

Am I a “Belgian” Scholar?

JULIE DAINVILLE

The question of identity is quite complex in Belgium. We have three regions, geographically enclosed: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels-Capital (not to be confused with the “City of Brussels,” even if it is basically the same geographical area). These are three communities established on a linguistic criterion (Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and German-speaking). The situation gets even more delicate in municipalities with three official languages (Dutch, French, and German), even though the country is only about thirty thousand square kilometres for about eleven million inhabitants.

Furthermore, Brussels is considered the capital of the European Union—although it is not an official status—for the city has been hosting the main European Institutions for a long time. The city of Brussels is home to 176,124 inhabitants, from 163 different nationalities where many languages and cultures live together. To use a very popular word in Belgium, Brussels is a (most of the time) peaceful “melting pot.” And it is also the place I have been living in since I was born. All my (still quite short) life long I have been surrounded by some conventional, even clichéd expressions of Belgian culture:

- the famous (or at least we do believe so) Belgian second-degree

humour,

- a multicultural and multilingual context,
- a sense of self-mockery...
- ... which exists alongside the feeling that being “small” does not mean one cannot achieve big things, as my small country has done many times,
- and the belief that a compromise can almost all the time be reached.

I think that Belgium is all those things: living together despite the linguistic, political, or cultural differences.

Of course, this atmosphere inflects the person I am, the way I approach the world surrounding me and, consequently, the way I do research. I do feel Belgian. At the same time, I do think that many other factors have been of importance. Multilingualism and multidisciplinary education (in rhetoric and classics) in a cosmopolitan context feed my work, which flourishes in the Université libre de Bruxelles and in GRAL (Groupe de recherche en Rhétorique et Argumentation Linguistique).

Multilingual, Multidisciplinary Work

The multicultural and multilingual atmosphere of Brussels makes it a special place. Cinema is a symbolic example: in Brussels, when one goes to see an international movie, one may choose to watch it in the original version with French and Dutch subtitles, or in French. In Flanders, movies are in the original version with subtitles; in Wallonia, most of the time, only the French version is available. This may seem minor, but it says a lot about the way the different regions conceive of languages. Furthermore, many expats, European or not, live in the city, which offers facilities to discover other languages or cultures thanks to the numerous international libraries, cultural

centres, or even restaurants. As far as I am concerned, being confronted by this probably increased my desire to learn more about languages, and that is why I studied classics and linguistics.

Within a Master's in linguistics, I studied classics. This background has been an important influence in my research. I usually work on ancient texts, trying to better understand them through the lens of ancient rhetorical treatises, within a philological approach.

A Free University within A Belgian Rhetorical Tradition

The university where I studied plays an important role in the way I do research. To clearly understand this point, a brief historical background will be useful. The Université libre de Bruxelles (then called “Université libre de Belgique”) was built in 1834 by Théodore Verhaegen and Auguste Baron. Its foundation is linked to the history of Belgium. Indeed Belgium became an independent country in 1830 and, at this time, only three universities existed: Ghent, Liege and Leuven. Brussels, although the capital of the country, had no university and at first investors refused to fund the project of a new Belgian university. It was only after that the foundation of a new Catholic university in Mechelen was announced that the “Université libre de Belgique” project could be launched in reaction, on the grounds of the will not to be influenced by a religion or dogma of any kind (which is still well alive today). This became its fundamental principle: the “Libre examen.” It means that, as stated in the University's first article of association, teaching and research rely on the rejection of authoritative argument and the independence of judgement. Such a statement has of course concrete implications on the way students and scholars are trained. My point here is not to praise my university without an ounce of critical mind (it would be in contradiction with the point I have just made), because this ideal is not always achieved. But I have been lucky enough to work with colleagues and professors for whom the “libre examen” does mean a lot, and who therefore respect it in their professional and scientific relations.

I cannot mention the Université libre de Bruxelles without dwelling on Chaïm Perelman, the new rhetoric and the School of Brussels. Perelman, with his book *Traité de l'argumentation. La Nouvelle Rhétorique*, written with Lucie Olbrect-Tyteca and published in 1948, largely contributed to bringing rhetoric to the forefront again after World War II.

The research team I belong to, the “GRAL” (Groupe de recherche en Rhétorique et Argumentation Linguistique) is one of the heirs of this school of thought, giving Perelman an important place in its research fields and pursuing his multidisciplinary approach of argumentation. Brussels's prime position in the field of rhetoric obviously influenced the place given to rhetoric in my research.

***Pistis* and Divine Testimony in Classical Rhetoric**

Bringing together the energy of my cosmopolitan context and my classical training, I have recently begun work on (for example) *pistis* and divine testimony in classical rhetoric. The historical period I am working on, the Greek classical period (around the fifth century BCE) is particularly relevant to study critical thinking, because of the cultural and, most of all, political upheaval that happened then in Athens: the establishment of democracy. Citizens had to make their own choices, based on proper deliberation. Oracular authority became, then, a striking and complex question.

My methodology derives strongly from my classical training. I look at oracles within the classical rhetorical culture by synthesizing authors as diverse in time and space and genre as Herodotus, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Hermogenes. Herodotus accepts, generally, the authority of an oracle: the reliability of the god is not disputable. The authority of the Delphic sanctuary seems well established in Herodotus's *Histories*. Not all classical authors share that assumption. Aristotle, for example, is suspicious of oracles: he accuses those who write in an ambiguous style of having,

actually, nothing to say. According to him, the oracles are ambiguous (deploying *Amphibolia*) to fool people, because the less accurate they are, the less likely they are to be proven wrong.

In grappling with that ambiguity, my conclusions are, in a certain way, entirely consonant with my work at the Free University (Université libre de Bruxelles). Where the free university notes that teaching and research relies on “the rejection of authoritative argument and the independence of judgement,” my analysis of classical oracles also places their authoritative role within the context of rhetoric. Even when the authority of the oracular sanctuary is not questioned, and the god trusted, critical thought and rhetoric are crucial when it comes to interpreting what Apollo wanted to say or, to put it differently, when it comes to making a decision. Then, what to do in light of the oracle’s insights is still the result of a human deliberation. *Amphibolia* is precisely the feature that makes oracles enter in the rhetorical sphere, allowing men to make their own decisions and to take their responsibilities — to exercise what at the University of Brussels is called “independence of judgement.”

Conclusion

I would conclude by saying that the melting pot I have been living in for so many years is probably key to understanding how I consider my work. Indeed, every point mentioned above, whether geographical, cultural, or educational, plays a part in the researcher I am. My academic *curriculum* is of great influence, but it is undeniably correlated to the history of the institution (notably the importance of the “libre examen” concept and the major role of Perelman in the history of rhetoric) and, of course, my choice to invest in this path must be, in some ways, correlated to the places that I lived in when I was younger and, most of all, to the people I met. Threaded through all of these influences, rhetoric is the tool by which I analyze the role of authority and judgement in civic life.

Works by Julie Dainville

« Divination et connaissance dans l'Œdipe-Roi », in L. Nicolas, *Le fragile et le flou. Apprivoiser la précarité : un art rhétorique (to be published; 21 p.)*

« Rhétorique et autorité historique : le cas de la Pythie dans l'œuvre d'Hérodote », in Julie Dainville et Benoît Sans (eds), *Entre rhétorique et philologie : pour une réhabilitation des liens entre théorie et pratique*, RIFL, 2017, p. 64-77.

« L'éloge paradoxal à l'école : rhétorique, pédagogie, citoyenneté », *Rhetor* 7, 2018, p. 26-37.

– « Le *genethliakon* dans la poésie de Sulpicia », *Rhetor* 6, 2016, p. 99-115
(online: <http://cssr-scer.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Rhetor-6-7-Po%C3%A9sie-Sulpicia-Dainville.pdf>)