Preface

Although the importance of emotions for persuasion is salient in Western literature as early as Homer and although in recent years the history of emotions has become a sub-field of Classics, the interfaces between persuasion and emotions have not as yet attracted the scholarly attention that they deserve. Modern commentaries fairly commonly employ the term ‘appeal to emotion’ (traditionally treated as a type of logical fallacy), but do not explain how audiences’ sentiments can be the object of ‘psychological manipulation’. ‘Appeals to emotions’ are not the equivalent of magic spells. Succinctly put, speakers cannot elicit emotional responses by virtue of the inherent causality of the words that they use. The use of the term ‘appeal to emotion’ reflects the culturally potent assumption that emotions are ‘irrational’, disruptive jolts rather than a cognitive phenomenon. Emotions can, of course, lead to irrational or inexpedient action and affect or distort our judgments, but in order to fully understand their uses in rhetoric, we need to familiarize ourselves with their ‘rationality’. This book challenges the view that the rhetorical uses of emotions resist rational interpretation and proposes possible ways of exploring their role in persuasion. Yet, because the Greeks understood that persuasion (peitho, sometimes with a capital P) is not just a matter of words, my analysis addresses instances in which emotions intersect with non-verbal means of persuasion – especially the emotive potentialities of vision. As the prominence of direct, lustful gazes in modern advertisements indicates, non-verbal persuasion (and its emotive potentialities) is a phenomenon that permeates our modern cultures – albeit in culturally specific ways.

Quite naturally, this book is not an all-encompassing interpretation of emotions’ implications for persuasion or rhetoric in antiquity. The literary material discussed here derives mostly from the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Although I treat a number of individual emotions, my goal is primarily to suggest methods of analysis which may facilitate our understanding of the literary, social, and cultural contexts in which persuasion is either theoretically discussed by ancient authorities or is practiced by public speakers in different settings. I also turn my attention to unsystematic, unscientific models of emotions, because these models reflect the different ways in which the ancient cultures or societies that attract our attention understood the interfaces between human sentiments and persuasion. Lastly, by focusing my attention to the uses of emotions in the public discourse of (especially) classical Athens, I emphasize possible ways in which the study of emotions can serve as a heuristic tool that enables us to look into potent cultural understandings and ideological assumptions.

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