



# Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured

*Professor Susan C. Jarratt*

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## **Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured** Professor Susan C. Jarratt

This book is a critically informed challenge to the traditional histories of rhetoric and to the current emphasis on Aristotle and Plato as the most significant classical voices in rhetoric. In it, Susan C. Jarratt argues that the first sophists—a diverse group of traveling intellectuals in the fifth century B.C.—should be given a more prominent place in the study of rhetoric and composition. Rereading the ancient sophists, she creates a new lens through which to see contemporary social issues, including the orality/literacy debate, feminist writing, deconstruction, and writing pedagogy.

The sophists' pleasure in the play of language, their focus on historical contingency, and the centrality of their teaching for democratic practice were sufficiently threatening to their successors Plato and Aristotle that both sought to bury the sophists under philosophical theories of language. The censure of Plato and Aristotle set a pattern for historical views of the sophists for centuries. Following Hegel and Nietzsche, Jarratt breaks the pattern, finding in the sophists a more progressive charter for teachers and scholars of reading and writing, as well as for those in the adjacent disciplines of literary criticism and theory, education, speech communication, and ancient history.

In tracing the historical interpretations of sophistic rhetoric, Jarratt suggests that the sophists themselves provide the outlines of an alternative to history-writing as the discovery and recounting of a set of stable facts. She sees sophistic use of narrative in argument as a challenge to a simple division between orality and literacy, current discussions of which virtually ignore the sophists. Outlining similarities between *écriture féminine* and sophistic style, Jarratt shows that contemporary feminisms have more in common with sophists than just a style; they share a rhetorical basis for deployment of theory in political action. In her final chapter, Jarratt takes issue with accounts of sophistic pedagogy focusing on technique and the development of the individual. She argues that, despite its employment by powerful demagogues, sophistic pedagogy offers a resource for today's teachers interested in encouraging minority voices of resistance through language study as the practice of democracy.

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