

Audience and Occasion

Abstract This chapter discusses seven questions concerned with the audience and the occasion for which a text is composed. The questions relate to the address to the audience, the occasion and genre of the text, the self-presentation of the speaker, the speaker's relation to the audience, emotions aroused, and the opening of the text. The chapter brings out the implications of, and possible answers to, the questions by considering doctrines of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Rudolph Agricola, Wayne Booth, and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. The chapter ends with an analysis of Chaucer's approach to the audience in a passage from *Troilus and Criseyde*, drawing on two of the questions.

Keywords Audience · Occasion · Address · Genre · Aristotle · Agricola Booth · Perelman · Chaucer

The main aim of this book is to present a list of questions, this first group of which is especially important since both the art of rhetoric, and the whole basis of human communication, depend on a speaker's understanding of an audience and an addressee's conceptions about the speaker. As in each of the other chapters I list all the questions related to speaker and audience at the outset before discussing each in turn.

How does the writer address the audience?

How does the writer take account of the occasion and genre of the speech or text?

How does the writer respond to the presumed pre-existing opinion of the audience?

How does the writer present themselves to the audience?

How does the writer establish draw on a relationship with the audience?

What emotions does the writer seek to exhibit or arouse?

How does the writer open the text?

HOW DOES THE WRITER ADDRESS THE AUDIENCE?

The way in which a writer addresses an audience always places the audience in a particular role. Sometimes this role is conferred by the genre in which the writer is working, but very often the pronouns used by the writer, or the implication of the subject and the way in which they are spoken of, produce a particular role for the audience. Thus, for example when Wyatt adapts Petrarch's sonnet 190, his opening line ("Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind") situates the audience as aristocratic men (in context, almost certainly members of Henry VIII's court) who are presumed to be considering women to whom they might address themselves. Thinking about how the audience is placed always helps the reader think about what a writer is attempting to achieve, and how the situation created and the words used might be interpreted. The audience addressed, and the role assigned to the audience, may change in the course of a text, but the role established near the beginning is likely to play a significant part in how a text works. Some of the figures of rhetoric (see Chap. 7) involve addressing the audience in a particular way or casting them in a particular role for a short section of the oration. For example in *permissio* the orator apparently submits a question to the audience for them to decide. Sometimes classical accounts of a particular figure mention its possible effect on an audience. Readers of texts will always want to think about the way in which the writer addresses them and about who the writer assumes, implies, or constructs them to be.

HOW DOES THE WRITER TAKE ACCOUNT OF THE OCCASION AND GENRE OF THE SPEECH OR TEXT?

The theory of the three genres of rhetoric (judicial, deliberative, and epideictic, or praise or blame) locates every oration in a social situation, before a defined audience, and with a particular aim in view. The underlying principle is that writers always need to think about the situation of a text, where it will be performed or read, and the situation of the audience. Sometimes the writer makes this explicit; sometimes it is implicit in the genre and the time of the writing. Readers will usually find it helpful to make explicit those features of the context of a work which may have been obvious to its first audience. Thus, for example, classical and renaissance analyses of Cicero's orations usually spend some time setting out the circumstances of the case and the political situation in which Cicero delivered the speech. These factors need not determine the interpretation of the text but they give readers an idea of the contemporary preoccupations and expectations which the writer may have been working with. Literary genres can be thought of as similar to occasions because they provide readers and writers with expectations about what a text in a particular genre will contain and how it will be written. The writer will usually exploit these expectations, breaking with some of them and fulfilling others. Writers often use the expectations of genre to create something new but they may still be criticized for the assumptions and messages conveyed by generic features which they have retained. Thinking about genre and situation will always help the reader understand more about the text and the writer's way of proceeding.

HOW DOES THE WRITER RESPOND TO THE PRESUMED PRE-EXISTING OPINION OF THE AUDIENCE?

In judicial and political oratory in the ancient world it was usually assumed that the jury or the members of the assembly would already have opinions on the issue being discussed and/or would have been influenced by the arguments of a previous speaker. Humour, sustained rebuttal, or recourse to history which exemplifies a contrary conclusion

may help weaken an audience's prejudices. More generally writers will sometimes exploit beliefs which they believe their audience to hold but will also sometimes challenge them or invite their audience to inhabit temporarily the persona of someone with a very different outlook on the world. Rudolph Agricola taught that the writer always needed to consider what the audience thought about a particular issue and what types of arguments were most likely to appeal to a particular audience. In his view considerations involving the audience and the intended self-presentation of the speaker or writer needed to be kept in mind at all moments of the text and were an essential element in the writer's choices about the structure of any given text (*De inventione dialectica*, pp. 449–50). In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca emphasize that the speaker's understanding of the audience must be adequate to the occasion; that the audience is often a composite of many smaller groups, defined by class, gender, and interest; that roles in society play an important role in the self-definition of such groups; and that attitudes of groups and individuals can change (pp. 19–45). Common-sense beliefs and assumptions about normal behaviour will depend on the society and the groups to which the audience belongs (pp. 71–3, 99).¹ The speaker must adapt arguments to the audience (p. 45).

HOW DOES THE WRITER PRESENT HIM OR HERSELF TO THE AUDIENCE?

Aristotle announced that there were three ways to persuade an audience: reason (which he called *logos*), self-presentation (*ethos*), and emotion (*pathos*) (1356a). In so doing he emphasized the importance of character and self-presentation in making an audience willing to agree. Aristotle (1378a) says that speakers are persuasive if they show practical wisdom, virtue, and good will. In *De oratore*, Cicero explains that an audience's minds are won over by someone's prestige, accomplishments, and good reputation. The effect of these qualities is enhanced by a gentle tone of voice, self-restraint, kindness, and flexibility (II. 182). Portraying the client as someone who is virtuous, pious, hostile to injustice, and a little diffident, and doing so in a speech which is thoughtful, gracious, gentle, and flexible will help in putting the audience on one's side and winning a case (II. 184). Writers sometimes deliberately present a different type of image of themselves. Chaucer typically presents himself as a foolish, fussy

man who does not know much about what he is talking about, partly for comic effect and partly to avoid responsibility for the apparent implications of his stories. Detective stories are frequently told in a cynical and apparently careless manner which nevertheless allows the hero's essential virtue (and often naïve sentimentality) to emerge clearly.

Wayne Booth's analysis of narratorial personae and narrative technique in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is very rich both theoretically and in his many supporting analyses of novels and short stories.² Part of his analysis rests on the distinction between the narrator and the implied author. The implied author controls both the story and the figure of the narrator. The implied author's views are usually apparent to the reader and may be different from what is known about the actual author's biography and views. Booth distinguishes various kinds of narrator: dramatized and impersonal; observer and actor; reliable and unreliable; restricted to one point of view, capable of entering other viewpoints, or omniscient. Those narrators who are capable of entering the thoughts of characters also differ in how deep inside of that character's thoughts they go (p. 163). For Booth an important part of the art of writing fiction consists of the management of degrees of distance between narrator and implied author, between narrator and reader, between implied author and reader, and between implied author and other characters (pp. 155–8). The most important distance is frequently that between the unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him or her in judging the narrator (p. 158). Booth's observations underline what can be learned about a text by focusing on the figure of the speaker and the way in which a text is presented to an audience.

HOW DOES THE WRITER ESTABLISH OR DRAW ON A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE AUDIENCE?

Renaissance letter-writing manuals laid some emphasis on the way in which the relationship between writer and recipient would determine the arguments and strategies which would be appropriate. For example Erasmus advises that a younger person or social inferior writing a letter of consolation should not assume the right to make certain types of consolatory arguments which an older person or a social equal would be able to make. Some authors, like Henry Fielding, seek to establish a kind of friendship with the reader. By establishing a relationship of trust authors

can convey their ideas more easily and escape censure for their attitude to their characters' mistakes. Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* has some very helpful ideas about the ways in which authors manage their relationship to their audience. He shows that at times silences indicate to us a sharing of views between author and implied audience (p. 423), whereas at other moments the writer will use commentary to reinforce and strengthen values which the author and reader already share (p. 177). For Booth, "every literary work of any power is in fact an elaborate system of controls over the reader's involvement and detachment" (p. 123).³ Looking out for the ways in which writers use adjectives, pronouns, and passages of comment to build and exploit relationships with their readers will sometimes be very helpful to readers in understanding how the different parts of a text function.

WHAT EMOTIONS DOES THE WRITER SEEK TO EXHIBIT OR AROUSE?

For Aristotle, emotion (*pathos*) was one of the three ways in which an orator could persuade an audience, and in some respects he considered it the most effective of the three. In the second book of his *Rhetoric* Aristotle wrote a series of instructions for arousing the emotions which might be useful in a speech, such as anger, fear, enmity, friendship, confidence, shame, envy, indignation, kindness, and pity. For each emotion he provided a definition, a description of the state of mind in which people were susceptible to that emotion, a discussion of the type of people in relation to whom they would feel the emotion and the reasons why people might become prey to the emotion (1378–88). This provided orators with a range of strategies and propositions which they could use to arouse that particular emotion. It also constituted a pioneering analysis of an important aspect of human psychology.

Later Roman rhetoricians, like Cicero and Quintilian, placed the emphasis on the skill of the orator in feeling an emotion fully and in conveying that emotion to an audience through language and gesture, as a great actor might. In *De oratore* Cicero provides an analysis of the way in which an orator might combine argument and emotional appeals in his fictional narrative of Antonius' handling of the case of Norbanus (II. 197–204). Antonius began the speech with a series of historical examples intended to demonstrate that sedition had on occasion been beneficial to the Roman state. Then he turned to a virulent attack on

the despicable conduct of his opponent's client who had lost a Roman army. Having aroused the audience to hatred for his opponent he turned to milder emotions, explaining that he was arguing on behalf of his loyal comrade and that it would have been dreadful if he had not taken up the case. Antonius claims that he won the case almost without arguing on its apparent key point, the Appuleian law. This fictional case study suggests the intricate ways in which argument and emotional appeals can effectively be combined through reflecting on the context of a particular case.

Rudolph Agricola believed that emotions could be aroused through the narratives one told, through arguments, and through imitating the state of someone suffering from an emotion. He generalised Aristotle's instructions into the formula that arousing envy and pity required that one present someone facing an undeserved event that happened to them which was either beneficial (to arouse envy) or harmful (to arouse pity). One could amplify the emotions by focusing either on the person who did not deserve the event or on the benefit or calamity itself (*De inventione dialectica*, pp. 378–91). Later renaissance rhetoricians added to Aristotle's instructions observations on arousing Christian emotions such as charity and the love of God. Readers should be alert to the ways in which emotions portrayed or aroused in the speaker and addressee can generate reactions and responses to the text that might have been absent or different without that accompanying emotion.

HOW DOES THE WRITER OPEN THE TEXT?

Classical rhetoric manuals advise speakers that their main task at the beginning of the speech is to make the audience receptive, well-disposed, and attentive. They should do this by explaining the importance of the decision the hearers have to make; by obtaining the goodwill of the audience; through discussing the person of the speaker, the opponents, the audience and the facts of the case; and by outlining the main direction of the speech (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, I. 3.5–5.8). In *De oratore* (II. 315) Cicero points out that the prologue can only be written when the orator has assembled all the arguments and appeals to be used. The introduction must charm and attract the audience but it may sometimes need to be forceful. It must be drawn from the very heart of the case to be made and must prepare for the principal argument. Sometimes it may be necessary to begin by undermining the arguments of the opponent or by establishing a principle from which our arguments can begin. He

suggests that reference will often be made to the character of the orator's client and the opponent, from the subject matter of the case, or from the audience before whom one pleads. These ideas from classical oratory often seem applicable to modern speeches, essays, and articles. Visiting preachers often begin by talking about their connections with the place in which they are speaking or with a story from the local or national news which will connect with their theme. Poets quite often begin with a shocking or paradoxical line, to attract the audience's attention and to arouse interest in how the opening will be explained and developed. The opening of a long text sometimes continues for quite a long time. In a play the opening three or four scenes will often be devoted to introducing the problem of the play and the main groups of characters. Novels often begin with preliminary information delivered in a different voice and mode from the main text. Shakespeare often began plays with servants or ambassadors establishing a tone or a problem before the introduction of the main actors. Thinking about the kinds of relationship which the writer wishes to establish at the opening will always help the reader understand how a text works, but the reader may sometimes need to distinguish different aspects of a relatively long opening sequence.

SAMPLE READING 1: CHAUCER—*TROILUS AND CRISEYDE* (C. 1385) AND THE AUDIENCE

This reading aims to answer the following questions from section one of the questions: How does the writer address the audience? How does the writer take account of the occasion and genre of the speech or text?

We do not know everything we would like to know about the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde*. We must presume that it was written for a court patron, perhaps with the intention that it would be publicly recited before the royal court, as illustrated in the frontispiece to Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS.61. The audience envisaged would all have been courtiers and Christians and would have included noblewomen. Chaucer (c. 1343–1400) must have intended the poem as a demonstration of the greatness of his powers as a poet, since in the epilogue, imitating Dante, he associates his poem with the greatest authors known to him directly or by reputation: Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Statius (V. 1789–92). Later still, in the penultimate stanza, he directs the poem to his famous poetic and intellectual contemporaries “moral Gower” and “philosophical Strode”,

asking his friends to correct the poem (V. 1856–9), before dedicating it to Christ (V. 1860–9). I am concerned here with another reference to his audience, just after his description of the ultimate bliss of Troilus and Criseyde's physical love.

But sooth is, though I kan nat tellen al,
 As kan myn auctour of his excellence,
 Yet have I seyde, and god to-forn, and shal
 In every thing al holly his sentence;
 And if that ich, at loves reverence,
 Have eny word in-eched for the beste,
 Doth therwith-al right as youre selven leste.

ffor myne words, here and every parte,
 I speke hem alle under correccioun
 Of yow that felyng han in loves arte,
 And putte it al in youre discrecioun
 To encesse or maken dymynucioun

Of my langage, and that I yow biseche (ed. B. Windeatt, Harlow,
 1984, III. 1324–1336)

The opening of this passage relies on the reader recalling Chaucer's by now familiar exculpation. He is not to blame for anything in the poem that might give offence since he is merely copying and translating the work of a much better author who had direct information about many of the events described and better sources for all of them. Chaucer continues to present himself within the poem as a sort of second-rank author, totally reliant on the work of a much better author who has told the story before. Chaucer claims that he cannot tell everything, as his author can, but he nevertheless claims that he has been able to convey the essential meaning ("his sentence") or even perhaps that everything that Chaucer writes reflects the meaning given him by his author. This seems to envisage a three-layered presentation of the events: on one level there is what actually happened at Troy, then on a second level

the authoritative account of what happened presented by the author Chaucer claims to be following, and on a third level Chaucer's own presentation of the story, which is for the most part wholly dependent on his author. Part of the aim of this presentation is to avoid any blame for telling a story about carnal love (which would from the church's point of view have been a sinful thing to talk about) and a woman who is unfaithful to her lover (which might have offended the women in the audience).

But in lines 1328–9 he introduces another element. Chaucer admits that it is possible that, out of reverence for love, he may have introduced some additional words of his own. If he has done this it is up to his readers to decide what to do with these extra words. The second stanza explains this slightly unclear idea. Everything said by Chaucer, as a man who presents himself as ignorant of love, is subject to the correction of his readers who know so much more about love. This introduces a fourth level, the reader who is responding to Chaucer's account of events and who makes whatever alterations seem to be required, using his or her experience of love as a corrective. In lines 1333–36, these readers who have a feeling (which perhaps implies sensitivity as well as experience) in relation to the art of love are explicitly identified as co-writers of the poem. They are asked to amplify or abbreviate Chaucer's language to make it more truthful to their experience of love. So now the impact of Chaucer's own writing seems to diminish even further. Not only is he writing about something of which he has little experience, trying only to preserve the meaning of an author who knows much more both about the story of Troilus and Criseyde and about love, but now everything he writes is subject to rewriting by his audience who have more experience and feeling than he has. So the final product of this process is not Chaucer's responsibility but it is also not the text as he has written it, or even as he first read it. His readers re-enact his role in writing in order to read/write for themselves a story about Troilus and Criseyde which reflects the readers' own experiences of love. So reading the narrative of Troilus and Criseyde becomes a way for the readers to re-experience and to reflect on their own experiences of love as they rewrite Chaucer's poem for him.

This invocation of the power of the reader with its intricate meditation on the relation between story, authors, and reader, occurs at a key turning point in the poem. Chaucer has just seen Troilus and Criseyde to the point where they are making love. Furthermore he amplifies their joys by wishing that he himself could have enjoyed such a night of love,

even if it were to cost him his immortal soul (III.1319–20). Most of the rest of the poem will be concerned with the way in which this extraordinary love is broken apart by circumstances and change. The poem will end with Troilus in the eighth sphere laughing at the folly of love (V.1814–25) and Chaucer urging young people to learn the lesson of the story of Troilus and Criseyde. They should give up all worldly vanity, including human love, and focus their attention and their love on Christ, who will never betray anyone. Since he is the best person to love, why would anyone want to search for imaginary loves (V.1835–48)?

The passage we have been concerned with focuses on the relationship between writer and audience and on the role of the reader in making and interpreting a text. It also serves to diminish the role of the poet, to suggest that in quite radical ways he does not really understand the love story as it should be experienced. Presumably this helps to reduce the contradiction between his wish to buy a love like this at the cost of his soul and his recognition that all human love is illusory, since the person who makes both observations confesses his own lack of understanding. It also places the responsibility for reading and understanding the poem firmly in the hands of the readers, who are instructed to rewrite Chaucer's language to make it fit their own experiences. Besides entertaining his audience, the poet also encourages and enables his readers to reflect on their own experiences of love and of human joy more generally and to think about the conflicted relation between that joy and their spiritual destination.

NOTES

1. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Theory of Argumentation* (Notre Dame, 1969). Chaïm Perelman (1912–84) was a Belgian philosopher of law. He and his long-term collaborator Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1899–1987) published their *La Nouvelle Rhétorique: Traité de l'Argumentation* in 1958. They use ancient rhetoric to develop a theory of the types and procedures of argument actually used in philosophy, law, and literature.
2. Wayne Booth (1921–2005) was Professor of English at the University of Chicago and a member of the Chicago Aristotelian school. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961, revised edition Harmondsworth, 1984) remained his most important work; also *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, 1988).

3. Booth's 1982 afterword provides a thought-provoking tabulation of his ideas on the different roles played by real and implied authors and readers and on the relationships which operate between writer and reader (pp. 428-31).

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