

Propriety, Metaphor, and Metonymy: Potential Contributions of Rhetorical Theory to
Psychoanalysis

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Calum Matheson

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In “The Question of Lay Analysis,” Freud (2002) suggested that “the analytical syllabus would include...cultural history, mythology, the psychology of religion and literary studies. Without a good knowledge of these areas the analyst would face most of his [sic] material with incomprehension” (p. 154). Of all the disciplines omitted from this list, perhaps the most striking is rhetoric: the ancient *techne* focused on the study of the means of persuasion, theories of audience, and artful devices in language such as figure and trope in speech. The influence of this art on psychoanalysis and its precursors is clear. As Patrick Mahoney (1979) wrote, it “would be hard to exaggerate the historical and intrinsic significance of rhetoric for psychoanalysis,” even arguing that Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* constituted “the first major psychological treatise in the West” (p. 88).¹ Psychoanalysis is ultimately a discipline focused on speech—the actually-enunciated language of analysands. An analyst may observe non-verbal symptoms or episodes of “acting out,” but for the most part, the medium of diagnosis, description, and therapy is not just language in general, but the spoken word in particular.

¹ Mahony’s characterization of rhetoric as a “veritable empire” in the same work (p. 89) recalls a disparaging comment made by a professor of my acquaintance that rhetoric is “the imperialism of a small discipline.” The professor’s comment is a wonderful unconscious demonstration of the power of rhetoric as it employs the classical tropes of metaphor, hyperbole, and possibly litotes, therefore creating a condition of irony, all in a mere six words.

Pioneering thinkers eventually folded rhetoric back into psychoanalytic art. Ella Freeman Sharpe was one early example, followed by Jacques Lacan, the most influential psychoanalytic theorist to restore rhetoric to a central place in psychoanalysis. However, both of these writers and many of their followers drew from a fairly narrow range of primarily ancient rhetorical scholarship and tended to focus on lists of tropes and figures, arguably the most stultifying and formulaic aspect of rhetoric. As a result, the vast richness of a contentious and still-evolving discipline has been mostly reduced to just a few concepts, chiefly that of metaphor. The purpose of this essay is to explore what potential this overlooked body of theory might have to contribute to the modern theory and practice of psychoanalysis. My primary example is the notion of *propriety* or *decorum* (Greek: *to prepon*)² and its potential to contribute to structuralist psychoanalytic theories such as Lacan's. Propriety can be understood both as a subject's capacity to determine what speech "fits" a particular situation and also as the trait of "fittingness" of the speech itself. As a faculty of individual speakers, propriety may name the bridge between the signifying order described by Lacan as the Symbolic from which the resources of identity are drawn and the speaking subject formed and conditioned by these larger social forces. While they should by no means reduce attention to the devices of speech (trope and figure), concepts like *decorum* might still make helpful contributions to psychoanalysis.

This essay proceeds in three main sections. First, I will briefly outline the significance of rhetoric to psychoanalysis and the mutual influence of the two fields of study. My purpose here is to demonstrate that it's less a matter of *establishing* intersections between rhetoric and psychoanalysis than of *recognizing* that they already exist and should be strengthened. Second, I will further discuss propriety as a rhetorical concept, making the case for the centrality of this

² For the sake of variation I will use both "propriety" and "decorum;" both words name the same concept.

term to rhetoric itself. Somewhat overlooked even in rhetorical study, propriety is nonetheless one of the key concepts stretching through almost three millennia of rhetorical study and one of the clearest proofs that this art is not reducible simply to verbal decoration. Third, I will demonstrate the utility of propriety in psychoanalysis through a retheorization of Lacan's notion of psychosis, which he describes as a foreclosure of metaphor and I argue can be better understood as an aberration of decorum. While metaphor and metonymy are both useful concepts in Lacanian work, Lacan's adaptation draws too heavily from structural linguistics at the expense of the contingency and dynamism of rhetorical study. I conclude with a short summary and suggestions for further explorations of rhetorical concepts in psychoanalysis.

Rhetoric and psychoanalysis

Patrick Mahony's (1979) previously cited insistence on the importance of rhetoric in psychoanalytic practice is perhaps drawing on his more complete treatment of the history of words as potential cures for illness, starting with Homer and running through Anna O's famous "talking cure" label to the present day of psychoanalysis (Mahony, 1974; Entralgo, 1970). Alongside the idea that words could respond to illness—physical or mental—ancient Greeks recognized the significance of spoken arts beyond their ornamental qualities as techniques for engaging in collective political, ethical, and spiritual life (Entralgo, 1970). The Sophists developed the art of rhetoric which later became cemented in Aristotle's fourth-century BC treatise, partly a distancing from the kind of sophistry espoused by other contemporary rhetoricians and partly an effort to systematize and develop rhetoric as a science or art (*techné*) crucial to civic life. Aristotle's work ranged beyond trope and figure to areas like emotion, character, ethics, and the nature of political interaction in a democracy. His writings in turn

influenced Roman rhetoricians such as Quintilian and Cicero. Even as the relative influence of Galen and Hippocrates eclipsed that of Aristotle and Plato for the practice of medicine, as a core part of European education rhetoric never completely faded but remained a basic expectation for students as part of the trivium. The links between rhetoric and the mind remained strong since persuasion requires an understanding of the mental processes of both the speaker themselves and those they seek to persuade.

Rhetorical influence on Sigmund Freud is harder to identify directly. Diego Enrique Londoño (2016), drawing on the work of Juan Rigoli (2001), has documented the influence of rhetoric on eighteenth and nineteenth century alienism. While Freud did not directly reference the rhetorical canon, much less the rhetoricians of his own day, he still emerged from such predecessors and was likely influenced by them. Risto Fried (1997) has argued through laborious close reading of a famous open letter of Freud's to Romain Rolland that the psychoanalyst closely modeled his discussion of his experience in the Acropolis on a form developed by Quintilian, incorporating every detail of the master's style in the "hidden structure" of his essay (p. 9), which would suggest a much stronger rhetorical influence than most other scholars have detected in Freud's work. In any case, it would be hard to imagine how such an erudite thinker as Freud, especially one familiar with Greek myth, would be unaffected by the latent influence of ancient rhetoric in his intellectual milieu. While rhetorical traditions have existed all over the world, Freud would certainly have been exposed at a minimum both directly and indirectly to the canon of ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric through Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Quintilian and the many more European thinkers throughout the centuries directly conditioned by these works, such as Adam Smith, Thomas Aquinas, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Giambattista Vico.

Although older predecessors such as rhetorician Gertrude Buck (1895, 1899) existed, it would take the pioneering work of Ella Freeman Sharpe to make connections between trope and psychoanalytic theory explicit and to put them to work as insightful tools for interpretation in psychoanalytic communities. Sharpe's work on metaphor is particularly striking, reflecting the deep sensitivity to language inculcated by her literary background. Her claim that "[t]he person who speaks vitally in metaphor *knows*, but does not know in consciousness what he [sic] knows unconsciously" (Sharpe, 1950, p. 168) identified a central tenet of later French psychoanalysis before structuralism had made its mark. For Sharpe, metaphor was a fundamental aspect of human experience bridging bodily and mental life. Analyzing it as a path to the unconscious also gets to the intersection of individual and culture: it is "personal and individual even though the words and phrases used are not of the speaker's own coinage. The verbal imagery corresponding to the repressed ideas and emotions, sometimes found even in a single word, will yield to the investigator a wealth of knowledge" (Sharpe, 1950, p. 159). This notion that the unconscious can be understood as both a system of inherited linguistic forms and an individual subject's relation to them, all betrayed by speech, perhaps distilled all of the essential elements necessary to leverage classical arts of language like rhetoric in the exploration of the unconscious.

Later theorists of metaphor echoed these ideas, whether Sharpe is acknowledged or not. Douglas Ingram's (1996) work is premised on the notion the "vigor of metaphor springs from...recognition that metaphor is far more than a figure of speech and is, instead, a mode of experiencing" (p. 22). Bornstein and Becker-Mataro (2011) have even argued that metaphor is the potential "glue" of psychoanalysis and science and a vital part of responding to trauma in which the analysand must refigure trauma in a new context, much as metaphor refigures one signifier in relation to another without erasing either. Significantly, both of these views implicitly

refute the notion of rhetoric as “mere” decoration in speech. Metaphor, for Bornstein, Becker-Mataro, and Ingram, like Sharpe, has at least phenomenological and epistemological aspects. Others (e.g., Edelson, 1983) have commented on Freud’s use of metaphor in the context of advancing a new science, evidence that while Freud may not have drawn explicitly on rhetoric, metaphor is present in his works as a means of conceptual combination. In all of these accounts, metaphor is an organizing structure of thought and therefore not reducible to aesthetic preferences.

By far the most extensive—and controversial—adaptation of rhetoric in psychoanalysis has come from French analyst Jacques Lacan and his followers. Lacan’s seminars on psychosis (1993) and formations of the unconscious (2017) give central value to metaphor and metonymy, most prominently in the case of psychosis (the foreclosure of metaphor is a defining feature for Lacan, as seen in the Schreber case), but more broadly through jokes, parapraxes, and other aspects of speech. The essays “Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud” and “Seminar on the *Purloined Letter*” (Lacan, 2006) distill this thinking most systematically in relation to rhetoric and linguistics, both including lists of other rhetorical figures. “Instance of the Letter,” which equates a structural-linguistic view of metaphor with Freud’s notion of condensation and metonymy with displacement, can be read as an extended meditation on the interplay of grammar and rhetoric in psychoanalytic thought (Matheson, 2020). Here, “grammar” is understood as the combinatory possibilities of language authorized by the syntax of a given language and its cultural habits, while rhetoric describes how these norms are instantiated in a particular act of speech. Even if one reads Lacan’s famous statement that “the unconscious is structured as a language” as a grammatical (rather than rhetorical) claim, rhetoric is still of central importance as it covers the contingent deployments of culturally shared signifiers in an

analysand's speech. Signifiers may speak through subjects, but what they say in this medium must still be made concrete in a contingent, specific set of circumstances—what Lloyd Bitzer (1968) called the “rhetorical situation.” Elsewhere, referring to Aristotle, Lacan claimed that “the best there is on the passions,” or affect, is “caught” in the “network of rhetoric” (Lacan, 2014, p. 14, referring to *pathos* as one of the three means of persuasion in Book II of Aristotle's rhetoric). The French psychoanalyst even asserted that “*Fort-da* is already a rhetorical figure” (Lacan 2013, p. 14), giving rhetoric a place at the heart of his theory as a means of understanding repetition.

While mentions of rhetoric that are not explicitly Lacanian continue in psychoanalytic scholarship (e.g., Earlie, 2020), Lacan's presence is felt in nearly all of them. Much of Lacan's writing and teaching on rhetoric occurred at a pivotal time in the twentieth century development of the field. Concepts like *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*, invention, and style would share the stage more with an increasing emphasis on trope, or the functions of language that suggest not simply ornamental choices but also different patterns of meaning and relationships to discourse. Lacan was acquainted with Chaïm Perelman who, with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, published *The New Rhetoric* in 1958. This volume became a dominant influence on the discipline of rhetoric through at least the 1970s in Europe and abroad, especially in the United States following its late-1960s English translation. Lacan's own “Metaphor of the Subject” (collected in *Écrits*) was a response to Perelman and reflected some engagement with rhetoricians of his day. Still, much of Lacan's structuralist-inspired early development of metaphor and metonymy began before the so-called “linguistic turn” transformed much of rhetorical studies in ways that grew the field beyond Lacan's anchor points of Quintilian, Aristotle, Perelman, and Olbrechts-Tyteca.

As a wide-ranging endeavor, modern rhetorical criticism has found much use for psychoanalysis, including alternatives to Lacan such as Winnicott (Gunn, 2020) and even Kohut (Barrett, 1991). The various intersections between psychoanalysis and rhetoric discussed previously work both ways—it is hard to develop a theory of *pathos*, for example, without reference to psychoanalytic work on affect and emotion. Although we should avoid reducing the entire rhetorical tradition down to the study of persuasion alone, this is still an important topic in rhetoric, and any notion of how to persuade must include at least an implicit theory of desire. As a result, much psychoanalytic theory bled into rhetoric during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The views of Kenneth Burke, perhaps the most influential twentieth-century American theorist of rhetoric, were heavily influenced by Freud. Rhetorical scholar Wayne Booth went so far as to write that because of the ways that psychoanalysts have encountered the irrational aspects of humanity, “any new rhetoric must be ready to learn from them” (qtd. in Barrett, 1991, p. ix). Recent work incorporating psychoanalytic scholarship in the discipline of rhetoric has tended to focus heavily on Lacan (perhaps largely due to his own emphasis on rhetoric as well as the political and cultural preoccupations of the discipline), but in ways that thoroughly incorporate subsequent transformations inspired by developments in literary criticism such as deconstruction and affect theory. Barbara Biesecker (1998, 2010) and Joshua Gunn (2004, 2012, 2020) made early groundbreaking contributions and have continued this line of inquiry alongside more recent rhetorical treatments of a wide variety of topics including voice (Bedsole, 2018), online communities (Beresheim, 2020), social theory (Bush, 2012), political secrecy (Hallsby, 2015), monuments (Ivanova, 2014), masculinity (Kelly, 2020), economics (McDonald, 2018), audience (Myers, 2018), indigenous peoples and law (Primack, 2020), and antiblack racism (Watts, 2017). The influence of psychoanalysis has been largely invigorating

for the field, although it may tend in some cases (e.g., Lundberg, 2012) to follow Lacan himself in reducing much of the vast heritage of rhetorical trope to a near-exclusive focus on metaphor, despite gestures to the contrary, and in others (e.g., Brunner 2019) to describe psychoanalytic notions as “rhetorical” when other descriptors might fight more precisely. These rhetorical treatments of psychoanalysis in turn have the potential to develop theory in new directions that could in turn benefit psychoanalysts, especially in areas of strength like studies of race, ethnicity, language, and the effects of contemporary media environments, including phenomena such as information overload, propaganda, and conspiracy theories which might heavily shape the experiences of analysands.

It is possible for one to object at this point that the contemporary innovations in rhetoric focus too much on literary and cultural studies to be relevant to psychoanalytic practitioners. How can Jacques Derrida help someone in distress deal with their depression? What does Gérard Genette have to say about eating disorders? Even leaving aside for the moment the notion that psychoanalysis in theory and practice extends beyond clinical concerns, perhaps the literary and cultural qualities of rhetoric are precisely what make it useful to analysis. Recall Freud’s preciously cited list of disciplines vital for analyst in “The Question of Lay Analysis” (which is written as a staged dialogue very much fitting with rhetorical tradition). All of them are areas of intense interest to modern rhetoricians, whose art is largely about divining the ways in which symbols maintain our cultural mythologies, old and new. The purview of rhetoric has expanded to include digital, visual, and material creations (all of which influence analysands), but its core provenance still includes the spoken word. As Freud (2002) wrote,

we should not despise the word. It is after all a powerful instrument, the means to let each other know about our feelings, the way to achieve influence over others. Words can have an unutterably positive effect, or inflict terrible injury. To be sure, in the very beginning was the deed, the word came later; in many

circumstances it was a cultural step forward when the deed was reduced to the word. But the word was originally a form of magic, a magic act, and it has preserved much of its old force (p. 99).

Ultimately, “[a]ll that goes on between analyst and patient is that they talk to each other” (Freud, 2002, p. 98). Understanding how language operates both theoretically and practically thus means developing our appreciation of and sensitivity to the primary medium of psychoanalytic craft, one that simultaneously implicates diagnosis, explanation, and treatment. Broadly speaking, psychoanalytic attitudes towards language and audience are closest to rhetorical ones, even more so than to allied fields like linguistics (Vassalli, 2001, p. 20), and it is less a matter of *choosing* to incorporate attributes of classical rhetoric as it is recognizing that the analyst *already has* (Entralgo, 1970, p. 181), which makes self-awareness particularly important.

One does not have to squeeze into uniform and pledge allegiance to Lacan to appreciate the potential of a field of study devoted to the instances in which human symbols mean something other than they seem.

In fact, even psychoanalytic thinkers who downplay the centrality of speech often provide opportunities for fruitful intersections with rhetoric. In a passage on training analysis, Kohut (1984) attacked the propensity of some analysts to become “addicted” to a particular brand of mental health, pursuing particular behaviors in an “overzealous” manner that lacks “the admixture of tolerance and wisdom” that Kohut deemed necessary to good analysis (p. 161). Kohut’s example here is the relentless pursuit of parapraxes, exactly what one might expect in a rhetorical approach attuned to the contingencies of language: “a patient makes a slip of the tongue...on many occasions it is more ‘analytic,’ more an expression of the seasoned analyst’s analytic wisdom, to pay little attention to such a minor manifestation of the unconscious than to concentrate on it and pursue it relentlessly until the underlying meaning has become manifest” (Kohut, 1984, p. 162). In relation to the word-as-cure, Kohut maintained that simply helping the

analysis and to verbalize the unconscious is not enough. “[S]elf psychology,” wrote Kohut, “does not see the essence of the curative process as lying primarily in the expansion of the domain of the ego,” even if a successful therapy is followed by “the patient’s increased ability to express himself [sic] verbally with regard to the formerly pathogenic sector of his [sic] personality” (1984, p. 65). Such a thing may be a positive sign, but Kohut “must immediately add that ego expansion (*in particular as manifested by an increase in verbal mastery*) does not eventuate in every instance of cure” (1984, p. 65, emphasis mine). This attitude seems to contradict the view that repression and defenses are primarily rhetorical in that patients create stories that elide distressing thoughts and memories, and that analysts help to disrupt these narratives (Billig, 2000; Skelton, 1995). Even Kohut’s objections, however, do not assume that verbalization is irrelevant or undesirable, only that it cannot in itself be said to constitute the goal of treatment. Such a view is consistent with rhetoric as the study of speech, rather than simply the art of producing it, since speech in this approach is not an end in itself but a means to affect some other result, such as expressing one’s own desires or influencing those of others.

Kohut’s temperance might qualify some of the more grandiose claims about language and psychoanalysis, but they inadvertently demonstrate why rhetoric is important beyond the simple cataloguing of figures and tropes. The most famous definition of rhetoric comes from Aristotle (1984): “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” in any given instance (p. 24). This definition puts emphasis on *the faculty of observing* what persuades in a particular instance, which rhetoricians might now simply call “criticism” and psychoanalysts might recognize as a modality of listening like Freud’s impartially suspended attention.³ Kohut

³ I have used Alan Bance’s translation of Freud’s phrase, in the *Penguin Modern Classics* Freud translations overseen by Adam Phillips, rather than Alex Strachey’s translation in Freud’s *Standard Works*. Phillips’s more context-specific literary approach seems more apt in a discussion of rhetoric than Strachey’s quasi-scientific

placed a significant importance on listening from the analysand's perspective (Akhtar, 2013, p. 11), but rhetorical studies of the interaction between rhetor and audience have long questioned whether and how such a thing might be possible. Ratcliffe (2005) argues that cultural and historical divisions—what we often understand as *identity*—stand in the way of *identification*, the search for commonality with another amidst divisions and different “cultural logics” (p. 34), especially those of gender and race, the latter of which receives relatively less attention in psychoanalytic theorizing than it does in rhetoric (for exceptions growing out of the tradition of Franz Fanon, see, e.g. George, 2016; Hook 2020). The study and practice of rhetoric require a kind of impartially suspended attention that differs at least in emphasis from psychoanalytic practice by highlighting the ways that the constraints of cultural and social forces are made manifest in speech. In other words, an asymptotic approach to the probably impossible goal of impartiality requires close attention to the context of speech, or a faculty for observing what means of communication are available in a given (culturally mediated) instance. This is not unrelated to Aristotle's original definition or the huge volume of ensuing work that makes the contingent contexts of speech a key concern for rhetoric.

Impartially suspended attention allows the analyst to “orientate his [sic] own unconscious, as a kind of receptive organ, towards the communicative unconscious of the patient, attuning himself to the analysand” (Freud, 2003, p. 37). The unconscious in this case is a faculty that can be attuned, a set of protocols at work even when we are not aware of their operation, and as such, closely resembles Aristotle's faculty of speech criticism. It is a structure that provides the conditions of possibility for acts of speech. Decorum, propriety, *to prepon*—these are all names for the faculty in rhetoric that allows an analyst of speech to attend to how

terminological system; for a more complete discussion of the merits of Phillips's translations vis a vis Strachey, see Hawkins (2019).

words fit the protocols that organize our (linguistically-influenced) selves, whether or not we are aware of their influence. As such, decorum already meaningfully intersects with psychoanalytic technique. The next section further develops this intersection in relation to speech, while the following section contextualizes it with the example of Lacan's concept of psychosis, one of the most rhetoric-informed notions in psychoanalytic thought, but also one that demonstrates the limitations of an approach to rhetoric focusing solely on a narrow understanding of figure and trope.

Propriety as a rhetorical concept

Propriety is notable in the history of rhetorical scholarship for the lack of focused attention it has received relative to its central importance. Prominent in Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, propriety/decorum became marginal as the field of rhetoric contracted over time. Rhetoric, according to Gérard Genette (1982), was broadly conceived in Ancient Greece (including audience, persuasion, trope and figure) before narrowing to the study of figure, and finally, to what is essentially nothing more than a commentary on metaphor (p. 103).

Psychoanalytic treatments of rhetoric have similarly narrowed: although Lacan mentions Aristotle's work on *pathos* as the best commentary on the "passions" and lists a number of arcane rhetorical figures and tropes in *Écrits*, his teaching focused almost exclusively on metaphor and metonymy, a subset of a subset of rhetoric, while his ideas of these forms tend to draw more from linguistics than rhetoric and thus treat them as formal organizations largely devoid of context in their deployments from *langue* to *parole*. Even rhetoricians who draw from psychoanalysis sometimes tend to reduce rhetoric to trope, and trope to simply metaphor (e.g., Lundberg, 2012). The only major rhetorical theorist of the last three hundred years to put

decorum at the center of rhetoric was Adam Smith (McKenna 2006, p. 109), more famous for *The Wealth of Nations* (who would have therefore affirmed every Scottish stereotype simultaneously assuming he overindulged with whisky while he wrote about dour propriety and capitalist frugality).

This contraction of rhetoric is particularly nonsensical in the case of decorum. In different senses, this term can refer either to the quality of an object (that it is fitting for a particular situation) or the capacity of a subject to determine what “fits” and what does not, what is appropriate, and what isn’t (McKenna 2006, p. 28-9). The sense of what belongs is necessarily heavily socially mediated: one way to think about propriety is as the capacity to apply internalized social norms (the injunctions and desires of the Other) to concrete situations, particularly as they relate to speech. Propriety is both the set of norms that exist around language and the sensibility about how much they can be stretched, in what ways, and to what effect (Hariman 1995, p. 180-1), which is what defines it as rhetorical rather than grammatical: much of rhetoric is about when to artfully massage the norms of speech to artistic or persuasive effect, a sense upon which all figurative language depends. This makes propriety arguably the most important single concept in rhetoric. Metaphor and metonymy, the two terms privileged by Lacan, both rely on it. What makes the substitution of a metaphor “work” is that the signifier deployed in place of another absent term is an appropriate replacement: otherwise, the trope is not metaphor but catachresis. Hence, “Achilles the lion” lands as a metaphor, while “Achilles the megalodon shark” does not, even if the traits emphasized by both (strength, ferocity, violence, etc.) are broadly congruent. So, too, with metonymy. Metonymy relies on a shared substance or proximity between two things to evoke a connection, but because everything is potentially like everything else in some sense (North 2021), metonymy is a species of invention (in the rhetorical

sense) establishing links between different things depending on a sense of appropriateness (Rosmarin 1985, p. 21). To refer to a nephew as one's "blood," for example, registers with a sense of socially-accepted propriety; to say that one's nephew is one's "mucus" does not, even though the principle of connection (bodily fluid for more abstract shared substance) is essentially the same. Whether to use explicitly figurative language at all in a given situation also depends on a sense of fittingness: flowery literary metaphors in a "high style" may be more appropriate for a eulogy, for example, than a recap of a hockey game in a sports bar. Therefore, propriety is at work on at least two levels: the internal logic of a trope, and the appropriateness of employing figurative language based on a concrete situation.

If rhetoric does indeed have a "master trope," that is almost certainly irony, at least in the context of psychoanalysis. Irony is not saying one thing and meaning its opposite—this definition is essentially sarcasm, which is a subset of irony—but rather saying something that could be read literally and *also* figuratively in another way, sometimes mutually exclusive and undecidable by the literal meaning of the words alone. "Nice weather we're having" cannot be decoded without knowing what weather conditions are actually like and what the speaker prefers; some other statements cannot be finally decoded at all even with contextual information. Irony is therefore a mode of ambiguity and multiplicity in meaning, which makes its almost total exclusion by Lacan a particularly egregious oversight (Ramazani 1989, p. 554-556). Irony is a layered, complex condition of language. Alanis Morissette's song "Ironic" is not actually ironic (e.g., "It's like rain on your wedding day" is bad luck, not a meaningful inversion of expectation). But it *is* ironic that the song, "Ironic," is *not ironic*, which in effect makes it an example of situational irony. When Morissette performed an updated version of the song which noted that the original was not ironic, this *was* ironic since it unexpectedly inverted the original

song and was perhaps a kind of meta-ironic deployment of irony since it ironically unraveled the potential irony of the original song, which relies on reading it as ironically non-ironic. If this discussion seems convoluted, then it has hopefully been a performative demonstration of the importance of the faculty of detecting and processing irony and the ambiguity and confusion inherent to its use.

Clear examples of ambiguity exist in psychoanalysis and help to demonstrate the relationship between irony and decorum. Freud (2003) recounts the following joke:

Two Jews meet in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. 'Where are you travelling?' asks the one. 'To Cracow,' comes the answer. 'Look what a liar you are!' the other protests. 'When you say you're going to Cracow, you want me to believe that you're going to Lemberg. But I know that you're really going to Cracow. So why are you lying?' (p. 110, italics in original)

Freud describes the joke as an example of absurdity, but it also demonstrates the subtlety of propriety. Speaker A asks “where are you travelling” knowing that speaker B is traveling to Cracow, but is incensed when Speaker B tells the truth, which Speaker A considers to be a lie. The proper answer, to Speaker A, is actually the lie which, because lying is the expectation in this context, would be truthful. However, this expectation is only sensible due to a rhetorical understanding of propriety in which a particular protocol of proper speech—the lie that indicates the truth—already exists. To a listener, the joke only works if we are also familiar with the notion of propriety at least implicitly so that we can understand why Speaker A considers Speaker B to be a liar even though B is actually going to Lemberg and what is absurd about the operation of Speaker A’s interpretation of the social code in this case. Propriety is therefore necessary both for the characters in the joke and for anyone listening to it. The displacement of images, signifiers, and so forth in dreams is another example. The protocols in the unconscious that authorize links between one thing and another in a dream (e.g., the white wolves of the Wolf

Man's dream and the white linens of the parental bed in Freud's interpretation) operate by a kind of decorum, as does the superego which this decorum helps them to evade.

Familiarity with the ambiguous expectations of language occurs in other places, such as in offers that are meant to be refused ("it's a family event that will no doubt be boring and besides is a long distance away, but of course you are welcome to come"), acceptances of social offers ("yes, we absolutely *should* get together to look at your stamp collection sometime!"), or denials of desire that are in fact affirmations of it such as those institutionalized in the Persian practice of *taarof* and technically a subspecies of irony called accismus ("no, I couldn't possibly eat the last piece of sushi," or "Oh, I couldn't accept your money for all of that work, I'm happy to do it"). All of these examples highlight the necessity of choice under conditions of uncertainty. Because metaphor, metonymy, and irony all conform to grammatical rules, there is always a possibility of interpreting them literally, and in fact that possibility is necessary for them to truly be ambiguous. The children's book series *Amelia Bedelia* relies on this possibility for humor: when the servant Amelia is tasked with drawing the drapes and dressing the chicken, she sketches an image of the curtains and puts clothing on the bird (Parish 1992; the presence of this theme in popular children's books can also be read as evidence of the need for this acculturation in early childhood development).

Irony relies on an ironist (*eiron*) and a dupe (*alazon*) who takes misses the subversion of the ironist by "following the rules" too closely, an example of Lacan's observation that the "non-dupes err" because in refusing to deviate from the "correct" meaning one ends up missing the point. This defines rhetoric overall for Paul de Man (1979), who stresses that a grammatical and a rhetorical reading may be mutually exclusive, but that a decision is still necessary. He famously draws from an episode of *All in the Family* in which Edith Bunker asks her husband

Archie whether he'd like his bowling shoes laced under or laced over. Archie responds, "what's the difference," and reacts poorly when Edith begins to explain what the actual difference between the two choices is. For de Man, this episode illustrates a key feature of rhetoric. The statement "what's the difference" can be read literally (grammatically) as an inquiry for more information, while it can be read figuratively (rhetorically) as a statement that the speaker *does not want* more information (de Man, 1979, pp. 9-10), an example of what is sometimes clumsily called a "rhetorical question." The point is not that Edith misunderstands. Rather, she makes a choice, as she must, given the necessity of judgment ("judgment" being another semi-discarded rhetorical notion) even under conditions where a full accounting is impossible, as in the contingent expressions of speech. This example shows what Genette (1982, p. 54) means when he claims that "figure" is really a "sense of figure" in that words themselves give few cues. It is the interpreter who makes a metaphor a metaphor or irony ironic even when a speaker intentionally tries to deploy this variety of language. The sensibility used for this interpretation is decorum.

To reiterate, decorum might be understood as the mediator between the Other's societal, familial, or cultural codes and the individual subject's actions, beliefs, and speech. This adds some nuance to Lacan's concept of the superego as the "Name of the Father," a term that somewhat flexibly denotes several concepts in Lacanian thought. The superego/name-of-the-father might name the Symbolic codes that govern a subject, but propriety describes the subject's sense of how to adapt to those codes in any given instance. Propriety is the means by which a subject knows when it can fudge the rules and when it cannot—and even when it is *supposed* to fudge the rules or ignore that an other seems to be doing so. It is also the sense of what objects and what behaviors by others are perceived as belonging and which are not. The theoretical

utility of this concept is further explored in the next section through the example of Lacan's concept of psychosis.

Lacanian Psychosis

One of Lacan's most compelling reinterpretations of Freudian theory is the topic of his third seminar on the psychoses. The central premise is the theoretical notion of psychosis as a "foreclosure" (Freud: *Verwerfung*) of the Name of the Father, or the organizing principle in the Symbolic register of human experience. Lacan equates this organizing principle directly to metaphor. The reason that the famous mad jurist Schreber was not a poet, Lacan says, is that he lacked the use of metaphor, because "poetical style...begins with metaphor, and where metaphor ceases poetry ceases also" (Lacan 1993, p. 218). A subject's normal navigation of the Symbolic requires metaphor, which permits one signifier to stand in for another and is equated broadly with Freud's notion of condensation. The Name of the Father is an appropriate label here because it is the signifier of the father's name that ties a child to him. In a world before DNA testing the biological provenance of offspring could never be proven with absolute certainty. The relationship to the mother, by contrast, is metonymic, one of shared substance not requiring the signifying relation of the name as it can be directly witnessed through the biological act of birth (hence "mama's baby, papa's maybe," in Hortense Spiller's 1987 psychoanalytic discussion of race). For language (and society) to function, this father must function as signifier and law (Lacan 1993, p. 96). This is the function of metaphor: organization by the signifier alone, rather than the shared substance of metonymy.

In psychosis, the protocols of metaphorical connections are disavowed and what fills in for them is a set of metonymic links, or delusions. So, a patient rejecting the ordering functions

of language that Lacan calls the Name of the Father might replace them with fantasies that the CIA is observing them, or that they feature as the star in a film like *The Truman Show* (Gold & Gold 2015), which serve to provide some structure to reality despite not being generally accepted by others. *Something* creates order and explains otherwise frighteningly chaotic intrusions by the Other. These delusions are essentially metonymic because they are understood to be non-arbitrary, based instead on some quality or aspect that is deeply meaningful to the subject but not to others who share their cultural and temporal coordinates. Annie Rogers, a Lacanian psychoanalyst who has experience psychosis herself for much of her life, describes the resulting systems as “incandescent alphabets” (Rogers 2016). These “alphabets”—literal or figural—are not purely random. They contain their own logic and systems of connection, even if these are not apparent to anyone but the subject experiencing psychosis, and as such, they are compensatory symptoms that help to orient these subjects in the world even when they are only “proto-orders” that do not “signify the position of the subject” (Rogers 2016, p. 75). Because psychosis is ultimately about metaphor and metonymy for Lacan, it is inherently linguistic and less a “disease” than something that “primarily concerns a way of relating to the signifier that differs from the way in which people conventionally use the signifying chain” (Vanheule 2011, p. 45).

The key to Lacan’s concept of psychosis, however, is not delusion so much as it is certainty. Metaphor produces meaning by inserting a signifier where there is none or by replacing one signifier with another, emphasizing the principle which authorizes the substitution (e.g., bravery, fierceness, or strength in Achilles and the lion). This substitution necessarily requires some flexibility, since Achilles has some of the lion’s traits but not others, meaning that at least a bit of ambiguity is necessary for metaphors to function. Metonymy usually links signifiers together in a chain through proximity. This kind of connection is precisely a disavowal

of ambiguity because the principles of this connection appear to be grounded in an objective connection, even if they are “accidental” in the sense that other proximate signifiers could have been used. For psychotic subjects, the autonyms, neologisms, and repurposed signifiers of their discourse are perhaps not *signifying*, but they are full of *significance*, a kind of meaningfulness without meaning (Rogers 2016, p. 51). Signifiers, for Lacan, originate in the Other, but metaphor permits most subjects to find some distance from them, to recognize them at least implicitly as arbitrary labels made for reference, not intrinsically meaningful signs that constitute hidden truths or overwhelming injunctions. As Lacan puts it, “What characterizes a normal subject is precisely that he never takes seriously certain realities that he [sic] recognizes exist. You are surrounded by all sorts of realities about which you are in no doubt...but you don’t take them fully seriously” (Lacan 1993, p. 74). Metonymy, on the other hand, seems more restricted, less arbitrary, and less ambiguous. Psychotics eschew the ambiguity of the signifier as seen in metonymy in favor of a set of signifiers that seem to be made meaningful by an imagined (i.e., Imaginary) Other such as God, the CIA, Satan, or whatever serves as the central figure of delusion. The subject might not understand something they perceive, but there can be no doubt for them that it has some kind of hidden meaning.

It is clear from this discussion that the psychotic “non-event” in the Symbolic (Vanheule 2011, p. 34) for Lacan has at least these three elements: 1) the failure of an ordering principle that authorizes some signifiers to stand in for others, 2) the emergence of a new connective protocol, a “seamless logic that becomes systemic and then irrefutable” (Rogers 2016, p. 11), and 3) an orientation towards this new system of absolute conviction, a certainty that the Imaginary signifiers covering up the gaps left in the Symbolic are deeply and meaningful and not arbitrary. The commonality in all of these elements has to do with *protocols of connection*—the Name of

the Father, the new delusional network, and the obscure connections between signifiers and their deeply buried significance. The description of these protocols as “metaphor” and “metonymy” is a product of Roman Jakobson’s influence on Lacan, as evident in “The Instance of the Letter,” cited above. Jakobson’s structural linguistics, however, employs these terms in ways that look highly idiosyncratic to a rhetorician, despite Lacan’s inclusion of rhetoric in his discussion of them. Using them as labels for phenomena in psychosis may therefore occlude the potential contribution of rhetoric to this area of Lacanian theory.

To describe the Name of the Father as “metaphor” is actually to miss what is most central to it.⁴ Metaphor is a replacement of one signifier (usually word) with another, but the most significant structural qualities of psychosis are not about actual words in speech but broader orientations towards the Symbolic and Imaginary registers which are its condition of possibility. Delusions are only metonymic if the subject experiencing them determines that the signifiers comprising them share proximity or substance. Because anything could potentially be connected to anything else depending on the principles of connection one emphasizes (Borges famous Chinese encyclopedia comes to mind), these principles are of more significance than the mere fact that two things are deemed proximate. In other words, the *reason* that X is proximate to Y is more valuable diagnostically, descriptively, and in treatment, than the notion that the two are connected *because they are proximate*. All words are metaphorical in the sense that they stand in for absent things, so any psychotic still capable of speech employs at least some species of metaphor. What varies for psychotic subjects relative to non-psychotic ones, then, is not substitution and connection *per se* but their rules for what may appropriately be substituted or

⁴ To be clear: “Name of the Father” as a phrase is a metaphor used by Lacan, but concept for which he is employing it should not be understood as “metaphor.”

linked to what. In other words, the subject's sense of rhetorical propriety is at issue, not metaphor or metonymy as such.

Propriety is also a superior theoretical concept for certainty. As explained in the previous section, propriety is not simply knowing the rules of social interaction and linguistic structure, but also the sense of how they should be applied in each contingent situation. This includes knowing when the rules should be treated with flexibility. Hariman (1995) explains this dual aspect of propriety:

The lineaments of this concept...suggest two dimensions...corresponding to the alternative perspectives available in any explicitly identified social code: a relatively uniform, commonsense, commonplace system of instructions and a more complicated awareness of those instructions as somewhat arbitrary markers of a constantly shifting field of social relations. Decorum operated at both levels, as a set of conventions and as a theory of conventions (p. 180).

In Lacanian terms, propriety could be understood as the mode of engagement that a subject employs in its encounter with the Symbolic Other, including the implicit knowledge that signifiers are arbitrary and malleable. The breakdown of this capacity is what makes the signifiers of the Other seem to be inscrutable, intrinsically meaningful signs, as they are in Schreber's experience of God's speech, James Tilly Matthews's delusion of the Air Loom, or the commonly reported experience of demonic possession or angelic messaging.

Even if one remains convinced by the orthodox Lacanian line that privileges metaphor, decorum is still involved in at least three ways. First, in a neurotic subject signifiers must be read as metaphor (or metonymy), i.e., understood as trope. *Trope*, from *tropos*, means "to turn," and this is precisely what this kind of rhetorical device does: it turns from one established meaning to another, newer one. This move is only a "turn" if there is an otherwise identifiable "straight" path, or lexical meaning. Identifying that lexical meaning—the commonplace or usual denotation

of a signifier—among the many potential associations of a given signifier is a function of decorum. Second, metaphor must be deployed in a context that renders it identifiable as such. The reason Schreber was not a poet was not just his failure to use metaphor (and, if one reads *Memoirs of a Nervous Illness*, it is evident that Schreber did sometimes use metaphor in writing) but the “paratext” or clues about how his text was to be received. The very same imagery can be identified as sacred in the *Revelation of John* but as a symptom of madness when delivered by a grimy-bearded stranger in a subway station, even if the interlocutor in both cases is a Christian believing in the truth of end-times prophecy. Knowing *when and where* to deploy trope requires some faculty of determining opportune moments (*kairos*), which is a subset of decorum. Third, a sense of appropriateness is necessary for an analyst tasked partly with determining what the potential meanings of an act of speech might be, either in interpretation or simply in registering an analysand’s speech with an eye towards facilitating their encounters with their own desire.

Understanding psychosis in terms of decorum may even help to extend the usefulness of this concept beyond its limitations in Lacanian theory. A common epistemological difficulty in psychoanalytic studies in general has to do with the selection of cases to support theoretical conclusions—because data is self-reported, not accessible to others, anecdotal, and very limited in scope, there exists little opportunity to employ an adequate dataset to test claims and a strong temptation to cherry-pick cases that support a preexisting theoretical belief. Lacan himself was hardly immune. As Stijn Vanheule (2011) notes, “in his choice of case studies Lacan seems to have had a preference for the more organized psychotic problems [rather] than those in which disintegration and chaos are pivotal” (p. 10). As a result, Lacan focused almost exclusively on cases of paranoia where some articulated system of delusions could be described. Of course, many written memoirs by those experiencing psychosis fit this bill as well—e.g., *Operators and*

Things, Illustrations of Madness, I Question, Memoirs of a Nervous Illness, The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky, The Collected Writings of Francis E. Dec Esquire, and a welter of self-published Kindle stories. Such texts are full of analyzable language and intricate systems to which the tools of linguistic analysis are easily applied. To establish the work of metonymy is much more difficult with patients who are non-verbal, highly disorganized, or experiencing psychotic breaks not exhibiting robust paranoid fantasies in part because they lack such easily publishable material and therefore contribute to selection bias in psychoanalytic study. Although it is possible to claim in these cases that metaphor has failed, it is more theoretically parsimonious to simply say that an organizing principle of connection has failed—in essence, propriety. This is also the case when patients perceive bodily disintegration (e.g., Cotard’s delusion, the “sacred heart” visions of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque), which is essentially the failure to cohere a sense of what does and does not belong together under the signifier of “body.” These delusions are harder to describe as metonymy, which still requires some connective principle, than as a disruption of propriety, in this case the sense of what belongs (maybe literally fits) together inside the body and what does not.

It is clear, however, that the emphasis on decorum does not require a rejection of Lacanian theories of psychosis. Metonymy still describes many paranoid fantasies well, especially those that become leveraged as a social link in the shape of conspiracy theories or extremist ideologies because although decorum may still be a prior question, the complex web of associations in some paranoid fantasies do share the elements of hidden meaning and asserted consubstantiality, at least to subjects afflicted by them (Matheson 2017, 2018). Metaphor and metonymy are also useful ways to think about the Symbolic order as long as we think of them more in the structural, *grammatical* sense that Jakobson did and avoid conflating them with the

rhetorical meanings with which they were used by Quintilian, Aristotle, Cicero, and other ancient rhetoricians. Preserving their structural senses as condensations and displacements established through habitual, repetitive connections in a broader cultural milieu is necessary because propriety as a concept requires some baseline of comparison. A subject fixated on a few lines of script who believes that they are routinely possessed by supernatural forces that protect them from danger and compel them to seize venomous snakes with their bare hands might be judged mad in Vladivostok but a wise leader in a Jolo, West Virginia church. The existence of these broader grammatical constructions is what makes their contingent rhetorical deployment possible and meaningful.

Conclusion

Rhetoric as a field of study deserves significantly more attention in psychoanalysis, both as a technique relevant to communication with patients and colleagues and as a theoretical discipline with accumulated insights into how human communication intersects with desire in a social context. Certainly, a number of psychoanalytic thinkers have already begun this project either explicitly or by engaging with allied fields of study such as linguistics and poetics. Further scholarly attention to rhetorical sensibility could help to complement these efforts, especially with a focus on more contemporary work. Just as many psychoanalytically inclined rhetoricians primarily demonstrate familiarity with older scholarship in psychoanalysis, many psychoanalytic writers focus less on contemporary theories of rhetoric in favor of ancient ones and simultaneously miss some insights specific to spoken, rather than written, uses of trope, figure, persuasion, propriety, and judgment.

Structural theories of psychoanalysis in the Lacanian tradition have perhaps the most to gain theoretically. Recognizing the significance of propriety to psychosis casts new light on all three of Lacan's enumerated structural positions of psychosis, neurosis, and perversion. Psychosis, as mentioned here, can be thought of as a failure to mediate between a terrifying Other and a fragmented self through propriety. Neurosis might be characterized as a conflict between desire and the Other mediated through decorum in the redeployment of signifiers to repress something forbidden. Both of these positions can be described in traditional Lacanian theory through metaphor and metonymy, but their relation to the third position—perversion—is clearest through decorum. Perverse subjects can still orient themselves to the Other by imagining themselves as the object of its desire (Swales 2012, Gunn 2020), but we can now see that their means of doing so involves a sense of decorum that privileges violations of the Other's injunctions as being situationally appropriate, or in other words, believing that the Other's prohibitions are meant to be transgressed since the subject is what completes the protesting, coquettish, but secretly desiring Other. This brings Lacan's theory of desire in perversion closer to that of Georges Bataille, by whom he was clearly influenced (see Bataille 1986).

Linguistics has probably contributed more to psychoanalysis since the 1950s than any other field in the study of language, despite a number of psychoanalytic works incorporating insights from literature and rhetoric. Metaphor and metonymy in their structural linguistic senses have come to eclipse almost every other concept despite the obvious suitability of a whole range of figures and tropes to analytic engagements with parapraxes, dreams, jokes, and everyday speech. The exclusion of irony is particularly ironic because in the attempt to explain all phenomena in terms of metaphor and metonymy, Lacanian psychoanalysis can sometimes bear an uncanny (ironic) resemblance to Lacan's own notion of psychosis: contingency disappears in

favor of structure, and the uncertainties of irony are replaced by set of interpretive protocols that sound like neologistic delusions to the uninitiated—the Name of the Father, *synthome*, *step-of-sense*, *jealouissance*, *hainamoration*, and so on, combined with scientific and mathematical concepts removed from their contexts and invested with inscrutable meaning—the Klein bottle, Borromean knot, Möbius strip, and various discursive “schemas” come to mind. This systematization threatens to perform what Shoshana Felman (2003) calls the “grammatization of rhetoric,” or the ossification of a system that should attend to slips, accidents, and unpredictable outbursts into one that seeks endlessly to categorize, incorporate, and domesticate speech.

Because all trope, figure, and rhetorical effect relies on an underlying notion of propriety, we might consider elevating the axis of literal/ironic above than of metaphor/metonymy. There are historically, culturally, and individually contingent notions of “normality” that we collectively agree to pretend are something other than arbitrary. Irony is a deviation that depends on this prior agreement for its departure to be sensible, just as the agreement itself depends on the possibility of ironic distance to function. At one extreme, an absolute fidelity to the law reads everything as meaningful and without irony, like many of the psychotics studied by Lacan, while at the other, a complete breakdown in linguistic organization results in an essentially disorganized subject incapable of intricate delusional logic. Propriety is the subject’s sense of what fits and what does not, how much deviation is possible, and how their linguistic environment is composed in any given instance. Metaphor and metonymy are both interesting and important concepts, but they lack the explanatory breadth of propriety on which they depend, along with many other relevant but understudied concepts—*catachresis*, *apostrophe*, *enthymeme*, and so on. Future work in this area could continue to develop the potential of these concepts—including irony—as I have attempted to begin here with *decorum*. The overall goal of this project

is not just to recognize the mutual imbrication of rhetoric and psychoanalysis, but to continue the development of each through insights of the other. Wherever propriety dictates, of course.

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