



## Arguing over texts: the rhetoric of interpretation

Arguing Over Texts: The Rhetoric of Interpretation. By Martin Camper. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xiii + 187. \$78.00 (Paperback), ISBN: 9780190677121

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## BOOK REVIEW

***Arguing Over Texts: The Rhetoric of Interpretation.*** By Martin Camper. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xiii + 187. \$78.00 (Paperback), ISBN: 9780190677121.

While many in the fields of rhetoric and communication studies are familiar with Greco-Roman argumentative system known as stasis theory, which divides issues by sets of common disputes, such as whether something occurred, or whether an action is justifiable, fewer are familiar with the ancient legal stases, or methods of arguing about the interpretation of legal documents such as wills and laws. In *Arguing Over Texts: The Rhetoric of Interpretation*, Martin Camper draws from this less familiar iteration of stasis theory to create a "systematic, theoretically grounded method for understanding and analyzing patterns in interpretive disputes" across disciplines (p. 3). In so doing, Camper admirably revises "ancient rhetorical theory to think about and solve modern problems" (p. 3). Not only does *Arguing Over Texts* offer a compelling rearticulation of ancient rhetorical theory—it also develops a sophisticated, yet accessible, model for thinking about the interpretation and production of texts. Indeed, one of the many strengths of Camper's work is his simultaneously learned, yet clear, application of rhetoric and hermeneutics. The result is a text that will without doubt satisfy scholars of rhetoric and textual interpretation, while also remaining highly engaging to a wide range of audiences, including advanced undergraduates in argumentation.

Building from past work in rhetoric and hermeneutics, particularly that of Kathy Eden, Michael Leff, and Steven Mailloux, Camper explains that while rhetorical hermeneutics (and hermeneutical rhetoric) have offered important contributions to the discipline and its approaches to textual interpretation, neither "outlines a replicable method for systematically carrying out" interpretive analysis (p. 7). The crux of Camper's contribution to these related fields, then, is his theorization and explication of a set of six "interpretative stases," namely ambiguity, definition, letter vs. spirit, conflicting passages, assimilation, and jurisdiction, which he draws from ancient sources such as Cicero's *De inventione* and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad herennium* (p. 9). These stases represent "a possible point of conflict" in the interpretation of any text (p. 9). The generalized nature of these points of stasis allow them to be applied in a variety of fields, from rhetoric and literature to the sciences and law.

Fittingly given Camper's claims about the broad utility of this system of interpretation, *Arguing Over Texts* is divided into chapters that explore each individual point of stasis in turn, illustrating a variety of sub-points through examples from different fields. The book begins by considering the stasis of ambiguity, which focuses on "divergent readings of a single word or phrase" and, as Camper notes, could be considered "the archetypal interpretative issue" (p. 17; 16, emphasis original). As in later chapters of the book, the range of sample arguments and examples used to illustrate the potential of ambiguity to serve as a productive locus of interpretation are impressive. In just this first body chapter, examples as diverse as the poetry of Phillis Wheatley (called by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. the author of "the most reviled poem in African-American literature"), ambiguities in church marquis, and poorly written headlines in local newspapers are all used to demonstrate various forms of textual ambiguity (p. 14, 17, 20). In other chapters, Camper analyzes interpretive disputes around Abraham Lincoln's sexual identity, various speeches made by President Barack Obama, and the infamous "Donation of Constantine," a forged document that circulated in the medieval period but was later proven to be false by humanist

Lorenzo Valla (p. 139). The range of examples employed throughout *Arguing Over Texts* is notable because rarely does a book so convincingly deliver on a promise to offer a generalized method of argumentation and interpretation. In providing so many disparate and distinct examples, Camper thoroughly evidences his claim that ancient rhetorical theory can help modern scholars and students of argumentation to interpret all sorts of texts in more sophisticated ways. This range is a true strength of the work.

While early chapters of *Arguing Over Texts* focus on word or sentence level issues such as ambiguity and competing definitions, later chapters focus on cultural or legal issues that inform who has the right to pronounce authoritative interpretations of texts. Especially important is the final chapter on Opening, Closing, and Moving Through Interpretive Disputes. Here, Camper synthesizes the claims in earlier chapters, showing "the logical and argumentative relationships between the interpretive stases and how interpretive disputes are initiated and resolved" (p. 163). This chapter models the use of the stases as hermeneutic method, making suggestions for rhetors and analysts that can be applied in a variety of situations.

The opportunity for synthesis afforded by this final chapter is needed to appreciate the system for which Camper advocates. For instance, the assertion that "the stases of interpretation occur in a predictable sequence, according to the logical principle of presupposition in which certain interpretive issues must be resolved" before any others are considered is a valuable insight, but also a necessary clarification, particularly as this presupposed order is not the order in which the chapters of the book are presented, which could cause confusion (p. 165). Overall, however, Camper's basic claim in this chapter—that "interpretive disputes proceed first from consideration of preliminary conditions" and then on to basic meaning and competing or divergent readings of a text—is well-defended, and the proposed hermeneutic method easy to follow (p. 165).

While the research, examples, and argumentation of *Arguing Over Texts* are all excellent, I would be remiss not to highlight another outstanding feature of this book: its applicability and ease of use in the classroom. Rare is the academic monograph that can satisfy many audiences simultaneously, and rarer still is the monograph that can make complex subject matter engaging for undergraduate students. *Arguing Over Texts* succeeds in both of these areas. I regularly teach an upper-division course in argument, and I have found the book to be very successful in this course. The wide range of examples used throughout provide students with many chances to connect with the subject matter, the sensible organization of the text lends itself to connecting chapters with classroom activities, and the interpretive system outlined and modeled in the final chapter of the book provides students with enough guidance to do impressive intellectual work without too much hand-holding. All in all, it is clear that with this book, Martin Camper has produced an excellent contribution to scholarship in rhetoric and textual interpretation. Moreover, his accessible writing and argumentation should serve as models for expanding the audience of scholarship in rhetorical studies.

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