, at any rate certainly not in the age of the mythical Achaean heroes Nestor, Odysseus, and Palamedes, as Socrates humorously suggests in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (261b–c).

As a matter of fact, the ancients themselves invoked different starting points for rhetoric: The most popular inventors featured on the one side

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26 Strabo, *Geography* 1.2.6.
27 See, e.g., the bT-scholium to *Iliad* 1.366a Erbse ed., calling the poet *rhetorikos*: “Because the poet is interested in rhetoric and wants to teach us the figure of recapitulation, he tells us the same things again from the beginning” (Sluiter 1999, pp. 176–79).
28 Eustathius, *Commentary on the Odyssey* (pp. 1454, 60–64, Stallbaum ed. [Eustathii archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis 1825–26]) (on Athena’s detailed prescriptions to Telemachus at the beginning of book 3).
30 Namely, whether we fix it to the mid-fifth century with Tisias, Corax, and the sophists or to the fourth century with Plato and Aristotle. The matter is hotly debated down to our own day; see, e.g., Cole 1991; Schiappa 1999, pp. 14–29; Gagarin 2007.
32 See Radermacher 1951.
Homer himself, on the other the characters of his epics (Plato's *Cratylus* [398a] records an etymology of “hero” from the verb *eirein* [to say]). The latter idea, with Odysseus as the representative of the grand, rich style, Nestor of the middle, moderate style, and Menelaus of the plain, restrained one, may be implied in the early fourth century by Socrates, who highlights Odysseus's rhetorical abilities in an anecdote known through his pupil Xenophon. What is more important, however, is that the idea of the heroes as orators could be implicitly derived from the poems themselves, for example, from Antenor’s famous speech in *Iliad* 3.212–24, where the character apparently distinguishes two (or three) rhetorical styles when describing the eloquence of Menelaus and Odysseus.

Indirect allusions within the very text of the *Iliad* also fuel the other common assumption (lying at the heart of Ps.-Plutarch’s *On the Life and Poetry of Homer II*) that Homer himself, rather than any of his characters, should in fact be regarded as the “father of rhetoric”: Widely invoked meta-literary passages include the reference to Achilles’ education as a “speaker of words” (a *rheter*: *See Iliad* 9.442–43, along with the bT-scholium on 9.443a Erbse ed.), the apparent hint to contests of declamation in the Achaean assemblies (*Iliad* 15.283–84), and more generally the strong accent laid throughout the epics upon persuasion and credibility. Answering King Philip of Macedonia’s inquiry about Homer’s view of rhetoric, Alexander the Great allegedly answered: “I believe that he admired the study, father, else he would never have introduced Phoenix as a teacher of Achilles in the art of discourse.” From this stance to the idea that Homer wrote the epics in order to actually teach (among other things) rhetorical devices, the step was rather small, and was often made.

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33 One scholium (bT-scholium to *Iliad* 3.212 Erbse ed.) even establishes the correspondence of the three heroes with the three great Attic orators, Demosthenes, Lysias, and Isocrates, respectively; see also Cicero, *Bratus* 40, 50; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 2.17.8 (“Even in Homer we find Phoenix as an instructor not only of conduct but of speaking; while a number of orators are mentioned, the various styles are represented by the speeches of three of the chiefs and the young men are set to contend among themselves in contests of eloquence”), 12.10.64; Ps.-Plutarch, *On the Life and Poetry of Homer II*, 172; Gellius, *Attic Nights* 6.14.7; etc. See Russell 1964, pp. xxxv–xxxvi; 1981, p. 137; Kennedy 1957; Lehnert 1896, pp. 99–100; Nünlist 2009, pp. 219–21.

34 Xenophon, *Memorable Sayings* 4.6.15 (see also Buffière 1956, pp. 349–50). See Luzatto 1996 against the idea that Antithenes (frag. 51 Caizzi = V.A.187 Giannantoni) dealt with Odysseus’s *polytropia*.


36 Karp 1977; Buffière 1956, pp. 349–54; but see also Quintilian’s quotation in n. 33.

37 Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 2.19.

38 Sluiter 1999.
“But Homer comes first, in the middle and last, in that he gives of himself to every boy and adult and old man just as much as each of them can take.”

[[Homer] is like his own conception of Ocean, which he describes as the source of every stream and river; for he has given us a model and an inspiration for every department of eloquence.] The wider consideration of Homer as the “father of all,” already known to Socrates and crucial to Greek educational practices, may ring familiar to our ears, but it was not entirely self-evident in Hellenistic times (third–first centuries BCE), when critics at Alexandria denied that he had a “modern” and thus factually correct knowledge of disciplines such as philosophy, geography, and astronomy. Perhaps the greatest supporters of Homer’s omniscience were the Stoic philosophers and a group of philologists active at Pergamon in Asia Minor in the second century BCE, namely Crates of Mallos (the head of the local library) and his followers and successors, the so-called kritikoi.

An important passage in Philodemus of Gadara’s fragmentarily preserved On Rhetoric (first century BCE) about Homer’s role as the founder of rhetoric may in fact allude precisely to Stoic doctrines, showing how controversial and yet widespread they were in their own day.

The city of Pergamon plays a crucial role in our story, both in its Hellenistic and in its imperial status. One of its sons, the grammarian Telephus, who acted as a private teacher to Lucius Verus in Rome and must have lived more or less a generation before Galen (thus late-first–mid-second century CE), wrote a lost treatise, On Homer’s (Rhetorical) Figures, which

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39 Dio Chrysostom, Oration 18.8.
40 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 10.1.46 (see also 49 about the other poets borrowing from Homer).
41 Xenophon, Symposium 4.6.
43 According to Strabo (Geography 3.4.4, p. 157 (Casaubon ed.), the Stoics “turned Homer’s poetry to their use as a basis of scientific investigations”; Seneca’s epistle 88 to Lucilius is partly a reaction to this development (Dingel 1974, pp. 39–47).
45 Frag. xxi, Sudhaus ed. (Philodemus 1892) = Fragmente zur Dialektik der Stöker (Hülser ed.), p. 612: “But some of us are so thoughtless that on the one hand we understand the depiction of Homer as the founder of philosophy (not only the kritikoi, but also the philosophers themselves; and not only of one school, but of all of them), but on the other we present it as an absurdity if Homer is considered as the founder of rhetoric.” On Philodemus’s complex views of rhetoric, and on his relationship with the Stoics (here most probably Diogenes of Babylon is quoted), see the essays by David Blank and Sophie Aubert in Woerther 2009 (pp. 73–93 and 95–117, respectively).
46 On Telephus see Pagani 2009. We may also wonder whether this treatise should be identified with Telephus’s On Homer’s Rhetoric, whose title is quoted by an anonymous Prologomenon to Hermogenes’ Staseis (13, p. 189, Rabe ed.): “And that Homer has sown the seeds of the art, was
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was tentatively identified in the nineteenth century as the common source of the remarks linking several works of the imperial age, namely the rhetorical chapters of Ps.-Plutarch’s *On the Life and Poetry of Homer II*, Ps.-Hermogenes’ handbook *On the Method of Forcefulness*, and above all several bT-scholia to the *Iliad* dealing with rhetorical issues, as well as two chapters (8–9, “On Figured Speeches”) of Ps.-Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s *Techne rhetorike*. In the latter work, scenes from Homer (together with passages from Euripides, Demosthenes, and others; but Homer has the lion’s share) are quoted and discussed not in praise of the poet but rather in the construction and shaping of a rhetorical theory, that is, in what can be considered a real handbook of the *discours figuré* for a didactic purpose: how to use metaphors, how to deliver diplomatic messages, how to control outbursts of rage, how to speak to kings and rulers, and so on.

The identification of Telephus as this common source is not generally accepted today: For one thing, it does not account for the occurrence of similar ideas in Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* (late first century CE), an earlier work already insisting on Homer as the *inventor* of rhetoric and as an inimitable model. However, even if Telephus’s lost treatise was just a distinguished item in a long-standing fashion of Homeric exegesis (and not its source), it still seems to be the closest we get to the idea of a handbook of rhetoric structured around the stylistic uses of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, an analysis of rhetorical issues and categories on the basis of a series of Homeric passages. In a way, this is like what the grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus was doing – in approximately the same years – with his own handbooks of grammar and syntax; nor should it be forgotten

shown by Telephos of Pergamon, who wrote a *techne* entitled *On Homer’s Rhetoric*, and there discussed the 13 *staseis.* The doctrine of the thirteen *staseis* was introduced by Minucianus in the second century CE.

47 The bT-scholia are a particular group of explanations, chiefly concerned with matters of style, ethos, aesthetics, etc., rather than with strictly speaking text-critical issues: See Nünlist 2009; M. Schmidt 1976; Richardson 2006, esp. pp. 192–204; Lehnert 1896.

48 The exact date and authorship of these two chapters (certainly not contemporary with the bulk of the Ps.-Dionysian *Techne*) have been variously debated, but it is safe to think of the second century CE, perhaps slightly later than Ps.-Plutarch. M. Heath 2003 argues for Aelius Sarapion as an author; the most detailed analysis of the work remains Schöpsdau 1975.


50 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.50: “Again, does he not transcend the limits of human genius in his choice of words, his reflections, figures, and the arrangement of his whole work, with the result that it requires a powerful mind, I will not say to imitate, for that is impossible, but even to appreciate his excellences?” See Wehrli 1928, pp. 5–7; Tavernini 1953, pp. 17–21; Russell 1981, pp. 123–24; Fuhr 1902.

51 See the text quoted in n. 46, along with Schrader 1903 and Wehrli 1928, p. 8.

52 Pontani 2010, pp. 98–102 and bibliography.
that Telephus himself, the author of a number of historical, lexicographical, and grammatical works, wrote a special treatise presenting Homer’s language as the best norm for correcting one’s Greek – this is at least what we can gather from the title: That Homer Alone, of All Ancients, Uses Sound Greek.

Most of what we know about Telephus is the titles of his works; another very remarkable one is On the Harmony Between Homer and Plato, and it clearly refers to a key topic in the allegorical and philological tradition of imperial times. Telephus’s titles are all the more significant given his prestige as an imperial teacher and given the cultural pedigree of his hometown, Pergamon (the city of Crates but also, in later times, the city of Galen, one of the most influential intellectuals and doctors of his time): One can reasonably surmise that these works extolling Homer’s reputation represented less the idiosyncratic obsession of a defensor Homeri than an intellectual move propaedeutic to a reevaluation of Homer as a “canonical text” in the strong sense, that is, not only as a vehicle of Greek identity in the difficult task of “being Greek under Rome” but more specifically as a still-valuable carrier of morphological and syntactical forms, phrasings, tropes, figures, and ideas to be exploited even by modern orators in their public performances. This is, after all – as we have seen – the argument made about Homer’s style ten centuries later in the commentaries of Eustathius of Thessalonica.

All this leads us to two preliminary conclusions. The first one, on a more technical level, concerns the mutual relationship between commentaries and treatises: The treatises on Homer’s rhetoric (from Telephus to the relevant section of Ps.-Plutarch) probably drew on a preexisting heritage of Homeric exegesis, rather than vice versa – which means that a series of more or less scattered explanatory remarks on the Homeric text were eventually collected by rhetoricians and woven into a broader analysis of Greek (poetic) discourse. This argument is of special importance, because scholia – in the form we now mostly possess them, that is, as marginal notes in medieval manuscripts – are often the heirs to very old explanations, stratified over the centuries; if we persuade ourselves that Ps.-Plutarch, in this matter as in many others, has rather drawn on scholia than influenced them, and if we agree that the scholia, as opposed to the bulky commentary by Eustathius

53 All listed and discussed by Pagani 2009.
55 Suda tau 495 (Adler ed. [Suda 1928–38]). During his journeys and his otium at Tivoli, Hadrian particularly enjoyed the “discussions about Homer and Plato”: Spartanus, Life of Hadrian 16.6.
56 For the general context see Swain 1996.
of Thessalonica, bear no clear trace of Hermogenes’ doctrines,\(^{57}\) this means that we can push at least some of these rhetorical explanations (and thus the underlying idea of rhetoric as a \textit{techne} immanent in Homer’s poems) some way back up into late Hellenism.

The second conclusion is more wide-ranging, and it concerns the choice of Homer as a touchstone for rhetorical skill and as a paradigm for good and sound writing. This choice was partly connected with the preeminence Homer enjoyed in the field of grammatical teaching, which generally preceded rhetorical studies; however, teachers of grammar and teachers of rhetoric were different, and did not necessarily keep the same textbooks.\(^{58}\) The adoption of Homer in the teaching of rhetoric (as of other disciplines) had the advantage of implying a strong feeling of identity, all the more so in the city of Pergamon, which was one of its cradles as well as one of its hotspots, for there Homer was paramount in art (the altar of Pergamon probably has epic subtexts;\(^{59}\) the famous relief of the \textit{Apotheosis of Homer} was executed by the sculptor Archelaos from the nearby Priene) and even received divine honors (the scholar Crates of Mallos performed cults in a sanctuary known as a \textit{Homereion});\(^{60}\) and even more in the late Hellenistic age, when rhetoric fought its decisive battle against philosophy, and later in the age of Hadrian and the Antonines, a crucial time for a new definition of Greek identity in the Roman Empire.

We have mentioned the second-century BCE quarrel that opposed philosophers and rhetoricians;\(^{61}\) it must be stressed that this quarrel was rather a matter of self-positioning and self-promotion within the broader frame of Hellenistic culture than a case of substantial, ideological disagreement. However, the rhetoricians, in the wake of Hermagoras of Temnos and other leading figures, attempted to demonstrate that their discipline was indeed a \textit{techne} and that it had but recently – since the times of Corax and Tisias – achieved this epistemological and scientific status;\(^{62}\) this is, for example, why the debated, anonymous text known as prolegomenon 17 to Hermogenes proudly and categorically rules out the derivation of rhetoric from the gods or from the Homeric heroes.\(^{63}\) On the other hand, many

\(^{57}\) M. Heath 1993 has shown that the scholia work with \textit{staseis} that might be as old as the second century BCE rhetorician Athenaeus; Pontani 2014 presents a case where Hermogenes is indeed used in a scholium, but this interference can safely be traced back to thirteenth-century Apulia. On Eustathius see n. 16 earlier in this chapter.


\(^{59}\) E. Simon 1975; but see a more updated bibliography in Yarbro Collins 1998, pp. 181–83.


\(^{61}\) E.g., Kennedy 1980, pp. 89–90; 1957.

\(^{62}\) E.g., Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria} 3.3.1; Cicero, \textit{On Invention} 1.5, 7, 3.6.

\(^{63}\) (Marcellinus?), \textit{Prolegomena to Hermogenes’ Staseis} 17 (p. 268, Rabe ed.); See Kennedy 1957 on the whole topic.
philosophers (especially the Peripatetics and the Academics, but initially also important Stoics such as Diogenes of Babylon) retorted that Homer’s heroes already act as perfect orators and that therefore the fifth or fourth century marked no real (r)evolution, much less the rise of rhetoric as a techne in the proper sense of the term.

The long chapter devoted to this issue in the landmark of ancient theory, Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* (2.17), ends up in a sort of compromise (rhetoric is a “natural” discipline but it must be aided by art), and it represents an excellent summary of the arguments pro and contra, attesting to the liveliness of this debate; again in the early second century the orator Aelius Aristides (another habitué of Pergamon) also devoted special attention to the topic, dwelling at length on the stylistic peculiarities of Homeric characters, on Telemachus’s quality as a public orator, and more generally on the alleged presence of rhetorical tenets in Homer’s poetry. This quarrel, as we have seen, originated as a battle for cultural preeminence and influence within the culture of the Roman world – and it is interesting to see that Homer and his heroes enjoyed pride of place in the arguments of both parties.

It might be even more surprising to realize that the debate has not been entirely settled down to the present day: While many scholars have attempted to describe Homer’s art of speech (and especially the speeches of his characters) in the frame of a self-conscious refinement of oral patterns, others have indicated, exactly in the wake of Quintilian and Ps.-Plutarch, how many features in Homer’s poems point to an explicit knowledge of rhetoric as a structured discipline – for example, in terms of speaker’s credibility, techniques of persuasion, lies, and truthfulness (the Thersites episode and the *peira* in *Iliad* book 2; Odysseus at Scheria and Ithaca, etc.).

Even contemporary theoreticians of literature refer to a “politisches Modell” (Tiasis, Corax, and Syracuse) and a “homerisches Modell” (innate ability of speech) as two opposite categories for explaining the rise of rhetoric.

This reappraisal of Homer’s role might help nuance our somewhat fossilized image of linguistic and stylistic Atticism, and it hints of a broader interest in literature even in the post-eventum of that “rationalization of

64 Aristides or. 2 (Behr ed.), *To Plato: In Defense of Rhetoric*, esp. pp. 93–96 and passim; Kindstrand 1973, pp. 200–03.
68 Pontani 2012, pp. 50–52; see also, e.g., Wilkins 2007 about Galen and Athenaeus.
discourse” which occurred in Greek and Roman intellectual culture through the first century CE.\textsuperscript{69} Above all, I believe that we should consider Homer as a persistently active stimulus in the domain of rhetorical teaching and in the self-definition of rhetoric: not a passively “inimitable” author, nor an indefinite ideal of perfection confined to a remote archetypal existence,\textsuperscript{70} but rather a text that had to be studied and perused because in manifold ways it could help greatly in the shaping of Greek discourse and of Greek identity (and thereby, in the long run, of the Western ones as well).

3. Rupert

Greek debates, however focused on the paradigmatic status of their own canonical author par excellence, could not possibly leave the Romans uninterested: Not only, as we have just seen, are Cicero and Quintilian among our chief sources for the Hellenistic controversy between philosophers and rhetoricians, but also a culture keen on the ideal of the \textit{vir bonus dicendi peritus} (good man, skilled in speaking) predictably spotted in such a character as Homer’s Phoenix the roots of the blending between ethic and rhetoric.\textsuperscript{71}

However, we also see the rise of a comparable approach to Virgil. Little is known about the prehistory of the study of Virgil as a paradigm of rhetorical expression, and much would be clearer if we could read the text of Florus’s \textit{Was Virgil an Orator or a Poet?} (dated, again, to the early second century CE)\textsuperscript{72} beyond its slender introduction, which is totally irrelevant to the topic; or if shadowy figures such as Arusianus Messius or Julius Rufinianus were something more for us than mere names.\textsuperscript{73} What is likely, however, is that the image of Virgil as a source of universal knowledge – an image supported even by such an archaist writer as Gellius in his \textit{Attic Nights} – must have prompted at least some scholars to regard the Mantuan poet as a model of rhetoric as well.\textsuperscript{74}

To be sure, the first extant handbook that builds a theory of rhetorical devices around the text of Virgil, stressing the political dimension of the

\textsuperscript{69} Connolly 2010, p. 151.

\textsuperscript{70} This is not Homer’s image in “Longinus,” \textit{On the Sublime}, either, where chs. 8 and 9 juxtapose Homer’s \textit{hypnos} to different rhetorical styles. On the general phenomenon of Homer in the Second Sophistic see also Zeitlin 2001.

\textsuperscript{71} Cicero, \textit{De oratore} 3.15.17.

\textsuperscript{72} von Albrecht 1994, p. 1120.

\textsuperscript{73} Squillante Saccone 1985, pp. 18–20.

\textsuperscript{74} Portalupi 1977, esp. pp. 471, 479.
Aeneid as an encomium of Augustus, is later in date: It stems from around 400 CE, and it goes under the name of Tiberius Claudius Donatus. The statement in the prologue could hardly ring clearer:

If you pay careful attention to the epic of Maro and grasp its meaning correctly, you will discover in the poet a perfect rhetor, and hence you will understand that Virgil should not have been taught by grammarians, but by the best of the orators. For he will show you the art of speech at its fullest, as we have posited at several places by way of examples.\(^{75}\)

While it is still unclear, for chronological and philological reasons, whether Claudius Donatus inherited single elements of the rhetorical analysis of Virgil from Servius’s commentary or vice versa,\(^{76}\) the importance of a handbook conceived in this way cannot be overestimated, not only because we find here a perfect counterpart to Ps.-Plutarch’s chapters on Homeric style (and most probably to Telephus’s lost work On Homer’s Rhetoric; see section 2 of this chapter), but also because within a couple of centuries this approach was to represent an obvious starting point for rhetorical analyses of the biblical text – in other words, for the tradition leading straight to the second of our four men, Rupert of Deutz.

In a very schematic way, we might identify the turning point in this story with Augustine of Hippo, a younger contemporary of Tiberius Claudius Donatus.\(^{77}\) This is not to deny or to underrate a lively tradition of Greek Christian exegesis: It is true, for example, that Origen in the third century CE had already offered some decisive contributions toward the rhetorical analysis of the text of the Septuagint, adopting this approach in his philological work.\(^{78}\) However, book 4 of Augustine’s On Christian Doctrine is doubtless the first writing in which scholars and preachers are provided with a systematic descriptive and prescriptive treatment of the rhetorical devices found in the Bible: The book is presented not only as a holy text but also as an eloquent one, so as to refute the pagan scholars who were celebrating the superiority of “their language over that of our authors” (4.6.10). Augustine’s argument, which hardly ever tackles the Hebrew text directly but for the most part relies on such “divinely inspired” translations as Jerome’s (see

\(^{75}\) 1.3 (Georges ed., trans. in Copeland and Sluiter 2009, p. 145).
Filippomaria Pontani

2.10.15–2.12.17), is rather clear-cut (3.29.40): “The learned must realize that our authors have employed the modes of all the forms of expression that grammarians using the Greek term call tropes; more precisely, rhetorical devices are immanent to the divine books, which even contain some of their very names, such as allegory, riddle, parable.”

It is for this reason that a few decades later the statesman and writer Cassiodorus, in his commentary on the Psalms, while treating the different pieces of that biblical book as a sort of laboratory and classifying them according to the different genres of oratory, can still claim that he is not superimposing any meaning or category from the outside⁷⁹ but rather elucidating the devices as they appear within the frame of the text:

Someone however may say: the premises of syllogisms, the names of figures, the terms for the disciplines, and other items of this kind are not found at all in the psalms. But they are clearly found in force of meaning, not in the utterance of words; in this sense we see wine in vines, a harvest in the seed, foliage in roots, fruits in branches, and trees conceptually in nuts.⁸⁰

Augustine and Cassiodorus, with their apologetic enthusiasm, end up viewing rhetoric as a body of knowledge revealed in scripture and crucial to its understanding. They thus pave the way for a long-standing Western tradition of rhetorical teaching applied to the Bible, reaching well into the Middle Ages, when it enjoys pride of place among other exegetical trends.⁸¹

The first systematic handbook after Augustine was produced in the early eighth century by the English monk Venerable Bede, who opens his On Figures and Tropes by attacking the Greeks and their claim to have been the inventors of rhetoric: “There is not one of these schemes and tropes which teachers of classical rhetoric boast of which did not appear in [scil. the Scripture] first.”⁸² In illustrating anaphoras, asyndetons, metaphors, and the like by means of biblical passages, Bede is inspired by running commentaries such as Cassiodorus’s Exposition of the Psalms and Augustine's Glosses on

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⁷⁹ Cassiodorus, Exposition of the Psalms, praef. 15 (Cassiodorus 2012, trans. in Copeland and Sluiter 2009, p. 214): “[The Bible] exploits its varieties of language in sundry ways, being clothed in definitions adorned by figures, marked by its special vocabulary, equipped with the conclusions of syllogisms, gleaming with forms of instruction. But it does not appropriate from these [scil. rhetorical categories] a beauty adopted from elsewhere, but rather bestows upon them its own high status.”


⁸¹ E.g., Dahan 2000, pp. 228–29.

the Heptateuch, but he is also essentially applying the same method Tiberius Claudius Donatus had used for Virgil.

It is the merit of Ulrich Schindel to have shown that this transition from pagan to Christian rhetoric, achieved by the scholarly tradition we have just outlined, was not a medieval outcome and was carried out in practice by means of the confessional adaptation of one specific text, namely the Ars of another, more famous Donatus (fourth century), a Virgilio-centric grammatical and rhetorical treatise that was one of the most influential of its kind throughout Late Antiquity, and of course counted among the sources of Tiberius Claudius Donatus as well. 83 The Christianized version of Donatus’s Ars was a common source for Bede, Isidore of Seville, and other authors, and it must have been produced between the fifth and the sixth centuries, perhaps in Italy. 84

Thus, when in the early decades of the twelfth century, in a monastery near Cologne, the Belgian abbot Rupert of Deutz wrote the sentence quoted at the beginning of this chapter, he was relying on a tradition of exegesis and handbooks that stretched back to Late Antique, Augustan, and even Hellenistic forerunners. Rupert’s goal, in an age full of cultural ferment (the age of such philosophers and theologians as Peter Lombard and Abelard), was less to instruct about rhetoric than to “return us to the reading of Scripture itself, armed with a greater understanding of how skilfully Scripture perfects its discourse and purveys its message of salvation”. 85 As a matter of fact, the rhetorical analysis of the Bible is but one of the many chapters of his bulky essay On the Holy Trinity and Its Workings, a comprehensive description of the Creation and of its wonders.

Among other things, Rupert argues, the style of the Bible is surprising: “Its style is so simple that anyone would believe himself able to imitate it, and so profound that virtually no one would prove himself capable of matching its character.” 86 This idea of inimitability, comparable to Quintilian’s declaration about Homer (see section 2 earlier in this chapter and note 50), makes for a perfect transition to our brief overview of the Arabic tradition: We have to pay a visit to a scholar investigating the rhetoric of the Qur’an in the heart of Asia.

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83 On Donatus’s handbook see the comprehensive study and edition by Holtz 1981.
84 Schindel 1975, pp. 19–95 (who also considers, but ultimately rejects, the possibility that the author might be Cassiodorus).
85 Copeland and Sluiter 2009, pp. 391–92 (see also p. 40).
4. Al-Zamakhshari

Arabic rhetorical doctrine was not especially quick to conceive of itself as an autonomous discipline: The study of balāgha (a rough equivalent of our idea of “rhetoric” in the technical and linguistic sense, as opposed to khaṭāba as the “philosophical” science of speaking, however crude this distinction may be) did not grow immediately out of the extraordinarily developed science of grammar. In Ibn al-Nadīm’s Fihrist (ca. 970–80) it still appeared on its way toward official codification, a stage it attained only in al-Sakkāki’s (d. 1229) encyclopedic work. Before that, balāgha acquired an increasingly important status during the tenth century, chiefly after the work of al-Mu’tazz (d. 908) and Qudāma ibn Ja’far (d. 932 or 948). In their attempt to describe the essential stylistic devices of Arabic discourse (meter, rhyme, word form, and word meaning), these early scholars had no corpus of public speeches at their disposal, and they thus sifted the poetical production of pre-Islamic as well as of Islamic times, with al-Mu’tazz deserving a very important place because of his interest in the bādi’, the innovative and hotly debated syntactical, phonological, and semantical figures of speech employed by the “new” poets of the Abbasid period, possibly inherited from an earlier tradition of prose writing.

It should be stressed from the outset that no stage in the history of Arabic balāgha appears to have been radically influenced by Greek doctrine: Aristotle’s works were translated quite early, but they affected the philosophical tradition rather than the more strictly rhetorical one; furthermore, contacts of the Arabs with Late Antique and Christian schools certainly have to be assumed, but this intercourse may have suggested single elements or inputs rather than the creation of a new branch of learning. For one thing, the very basis of Aristotle’s codification, namely

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87 This distinction partly reflects Ibn Khaldūn’s view: See the learned and detailed discussion of Larcher 2009. Halldén 2005, pp. 20–23, objects to it both by showing that the balāgha doctrine is in fact more complex and by nuancing and reassessing the often-overlooked concept of khaṭāba.

88 On the rise of Arabic grammar from philological and political needs see Pontani 2012, pp. 54–64 (along with the works there cited, e.g., Versteegh 1993, Endress 1986). Baalbaki 1983 argues against the idea of an early development of balāgha from Sibawayhi’s grammar.


92 Halldén 2005, pp. 28–32, makes the most out of this connection, though the evidence is admittedly opaque. See also Watt 2009 on the Syriac mediation.

the articulation into genres, remained necessarily foreign to a world where most genres simply did not exist.\textsuperscript{94}

The real turning point in the history of Arabic rhetorical doctrine was marked precisely by the incorporation of the canonical text as an object of study.\textsuperscript{95} All the most important treatises on style, figures, and so on, from the tenth century down to al-Sakkākī, tackle or presuppose more or less directly a dogma inherent to the community’s canonical text: the so-called \textit{i’jāz} (inimitability) of the Qur’ān.\textsuperscript{96} In its simplest form, the \textit{i’jāz} starts from the assumption that the Qur’ān is a miracle, the only miracle of Mohammad, inscribed within the Qur’ān itself,\textsuperscript{97} surpassing any human power and centered on an uncreated language and on a beautiful style just as the miracles of Moses and Jesus were centered on magic and medicine respectively.\textsuperscript{98} This inimitability amounts to the idea that no speaker of Arabic can possibly (etymologically speaking, it is a matter of “capability”; i.e., no one is able to) produce a more perfect, more convincing, formally better thought-out text than the uncreated, God-sent text of the Qur’ān; imitation has led impious writers to utter failures and should never be attempted again.\textsuperscript{99}

The Qur’ān was not of course absent from scholarly speculation on style prior to the \textit{i’jāz} dogma: Exegetes from al-Farrā’ to Ibn Qutayba tackled difficult passages in the Qur’ān with the tools of rhetorical doctrine,\textsuperscript{100} and al-Mu’tazz himself justified many of the \textit{badī’} by spotting their presence within the holy text. On the whole, however, it can be said that the attention paid by exegetes to the various features of Arabic poetry, including the Qur’ān, “was the outcome of a long process, the confluence of theological speculations and philological subtleties.”\textsuperscript{101} It was only at this point that a text already “believed to contain every form of knowledge that a child can need”\textsuperscript{102} could be read in schools not just for its grammatical, ethical, or indeed religious value but also as a literary masterpiece; the way was paved

\textsuperscript{94} Larcher 2000, p. 314; 2009, pp. 206–07.
\textsuperscript{95} Van Gelder 1982, p. 97; Larcher 2009, pp. 207–08.
\textsuperscript{97} On the often-quoted sura 17/88 (“Say: If men and \textit{jinn} banded together to produce the like of this Qur’ān, they would never produce its like, not though they backed one another!”) see, however, the more cautious interpretation by Radscheit 1996.
\textsuperscript{99} Boullata 1988.
\textsuperscript{100} Dichy 2009.
\textsuperscript{101} Van Gelder 1982, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{102} Peters 2000, p. 311.
for the statement by al-Zamakhshari quoted as one of the epigraphs to this chapter.\textsuperscript{103}

Two apparent paradoxes must be clarified here: First of all, the Qur’ān is not properly speaking a work of poetry (even if Martin Luther believed the opposite)\textsuperscript{104}: Having been revealed to an “illiterate” man such as Mohammad, it does not respect or fulfill the traditional requirements of Arabic poetry. However, after the widespread acceptance of the dogma of \textit{i’jāz}, the Qur’ān was proclaimed as belonging to a very peculiar genre, which ranked as definitely higher than prose but through its unique beauty and perfection could afford to neglect the stricter norms of poetry.\textsuperscript{105} After all, among most Arab critics prose “was no more than poetry without meter and without continuous rhyme,”\textsuperscript{106} and the distinction ran along a line of content and meaning, of objective versus imaginative representation, rather than of formal outer appearance.\textsuperscript{107}

Second, it would seem obvious that an inimitable text (inimitable in a much more dramatic sense than Homer in Quintilian’s words, or even the Bible in Augustine’s) could not possibly serve as a basis for a prescriptive teaching of “how to write,” but might at most be exploited retrospectively as a tool for describing the key features of Arabic style. In fact, the early approaches are more descriptive than not, and they all emerge at the crossroads of religious worries and exegetical practices:

- the Iraqi al-Rummānī (889–994), in Ibn al-Nadīm’s words “one of the most illustrious of the grammarians of al-Basrah and theologians of Baghdad,”\textsuperscript{108} writes a \textit{Treatise on the Inimitability of the Qur’ān}, containing a detailed account of the ten tropes to be found in the holy text (e.g., comparison, metaphor, hyperbole, paronomasia), but also of its peculiar stylistic virtues (clarity, conciseness, euphony);
- the Persian al-Khatābī (931–998) insists on the Qur’ān as perfectly fulfilling the threefold subdivision of Arabic style (the eloquent, the correct, and the current one)\textsuperscript{109} and as an excellent work in its lexical choices, ideas, and intellectual structures, most of which escape the knowledge.

\textsuperscript{103} Larcher 2009, pp. 207–09.
\textsuperscript{104} Bobzin 1996, pp. 172–73.
\textsuperscript{105} Grévin 2012, pp. 144–46.
\textsuperscript{106} Bonebakker 1970, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{107} Cantarino 1975, pp. 92–94 (reaching down to Ibn Khaldūn’s view of the issue); Neuwirth 1983 on al-Rummānī.
\textsuperscript{109} The threefold division of styles is centered on Virgil in the Latin West; and “Homer is alleged to be capable both of elevation when the subject requires it, and of ‘propriety’ where elevation is out of place” (Russell 1981, p. 123).
of human beings. Al-Khaṭṭābī thus points to the holy text’s miraculous nature in three respects, the *lafz* (word choice), the *mānā* (the meaning of words), and the *naẓm* (ordering and style: etymologically, the “stringing of pearls”); the Iraqi al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) also insists on the deliberate stylistic excellence of the Qur’ān and argues that a peculiar linguistic skill is needed in order to properly understand the holy text – a stance Mohammad would have probably disliked, as at least partially conflicting with the ideal of *bayān* (“distinctness”) so characteristic of the Arabic language.

But the standard codification of Arab *balāgha*, both in descriptive and in prescriptive terms, relies primarily on the work of a Persian scholar who, a few decades later, focused his analysis precisely on the elucidation of the features and virtues of the Qur’ān: I am referring to al-Jurjānī (d. 1078 or 1081), the highest theoretician of *naẓm*, who in his masterpiece *The Mysteries of Eloquence (Asrār al-balāgha)* defined some of the central figures of speech (with a special attention to analogy, similes, comparisons, metaphors, etc.) not only as mere technical devices but also as reflecting the psychological intention of the author(s) and the intended reaction of the audience. Tropes, in al-Jurjānī’s view, are also indispensable tools for exegetes to use in achieving a correct interpretation of the Qur’ān, since they prevent readers from understanding it in either too literal or too metaphorical a sense. It is no surprise, then, that in his *Proofs for the Inimitability (Dalā’il al-i’jāz)* the same tools are exploited to effect a systematic analysis of speech by means of a series of rhetorical devices, all to be found in (and to be defined through) single passages of the Qur’ān.

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110 Audebert 1982, pp. 115, 120 (“Pénètre-toi de cela et sache que si le Coran est inimitable c’est parce qu’il offre les vocables les plus purs, agencés selon les rapports organisateurs les plus parfaits, et qu’il contient les idées les plus justes sur l’unicité de Dieu”).
111 Heinrichs 1998b; on the etymology of *naẓm* see Moses ibn Ezra, *Kitāb*, fol. 14v (Mas. ed. [ibn Ezra 1985–86]).
112 “When one considers these suras most of them turn out to be built, from beginning to end, on giving evidence for the miraculous nature of the Koran” (quoted in van Gelder 1982, p. 100). See also Boullata 1988, p. 145.
114 Gilliot 1990, pp. 73–75; Gilliot and Larcher 2004, pp. 124–26. This of course touches upon the issue of obscurity, on which see Sluiter, this volume.
115 Abu-Deeb 1979 makes bold assumptions concerning the character of al-Jurjānī’s *naẓm* as a sort of poetic imagery corresponding to metaphorical discourse in the sense favored by modern literary criticism.
116 A German translation in Al-Curcani 1959.
118 Weisweiler 1958, and see also some discussions in Abu-Deeb 1979.
Al-Jurjānī’s work proved so effective that shortly after him al-Zamakhsharī (1075–1144), the *mutazilite* scholar from Khwarazm whose praise of Qur’ānic rhetoric we read at the beginning of this chapter, imported and exploited many of his principles both in his *Chosen Fine Pearls of Metonymy, Metaphor and Simile*\(^{119}\) and in what happens to be perhaps the bulkiest and most influential medieval commentary on the Qur’ān, the *Khashshaf*. Rhetorical interests (sentence composition, imagery, discourse structure) are here paramount,\(^{120}\) and in this case (as opposed to what had happened in the early period, and to what we have seen in the Greek tradition) we have a commentary drawing on a treatise, not the other way round.

On the whole, the role of the Qur’ān for the shaping of the Arabic identity of the *umma* is pretty obvious; as a further proof of this point, several of the scholars involved were living in Persia or in marginal regions of the Islamic world, where Arabic culture was daily confronted by other, no less powerful traditions.\(^{121}\) That the style and rhetoric of the canonical text should represent part of the importance of that text to the community corresponds to what we have ascertained in the Greco-Latin tradition; however, the relevance of this process is here enhanced by the fact that the adoption of the canonical text into the frame of rhetorical analysis was prompted by religious concerns. Indeed, this powerful religious bias, the caution imposed on scholars by the unquestioned dogma of inimitability, and the general reliance on a centuries-old tradition may be thought to account for the lack of a comprehensive modern study of the rhetoric of the Qur’ān and its influence on the public and private discourse of Arabic-speaking communities down to our own day.\(^{122}\)

5. Moses ibn Ezra

Hebrew grammar had a long history within the Masoretic and Rabbinic tradition before any outside (Arabic) catalyst such as Sibawāyhi’s eighth-century handbook helped bring it to light in a systematic form.\(^{123}\) In much the same way, the study of biblical style and language permeated

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\(^{119}\) Lane 2006, pp. 272, 282–83.


\(^{122}\) Boullata 1988, pp. 144–54; Wielandt 2003; Boullata 2003.

\(^{123}\) Khan 2000, p. 5; Dotan 2000, pp. 219–20; Pontani 2012, pp. 64–76.
a significant part of the midrashic or non-midrashic exegetical corpus handed down through generations of Jewish scholars, from Hillel the Elder’s and Rabbi Ishmael’s hermeneutical rules (first century BCE and second century CE respectively)\textsuperscript{124} to the advanced syntactical speculation of the Karaites,\textsuperscript{125} and later from the complex methodology of the Talmud developed by Samson of Chinon (ca. 1260–1330) to the recurring stylistic and exegetical observations on biblical verses in some late medieval and Renaissance sermons.\textsuperscript{126} But it was not until the interaction with Arabic prototypes that a standardized handbook of Hebrew rhetoric did appear,\textsuperscript{127} from the pen of the fourth man on our list, the Sephardi scholar Moses ibn Ezra (ca. 1055–1138).

Among the general features of Jewish doctrine down to the Middle Ages, I shall single out for our ends just three. First, there was less motivation to promote biblical Hebrew as a linguistic or stylistic paradigm in communities that – for all their devotion to the language of the Holy Writ, which of course they mastered and studied – were largely speaking and writing in other languages, whether Aramaic in the second century CE or Arabic in medieval Andalusia and in the East:\textsuperscript{128} The very extent to which Hebrew (rather than the vernacular) was used in sermons and preaching in Jewish communities throughout the Middle Ages is still a debated issue.\textsuperscript{129} Second, especially in its Rabbinic component, Jewish doctrine was not greatly inclined to promote the direct study of scripture for its own, intellectual sake;\textsuperscript{130} only the exegetical movement of the Karaites, starting in the ninth century, openly claimed the need for dealing with the text in a fresh way (the well-known motto attributed to ‘Anan ben David, a major founder of the Karaites, went: “Search well in Scripture and do not rely on my opinion”).\textsuperscript{131} Finally, Jewish doctrine was also relatively accustomed to producing manuals or codifying disciplines and preferred to approach the wording of the holy text from a number of

\textsuperscript{124} Jacobs 1961.
\textsuperscript{125} One might thus wish to modify the stark assertion by Kennedy 1980, p. 120, that “rhetorical consciousness is entirely foreign to the nature of biblical Judaism.”
\textsuperscript{126} Saperstein 1989.
\textsuperscript{127} Rabinowitz 1985.
\textsuperscript{128} Saenz Badillos 1993; Pontani 2012, pp. 70–72. This of course should be taken as an overall trend, not as a denial of the existence of a body of exegetical literature in Hebrew in the early centuries CE.
\textsuperscript{129} Saperstein 1989, pp. 39–44.
\textsuperscript{130} Talmage 1999 (ranging from Rashi to Profiat Duran), esp. p. 161: “The value of occupation with scripture is not primarily intellectual, but theurgic.”
\textsuperscript{131} Khan 2000, pp. 1–5; Frank 2000.
different angles, without feeling the need of a shared, unified methodology. This is apparent from the very absence of a unitary linguistic or stylistic theory even in the body of medieval Hebrew encyclopedias.132

This said, observations on the construction of discourse were by no means unknown to the Jewish scholars; later Geonic exegesis did show a close interest in textual phenomena even in aspects of detail, but its culminating point, namely Saadiah Gaon’s *Tafsir* (“Interpretation”) on his own translation of the Bible, is largely indebted to Arabic prototypes.133 Saadiah, who had also fashioned the first grammar of Hebrew on Sibawaihi’s model,134 not only envisaged a new type of organic biblical commentary almost entirely unknown to the atomizing midrash but also interspersed his commentary on the Pentateuch with references to metaphor (*majāz*), imagery, and so on, mostly following the methodology of his Arab counterparts.135 The same claim, mutatis mutandis, applies to the Karaite scholars, who also lived in an Islamic environment, and who largely imitated their Arab predecessors when producing some of their earliest grammatical works.136 These were intended less as a guide to promote creative use of Hebrew than as essentially descriptive essays.137

Against this background, Moses ibn Ezra’s twelfth-century *Book of Discussion and Conversation*, a work written in Arabic and devoted to the illustration of poetry, rhetoric, and language but above all to the “ornaments of speech” (Arab. *badī‘*) in the Hebrew Bible (section 8), strikes a note of continuity and one of innovation. The continuity emerges if we consider that precious insights on single aspects of biblical rhetoric were already the heritage not only of most Rabbinic and Geonic traditions (above all Saadiah) but also of the Karaites;138 the radical novelty lies in ibn Ezra’s decision to orientate his analysis programmatically along the pattern of contemporary Arabic works on the same topic, spelling out at the outset that his primary aim was to show in detail (not as a vague statement

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132 See the essays collected in Harvey 2000 (where by contrast Biesterfeldt’s article, pp. 77–98, discusses the pivotal role of grammar and linguistics in Arabic encyclopaedias). See also Altmann 1981, pp. 100–01.

133 Brody 2000, esp. pp. 80–82; Robinson 2007, p. 34. On Saadiah and Geonic exegesis see Vollandt, this volume.

134 Pontani 2012, pp. 72–76, with bibliography of earlier publications.


136 Khan 2000; Frank 2000, pp. 115–16.

137 Khan 2000, pp. 11–15; Khan et al. 2003, pp. xxiv–xxvi, particularly on Abū al-Faraj Hārūn’s work (early eleventh century) taking its cue from ibn Nuh’s grammatical commentary on the Bible, in much the same way as Arabic grammars developed from commentaries.

138 M. Cohen 2003, pp. 541–42, also comments on ibn Ezra’s boldness.
of principle) that the Hebrew Bible had a literary and stylistic pedigree no poorer than Arabic poetry and the Qur'ān.\textsuperscript{139}

Now, this intellectual move cannot be understood outside the wider context of the medieval Andalusian melting pot: In the eleventh century, the inevitable dependence of Jewish scholars on Arabic patterns in disciplines such as grammar and linguistics (ibn Ezra acknowledges Hayyuj and Ibn Janaḥ as his predecessors)\textsuperscript{140} went hand in hand with a “cultural-nationalistic” claim about the excellence of the Bible, and above all with a new interest in its text (especially but not exclusively Job, Psalms, and Proverbs) as a source of inspiration for the production of modern Hebrew liturgical and secular poetry. Ibn Ezra himself was a distinguished lyric poet, and his growing interest in biblical rhetoric was accompanied by a parallel rise in the poetic activity of Andalusian Jewry – in much the same way as al-Mu'tazz had been prompted to codify the \textit{badī'} by the rise of a “new” school of Arabic poetry in Iraq (see section 4 earlier in this chapter).\textsuperscript{141}

Since the tenth century, “just as the Muslims had understood language and poetics through the Qur'ān, so the Jews understood language and poetics with reference to the Hebrew Bible, which they explained with the help of tools that were developed by the Muslims.”\textsuperscript{142} Moses ibn Ezra declares that he is deriving his tools from the Arabs, but at the same time he gives support and substance to the contemporary writing of Hebrew verse by showing that biblical Hebrew, no matter what objections Muslims or even some Jewish scholars made, did possess a rhetorical structure that could well be appropriated for secular aims.

Indeed, ibn Ezra’s point is that the stylistic perfection of the Hebrew Bible does not necessarily entail a “subcultural adaptation of the concept of \textit{i'jāz al-Qur'ān}”:\textsuperscript{143} His challenge is to consider the Bible as a divinely inspired but humanly produced piece of literature, and to unravel empirically the sacrosanct way in which the blessed prophets elaborated their texts to make them as persuasive and as stylistically brilliant as they actually are.\textsuperscript{144} He also thereby intends to endorse the theory of the preeminence of the Hebrew language and to revitalize the study of Hebrew rhetoric as a matter

\textsuperscript{139} See Mas in the preface to ibn Ezra 1985–86; M. Cohen 2000, pp. 290–91; van Gelder 1982, pp. 140–42.

\textsuperscript{140} M. Cohen 2000, p. 285.

\textsuperscript{141} See Brann 1991, pp. 23–58, on the wider context of Hebrew "cultural nationalism" in Andalusia. See also Carmi 1981, pp. 25–27.

\textsuperscript{142} Robinson 2007, p. 125. See ibn Ezra’s own statements on Arabic and Arab tradition in \textit{Kitâb}, fols. 6v, 16r (Mas. ed. [ibn Ezra 1895–86]).


\textsuperscript{144} M. Cohen 2000, p. 291.
of ethnic pride, of identity *lato sensu*, and of poetical awareness: For this purpose, he focuses above all on the Psalms, on Job, and on the Proverbs, but he does not neglect the narrative books.

The influence of ibn Ezra’s work on later Andalusian poets such as his pupil Judah Halevi was significant, but its impact on scholastic practice (of which we unfortunately know little) and on scholarly trends must have been conversely rather modest, as is shown by the sheer fact that it circulated for a very long time in manuscript form.\(^{145}\) Biblical rhetoric did not become a favourite theme for later Andalusian scholars, who were also living in a different political situation; in later times some masters, such as Joseph ibn Shem Tob in his *En ha-Qore* (mid-fifteenth-century Spain), did appreciate rhetoric as “the best of the arts for preaching,”\(^{146}\) but others viewed it as a rather reductive exegetical tool.\(^{147}\) Even among contemporary scholars, the study of biblical rhetoric has not attracted as wide an interest as other aspects of Jewish culture.\(^{148}\)

But there is a conspicuous exception to this trend: An extraordinary *summa* of *ars rhetorica* applied to the Bible was written in northern Italy and published in Mantua in 1475 as the first Hebrew book printed during its author’s lifetime: I refer to the *Book of the Honeycomb’s Flow* by Rabbi Judah Messer Leon (ca. 1420–ca. 1498).\(^ {149}\) The charm of this bulky treatise lies in its indebtedness to a variety of traditions. While showing familiarity with the Jewish and Arabic (chiefly Averroist-Maimonidean) philosophical tradition (which represented the chief mediator for the knowledge of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*), and with ibn Ezra himself, the *Book* overtly acknowledges its deepest debt to Cicero, Quintilian, and the earliest Latin treatise (first century BCE), known as *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.\(^ {150}\) We witness here, in pure humanistic fashion, an attempt to appropriate and re-functionalize the Greco-Latin tradition in order to show that “our holy and beautiful house”\(^ {151}\) was by no means inferior to the consecrated classical works used in the rhetorical handbooks that were widely circulating in the Latin West.

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\(^{146}\) Saperstein 1989, pp. 387–92 (quotation from 390).

\(^{147}\) E.g., Saul Ha-Levi Morteira (ca. 1622; see Saperstein 1989, pp. 274–75): “Nothing in the Torah is mere rhetoric; everything is of substantial and fundamental significance.”

\(^{148}\) de Regt and Fokkelman 1996 is very useful, though not systematic; Meynet 2007 has a very idiosyncratic approach; Lundbrom 2013 is a valuable collection of studies.

\(^{149}\) See the edition with translation by Rabinowitz (Messer Leon 1983) and an excellent overview in Bonfil 1992. See also Zonta 2006, pp. 209–14.

\(^{150}\) Messer Leon 1983, 1v.1.2. See also Bonfil 1992, pp. 24–25. For this blending of traditions in Renaissance Jewish rhetoric see Altmann 1981, pp. 97–118.

\(^{151}\) Messer Leon 1983, Is. 64.10.
Messer Leon’s treatise, a humanistic product to be ranged alongside George of Trebizond’s and Thomas Wilson’s, albeit partly apologetic in tone, does not belong to the old lineage of Jewish tradition. Its very publication was eased by the printer’s intervention in Messer Leon’s preface, designed to shift its focus from profane learning to theology and scriptural exegesis; its impact on the traditional scholastic practice of Italian communities such as Mantua or Ferrara still has to be assessed; and it can hardly be said that it contributed to the shaping of a new figure of a Jewish intellectual/orator in the Ciceronian fashion. Still, its approach provided fertile ground for further speculation, from Azariah de’ Rossi to Judah Moscato (and, in the long run, Robert Lowth). What matters here is that Messer Leon sought to provide Italian Jews with a means of cultural legitimation by showing how the inimitable Torah was in fact the source of all knowledge, and to prompt – if unsuccessfully – a “new definition of the cultural Self” in Renaissance Italian Judaism.

In analyzing a canonical text as perfect as God is perfect, Messer Leon insisted that that text could be interpreted according to the same rhetorical and poetical principles presiding over works of a secular or profane character. All the virtues of speech – the figures, the tropes, the partitions of speeches described by Greek and Latin rhetoricians were thus not read “from the outside” into the biblical text: They were rather innate to the Holy Scripture, because they were implanted by God in the spirit of the Prophets. All the fundamental principles of the science of rhetoric (issues, invention, pathos, technical figures) are included in the Hebrew Bible and – given its excellence – can best be learned from it, particularly from the Torah: “Once I had studied and investigated Rhetoric, ‘searched for her as for hid treasures’ [Prov. 2.4] out of the treatises written by men of nations other than our own, and afterwards came back to see what is said...”

154 A sermon by Abraham Farissol might indicate its circulation in Ferrara in the 1470s: See Ruderman 1978, esp. pp. 10, 24–26. The Book was also praised by Azariah de’ Rossi and circulated among Italian students of law or medicine well into the sixteenth century.
158 See Book iv.82.2, with Rabinowitz’s comments, in Messer Leon 1983, pp. lx–lxii.
159 Rabinowitz, in Messer Leon 1983, pp. xv–xvi and n. 3.
160 Messer Leon 1983, i.1.8: “The Lord gave him [scil. Isaias] the language of the most expert practitioners of the rhetorical art, so as to know how to address forceful words at the proper time to one who is weary.”
of her in the Torah and the Holy Scriptures, then the eyes of my understanding ‘were opened’ [Gen. 3.7], and I saw that it is the Torah which was the giver.”

Though moving from a spectacularly different traditional background, Messer Leon’s Bible thus proves to be, much like Ps.-Plutarch’s and Quintilian’s Homer, much like Augustine’s and Rupert’s Vulgate, much like al-Khaṭṭābī’s and al-Jurjānī’s Qur’ān, the inimitable source of every science and of every rationally apprehended truth, including – first and foremost – the language and style of which it is made.

6. Concluding Thoughts

“The speeches of the ancients”: This is the literal meaning of the Mesoamerican term for “rhetoric” (huehuetlahtolli) according to the Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún, who devoted the entire book 6 of his momentous Historia General de la Nueva España (1540–85) to a collection of exemplary speeches of native Mexicans. In more thoroughly literate cultures, such as the ones studied in the present chapter, the “ancients” did not correspond to elderly sages perpetuating remote traditions, but rather to authoritative texts (or “reliable books”), whose selection necessarily resulted from a negotiation between the implications of their canonical status and their identity-creating value on the one hand and the concrete needs of rhetorical teaching on the other.

As we have seen, in none of the four traditions here considered did rhetorical theory rise exclusively from the study of a canonical text: The Attic orators, Cicero and Virgil, early Islamic poetry, the Talmud – to name but a few – all represented essential ingredients for the rise of rhetorical thought in their respective cultures. In all four cases, however, the canonical texts of those cultures (Homer, the Latin Old Testament, the Qur’ān, the Hebrew Bible) soon acquired a central role in the definition, consecration, and assessment of style, even when they could seem prima facie not particularly suitable or appropriate to this end. Albeit prompted by different stimuli (preservation of identity in Greek, creation of a new culture in Latin Christianity, religious dogma in Islam, competition with other traditions in Hebrew), the conceptual and material adaptations of these texts

161 Messer Leon 1983, i.3.12.
163 See Burak, this volume.
to daily rhetorical practice sometimes followed surprisingly similar paths, even in matters of detail. For instance, it might not be chance that from within these texts, persuasive speeches or elaborated tours de force, above all, were singled out for analysis or used as samples: the *rhēseis* of Homer’s characters, the pregnant lines of the prophets or the Psalms (particularly from a Christian point of view), and the more distinctly prescriptive of the Qur’ānic suras.

In all cases, it is clear that the reason for expanding the “power” of these canonical texts onto the domain of style and rhetoric had less to do with their self-evident features than with their cultural authority and the need to reaffirm their hegemonic status. The text-workers who achieved the complex task of creating rhetorical handbooks from these texts acted both as teachers/practitioners in the classroom and as intellectuals committed to the higher goal of “defending” and “promoting” those texts in society, not by detecting hidden meanings and correspondences “behind” them (this was, after all, the allegorists’ work) but by presenting and highlighting — through a painstaking, sometimes all-too-subtle analysis — rhetorical effectiveness as one of the texts’ allegedly “innate” qualities.

Especially when centered, as it often was, on the concept of “inimitability,” this approach could easily lead to intercultural collisions. One can speculate what Rupert of Deutz, al-Zamakhshārī, Moses ibn Ezra, and Eustathius of Thessalonica could have said to each other, had they ever gathered in the same place to discuss rhetoric: They would have probably found in stylistic arguments a common ground for pursuing the old contests between Homer and Moses, between the Qur’ān and the Bible, or between the Qur’ān and the Bible.

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165 See Most, this volume.


and Homer – the latter comparison was in fact introduced as early as the late ninth century by the Christian Lebanese scholar Qustā ibn Lūqā, who during his years in Baghdad attempted to extol the omniscience of Homer in all fields (medicine, dialectic, rhetoric, etc.), thereby questioning the very essence of Islamic *i'jāz*.  

168 Samir and Zilio Grandi 2003: Q 463–76.