Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—out of profundity.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

The profound superficiality about which Nietzsche marvels describes ancient Greek culture as a culture of contact, a culture replete with spectacular gatherings, groping eyes, bending flesh, constantly redoubling so that the superficial became embedded, enfolded into bodies, tones, words. One condition of such enfolding was the agôn, the contest, the encounter that produces struggle and change. As scholars such as Walter Ong, John Poulakos, and Jeffrey Walker have pointed out, agonism provided an important context for the emergence of rhetoric in antiquity. As I will suggest, athletics made available an agonistic model for early rhetors to follow as they developed their art. But the force or quality of this brand of agonism is nonetheless at times surprising, and this unusual character of the agôn was central to the particular development of rhetoric as an art of response.

It must be noted from the outset that the agôn is more than the one-on-one sparring that is emphasized in most treatments of the topic. That is, agonism is not merely a synonym for competition, which usually has victory as its goal. For outcome-driven competition, the Greeks used the term athlìos, from the verb athleuein, meaning to contend for a prize. The agôn, by contrast, is not necessarily as focused on the outcome as it is on athlìos, the more explicit struggle for a prize. Rather, the root meaning of agôn is "gathering" or "assembly." The Olympic Games, for example, depended on the gathering of athletes, judges, and spectators alike. Put simply, whereas athlìos emphasizes the prize and hence the victor, agôn emphasizes the...
event of the gathering itself—the encounter rather than the division between the opposing sides. To be sure, the “gathering” force of ἀγῶν to some extent entails—and is enabled by—the victory. One aim of this exploration, though, is less to consider agonism’s teleological, or victory-driven side, and more to foreground the agonistic encounter itself. I will suggest that this encounter constitutes the more pervasive agonal dynamic, a dynamic that also figures prominently in the development of rhetoric as an agonistic force.

John Poulakos’s important book on the sophists points out the agonistic connection between rhetoric and athletics (32–39), arguing that the sophists effectively “turned rhetoric into a competitive enterprise” (35) and that athletics provided a “rich vocabulary” for the rhetorical art. Poulakos’s account, however, focuses on the athlios side of agonism, the “victory at all cost” mentality. Yet the “gathering” force of the ἀγῶν inheres as well, most notably in the very structure of rhetorical situations and their dependence on an assembly, but also in the training and production of a rhetorical subject. The realm of training, interestingly, shows most clearly the close relation between athlios and ἀγῶν, as a drive for the prize depends on the gathering force of agonistic logic from the very beginning. ἀγῶν is also connected to the verb ἀγείν, which is generally translated “to lead,” but in some instances is linked to training and can be translated “to bring up, train, educate” (e.g., Plato’s Laws 782d). So the word ἀγῶν suggests movement through struggle, a productive training practice wherein subjective production takes place through the encounter itself. As Nietzsche suggests, the Greeks produced themselves through active struggle; their pedagogy depended on agonism (1974, 58; see also Poulakos, 33).

Taking seriously rhetoric’s emergence in the context of the ἀγῶν requires a reconfiguration of rhetoric as an agonistic encounter. That is, for the sophists at least, agonism produces rhetoric as a gathering of forces—cultural, bodily, and discursive, thus problematizing the easy portrayal of rhetoric as telos-driven persuasion or as a means to reach consensus. As a result, the sophistic rhetorical exemplar was the athlete in action. Perhaps the stranger in Plato’s Sophist said it best when he dubbed the typical sophist “an athlete in the contest of words” (ἀγονιστικὸς peri logos en tis athlêtês) (231e). This statement figures sophists as athletes: same style of performance, different venue (words rather than wrestling or boxing). As such, I will argue, it was a peculiarly athletic—or, to invoke Nietzsche—Olympic notion of agonism that functioned as an important shaper of early rhetorical practice and pedagogy.
A treatment of the agonistic link between rhetoric and athletics requires a corollary consideration of aretê, a kind of virtuosity that in its own way drove agonistic encounters, as Greeks sought after the esteem of others through competitive engagement and display of their abilities, be they skill at javelin throwing or delivery of an encomium.

1. A politics of reputation

At the heart of the ancient agôn lies the concept of aretê, for the struggling contest served as a stage of sorts. Aretê was associated with the goodness, courage, and prowess of a warrior. One of the best examples of early agonistic manifestations of aretê can be found in Homer’s Achilles, who is referred to as “strong,” “swift,” and “godlike” (1.129; 1.140); “the great runner” (1.224), and “the best of the Achaeans” (16.279). His aretê in the Iliad has a double force, for not only is he a brave and brilliant warrior, but from the outset, he is destined to die in battle at Troy (1.536), with the utmost glory, a guarantor of aretê. Conceptually, aretê was tightly bound with agathos (good), kleos (glory), timê (honor), and philotimia (love of honor).

As David Cohen points out, the norms and practices of Athenian virtuosity “operate within the politics of reputation, whose normative poles are honor and shame” (183). As such, aretê functions as an external phenomenon, depending on outside reception and acknowledgment for its instantiation. Aretê thus operated within an economy of actions, wherein certain acts, such as dying in battle, or securing a victory at the Olympic games, were considered agathos and hence deserving of honor, and certain acts were not. In other words, one cannot just be virtuous, one must become virtuosity by performing and hence embodying virtuous actions in public. In addition to depending on acknowledgement, then, aretê also had a performative dimension, which is to say that it must be enacted, embodied. Aretê was thus not a telos, but rather a constant call to action that produced particular habits. As a repeated/repeatable style of living, aretê was therefore a performative, bodily phenomenon, depending on visibility—on making manifest qualities associated with virtuosity. As such, it was produced through observation, imitation, and learning.

For ancient Athenians, identities did not precede actions, as this movement of aretê demonstrates. That is, one could not just “be” manly...
(Andreios) and all that entails without displaying his “manliness” through manly acts of courage. In the *Iliad*, an epic primarily concerned with human achievement, the outside—or the place from which such commendations come—can be located with the Olympian gods. In Homeric epic, the gods serve as arbiters of glory or kleos, acting not just as approving judges, but also as the very enablers of heroic actions. In this regard, the interventions of Athena are telling.

In book 5, Athena guides the spear of Diomedes into Pandaros’s face (290–91) and then into Ares’ midsection (856–57), and in book 23, Athena trips Ajax in a footrace (774–75), thus sealing Achilles’ victory. As Seth L. Schein notes, such interventions say less about the agency of the gods vs. humans, and more about the goodness of the hero receiving assistance from the gods. That is, as Schein puts it, “the presence of the god was the traditional poetic means of calling attention to the greatness of the victor and the victory, and it likewise conferred a special dignity on both victor and victim by showing that the gods themselves were concerned to intervene in their struggle” (58). So the very notion that the god would care to intervene suggests that honor is at stake and that, in the context of Homeric epic, the gods function as the exterior forces in charge of conferring kleos. The resulting actions—the slicing of Pandaros’s face and Achilles’s winning of the footrace—are deemed indicators of virtuosity by the onlookers in and readers of the poem.

But establishing oneself as a great warrior and dying in battle were not the only ways to achieve fame in ancient Athens. As the example of Achilles’ footrace suggests, the politics of reputation also operated in athletic competitions, sometimes held as part of funerary rituals (as in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) and sometimes part of celebratory festivals, as is the case with the Isthmian, the Pythian, the Nemean, and the Olympic Games. Much like the warrior Achilles, athletes relied on and responded to “the outside” (the opponents, the spectators, the judges) for their aretè. As we will see, though, the responsiveness of the agôn troubles the very notion of an “outside,” for the relational quality of struggle makes opponents, spectators, and judges part of a network of agonistic production.

A common way to memorialize athletes and other famed men was to erect statues in their name. For the victorious athlete, the statue-form did not function only as a mark of aretè, but its carefully crafted surface also served to simulate virtue, to radiate aretè from its rendering of bodily parts (limbs, abdomen, ears, eyes). In other words, the statues, like the victori-
ous athletes they invoked, embodied and hence modeled aretē for their beholders.

For ancient Athenians, physical beauty and moral superiority were inextricably tied (Vernant 1989, 28–29). This double force of aretē is suggested by the term for nobility, kalos kagathos, the beautiful and good. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle discusses the relationship between the beautiful, the good, and aretē. He writes, “now kalon describes whatever, through being chosen for itself, is praiseworthy or whatever, through being good [agathon], is pleasant because it is good [agathon]. If this then, is the kalon, then virtue is necessarily kalon; for it is praiseworthy of being good [agathon]” (1366a). Aristotle’s description of these qualities points to their indissoluble connections: kalos, agathos, and aretē relate recursively, each reaffirming the other. Furthermore, kalos kagathos is an outwardly projected quality, a decidedly corporeal feature. According to Vernant:

The Greek body of Antiquity did not appear as a group morphology of fitted organs in the manner of an anatomical drawing, nor in the form of physical particularities proper to each one of us, as in a portrait. Rather, it appears in the manner of a coat of arms and presents through emblematic traits the multiple “values”—concerning his life, beauty and power with which an individual is endowed, values which he bears and which proclaim his timē, his dignity and rank. (28)

Such “emblematic” traits, distinctive marks of aretē, often invoke the bodies of the gods, what Vernant designates “divine superbodies,” bodies that radiate splendor. Vernant also points out that images of men engaging in athletic activity exhibit “stature, breadth, presence, speed of leg, strength of arm, freshness of complexion, and a relaxation, suppleness and agility of limbs” (28). These qualities, along with their suggestion of a capacity for the agôn, for the frenetic battle, “can be read upon [the body] like marks that attest to what a man is and what he is worth” (28). Such marks constituted a corporeal code of aretē. Similarly, in the Rhetoric, Aristotle designates the following as features of “virtuosity of the body” (sômatos aretas): “health, beauty, strength, physical stature, athletic prowess” (1360b 4). Later he elaborates “bodily excellence in competitive athletics (agônistikē de sômatos aretē)” as follows:

a combination of size and strength and swiftness (and swiftness is actually a form of strength); for one who can throw his legs in the right way and move quickly and for a distance is a runner, and one who can squeeze and hold
down is a wrestler, and one who can thrust the fist is a boxer, and one who can
do both of the latter two has the skills needed for the pankration, and one who
can do them all [has the skills] for the pentathlon. (1361b 14)

Noteworthy in this passage is the way in which bodily features be-
come discrete and recognizable actions or capacities (dunamenos). Identi-
ties are thus inseparable from potential movements: one who is able to
execute a certain type of “hold” is a wrestler, for example. Capacities
(dunameis) can be suggested by particular bodily features, and this is where
kalos becomes important. Aristotle observes that for youth, beauty “is a
matter of having a body fit for the race course and ordeals of strength,
pleasant to look at for sheer delight; thus pentathletes are the most beauti-
ful because they are equipped by nature at one and the same time for brawn
and for speed” (1361b 11). The “equipment” for strength and speed, probably suggested by an even bodily distribution of moderate musculature, is
then linked directly to virtue.

There is apparently no need for Aristotle to describe the particular
ways in which strength and brawn manifest themselves corporeally, for the
kalos invokes an already established ideal. As Vernant puts it, “the cate-
egory of the body is less a matter of precisely determining its general mor-
phology or the particular form nature gives to one individual or another
than it is a matter of situating the body between the opposite poles of lumi-
nosity and darkness, beauty and ugliness, value and foulness” (31–32).
Aristotle upheld the body of the athlete as that closest to kalos kagathos,
and this identity was secured in the particular capacities marked most no-
tably by bodily configurations or in the stylized movements of the body.
Bodily aretē thus aligns with corporeal capacity, signs of work and devel-
opment quite literally built up in the body through training for particular
movements.

Thus in ancient Greece, one is what one does—or better, what one is
perceived as doing. As James Redfield argues in his exploration of Homeric
culture and values, “Homeric man” exists only on an outward plane, con-
stituted only by his surface: “such a man is not an enclosed identity; he is
rather a kind of open field of forces . . . [t]here is no clear line for him
between ego (I) and alter (other)” (21). A person’s identity is thus based on
interactions with others, and perceptions by others. Redfield is thus on the
track of the same impulse Nietzsche celebrates as a kind of faith in sur-
faces and folds—the fold here designates the moment and effect of the
encounter, the very locus of identity. Though distinctly Homeric according
to Redfield, this constitution by the outside persists into the fourth century, as evidenced by Aristotle’s treatment of the surface-quality of kalos kagathos and the tight link between aretê and actions.

Not surprisingly, then, the gods most connected to athletics sported the most bodily aretê and were imitated by the sculptors of athlete statues. Apollo, Hermes, and Heracles all functioned as gods of contests, and their forms were invoked by athletic statues (Hyde 100–109).

Characteristics of aretê thus included glory, honor, courage, and bodily strength and swiftness to succeed in battle. As Joseph M. Bryant points out, mythical and historical warriors served as paradeigmata or exemplars of outward, bodily excellence (28). These ideals, of course, were incorporated into educational practices in the form of military and athletic training (28; see also Marrou, 36–40). The somatic ethoi of athlete and warrior were thus tightly bound in Hellenic culture; both exhibited the bodily excellence of strength in their muscled physiques suggestive of the capacity (dunamis) for actions exhibiting courage and honor.

2. “Questing” for aretê: Pindar’s victory odes and the agôn

In order to track aretê back to the agonal dynamic with which this exploration started, I will delineate the ethos of virtuosity by following the athletic agon a bit further. Along with sculpture, poetry served as a means of conferring and producing athletes’ virtue, but the poetic depictions of athletes produce aretê with a slightly different force than athlete-statues. While the bronze and marble muscles render aretê in terms of bodily capacity, the discursive rendering of athletes elaborates the quality and magnitude of the aretê emerging from success in competition. Athletic aretê is articulated most notably in the odes of Pindar, the fifth-century epinician poet. While sculptures of athletes by their very constitution offer a pedagogy of virtuous corporeal codes, Pindar’s epinicia (poems commemorating a victory) offer a pedagogy of the movements of virtuosity that emerges in the context of agonal festivals. Indeed, for Pindar, virtuosity is nothing but particular styles of movement: “far shines that fame of Olympic festivals . . . where competition is held for swiftness of feet and boldly laboring feats of strength” (Ol 1 92–96). Pindar’s Ol 2 suggests that victory (nikê) is not necessarily the sole proof of aretê, but rather a symptom of becoming virtuous. He sings, “Winning releases from anxieties one who engages in com-
petition. Truly, wealth embellished with excellences (aretais) provides fit occasion for various achievements by supporting a profound and questing ambition" (52–55). Here, the word translated as “questing” (agroteron) in its noun form denotes hunter or huntress, the one who is “fond of the chase,” (Liddell, Scott, and Jones 1996, 16). Victory, in combination with aristocratic wealth and other virtuous actions, indicates a questing, a continual pursuit of virtuosity. What matters for aretê, then, is not the victory per se but rather the hunt for the victory.

“Questing,” for Pindar, necessarily entails certain risks and much work, as he writes in an ode for the winner of the mule race at Olympia in 472 and 468 B.C.E.: “Achievements without risk win no honor among men or on hollow ships, but many remember if a noble deed is accomplished with toil” (Ol. 6 9–12). The emphasis on the quest rather than the victory itself is consistent throughout Pindar’s epinikia. Take, for example, his tribute to Hagesidamos, the winner of boys’ boxing in 476 B.C.E, into which Pindar incorporates a general comment on the Olympic games:

Time. Time moved forward and declared the plain truth:
how Herakles divided up the gift of war and offered the choice part,
and how he established the four years’ festival with the first Olympic games
and its victories.
Who then won the new crown
with hands or feet or chariot,
after fixing in his thoughts the boast
of the contest and achieving it in deed?
(Ol 10 55–63; trans. mine)

Pindar goes on to list early victors in running, wrestling, and boxing—that is, those who fixed their thoughts on an achievement and emerged from the contest as victors. But the main focus here is the very act of “fixing in his thoughts” (doxa themenos). The gerundive, themenos, comes from the multivalent tithēmi, which can have the force of placing or depositing, as well as executing and producing. Themenos thus invokes the productive force of “setting one’s mind” to something, which is most—if not all—of the game, according to Pindar. At the very least, it is the act of “fixing” one’s mind to virtuosity, and the concomitant “questing” discussed earlier, that is the most suggestive of contestive glory for Pindar. In many ways, Pindar’s encomiastic art demands a narrative of ongoing, repeated production. Aretê, that is, cannot be something that one can merely happen upon, for then it becomes difficult to celebrate as a remarkable achievement. As Hesiod had long before pointed out, there has to be sweat before aretê (289).
In this context, then, agônes provided occasions for showcasing the effects of one’s “questing.” It is important here once again to distinguish between the actions during the contests and the prizes won by victors. While the agonistic performance, the actual athletic movements, demonstrated aretê, the prizes (athlioi) were more closely aligned with kleos (glory or fame). This subtle distinction becomes apparent in Is 1; here Pindar sings of athletes Kastor and Iolaos:

and in athletic games (aethloisi) they attempted the most contests (pleistôn agônôn),
and adorned their houses with tripods,
cauldrons, and bowls of gold,
tasting (geuomenoi) the crowns of victory
of victory. Their areta shines (lampei) clearly
in the naked foot races and in the hoplite races with clattering shields.
Just as in their hands as they fling javelins
and when they hurl the stone discuses
(18–25; trans. mine)

The first part of this passage points to the prizes awarded to victors, and the verb geuomenoi, a middle form of geuô, suggests that athletes “taste” victory and its attendant kleos, thus implying that they nourish their craving for the prize, the end of victory. But it is during the agôn itself, in the bodily movements of the athlete, and not in the gleaming cauldrons or bowls, that aretê becomes most conspicuous. The outward movement or enactment of aretê in the hurling of the javelin stands in distinction to the inward movement of glory at the contest’s end. The agôn is thus sutured to aretê insofar as athletes engaged in their quest for virtuosity with an eye to the contests or gatherings where their arduous efforts would be acknowledged. Further, the economy of aretê is decidedly bodily. Again, in the same way that warriors continually exhibited virtuosity, athletes competed over and over, suggesting that the “questing,” the performing of excellent actions—not merely the victory—repeatedly produced aretê.

3. Agonism

If questing was foremost in the production of aretê and it is the struggle that really mattered, it is important to delineate the precise character of that struggle. Indeed, it is the idea of the struggle or strife that fascinated
and drove the ancients starting at least with Homeric times. The idea of productive strife as a principle of movement is central, for example, in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, as he delineates two kinds of strife:

There was not only one race of Strife (*eridôn*), but over the earth there are two. On the one hand, there is that which a man would praise when he came to apprehend it; but on the other hand there is that which is blameworthy. Their spirit is divided. The one is bound to evil war and battle: it is abominable; no mortal loves it, but by necessity they honor the heavy Strife according to the plans of the gods. The other gloomy Night brought forth first, and so the son of Cronus, who sits above and resides in the ether, placed it in the roots of the earth and made it much better for men. This kind of strife rouses a man to work even if he is shiftless. For, if a person without work in hand sees another, a wealthy man who hurries to plow and plant and put his house in good order, then that neighbor envies his neighbor who hurries after riches. This is the good Strife for mortals: potter is angry with potter and carpenter with carpenter; beggar envies beggar, and singer, singer. (11–26; trans. mine)

Hesiod's concern is primarily with the effects of the two kinds of strife. While one kind of strife can be destructive insofar as it manifests itself in war resulting in death, among other things, the other kind of strife can be productive, placing people in relation to land, to plants, to each other, producing struggles on many levels. In the context of *Works and Days*, the "good strife" rouses (*egeirei*) men and makes them hurry (*speudei*), thus producing them as more efficient land-working machines. The Greek word used for strife here is a derivation of *eris*, generally translated as strife, quarrel, contention, or discord; *eris* later became closely allied in meaning with *agôn*, a contest (LSJ 314), and eristics, disputation.

The productive quality of agonism delineated by Hesiod, while overshadowed in contemporary uses of the term by the destructive, "takeover" force, nevertheless still inheres in contemporary pharmacological research, where agonism is a key concept in drug-cell relations. This relatively recent instantiation of the word is instructive, for its metaphorics actually help illustrate more precisely what I take to be Hesiod's distinctions. In pharmacodynamic language, the term agonism designates the bonding of a drug chemical with what is termed a receptor, a special area on the outer surface of the cell membrane. The agonistic bonding then triggers a change in cellular activity. In other words, agonism denotes an encounter, the production of a response, and a subsequent change in both substances.

By contrast, a drug that produces the opposite effect—i.e., blocking a receptor or inhibiting response—is termed an antagonist (Graham, 15–
16). The notion of antagonism is crucial for understanding the forces of agonism. Whereas antagonism blocks a response, agonism, by definition, demands one. The *agôn* is thus constituted by a modality of response, the production of some kind of movement, be it a speeding up or slowing down, of cell activity—in pharmacological terms—or of discursive or bodily activity in other terms. Because it depends upon molecular affinity (Kenakin) for response production, agonism can be delineated as a response-producing encounter.

Twentieth-century pharmacology, on a molecular level, thus preserves the distinction between antagonism and agonism that underlies Hesiod's delineation of "bad strife" and "good strife." On one hand, antagonism (or destructive strife) is characterized by stoppage of movement or death, as in war. Agonism, on the other hand, produces envy and speed in movement. As Jean-Pierre Vernant contends, this passage valorizes "a life of mixtures" (20). This "life of mixtures"—agonistic movement—seen in *Works and Days* invokes notions of excellence that are more prominent in the Homeric poems, where the *agôn* offers an occasion for the demonstration and hence production of virtuosity.

4. Rhetoric, the sophists, and logôn agônes

The questing aspect of agonism (and its connection to *aretê*) carried over into other modes of training, as the *agôn* and its attendant *aretê* permeated the realms of drama, poetry, and music. It is therefore not surprising that sophistic discursive practices and ideas about an orator's virtuosity emerged within the agonal scene as well. According to Diogenes' Laertius, Protagoras was among the first to join competition and rhetoric, for he was responsible for the inception of competitive debates—*logôn agônes* (80 A 1, 3, and 20).

Moreover, the sophists, particularly Protagoras, held wide repute for their controversial claim to teach *aretê* to young men. Plato, for example, depicts Protagoras as the following assertion in the dialogue bearing his name: "I have shown you by both fable and argument that *aretê* is teachable" (*hôs didakton aretê*) (328 c). Not unlike Pindar, for the sophists, questing after *aretê* and the related repetitions of virtuous actions were what constituted and/or produced virtuosity. In the same dialogue, the character Protagoras describes his educational philosophy to the young Hippocrates
as follows: "Young man, you will gain this by coming to my classes, that on the day when you join them you will go home a better man, and on the day after it will be the same; every day you will constantly improve more and more" (318a–b). It is thus through repetition of the act of attempting to perform areté (via Protagoras’s classes), day after day, that one achieves virtuosity.

Like athletic areté, rhetorical areté is also enacted and based on the perception/reception of others. The bond between areté and actions in the realm of rhetoric becomes clear later in the dialogue when Socrates tries to get Protagoras to ontologize areté by defining its parts (temperance, the beautiful, and the good). When Socrates tries to pin him down on the definition of "good," for example, Protagoras enumerates items that could be both good and evil, "namely, foods, drinks, drugs, and countless others." He then settles for a while on the example of oil, which, as Protagoras contends, is "utterly bad for all plants, and most deadly for the hair of all animals save that of man, while to the hair of man it is helpful, as also to the rest of his body" (334B). Here, oil becomes an interesting example, because it is an important part of the wrestler’s preparation for a match. Wrestlers applied oil all over their bodies in order to keep dirt out of their pores (Harris, 21), but it also created a slick surface which sometimes helped wrestlers slip out of their opponents’ grips.

Through the example of oil, Protagoras himself slips out of Socrates’ questioning. By demonstrating that the “good” of oil cannot be apprehended separately from use, Protagoras underscores the emergent, particularized quality of areté. In other words, the work of virtuosity, for Protagoras, transpires only in relation to others, on particular surfaces, and from particular actions. That areté cannot be known in advance is precisely why the sophists depend on the agôn for their mode of training and performance. Logon agônes, much like athletic contests, set up relations, simultaneously calling upon and producing virtuosity.

Indeed, Timon called the old sophist “Protagoras who mixes in (epimeiktos), master of wrangling (erizemenai eu eidoś)” (DK 80 A 1.52). The word epimeiktos suggests one who resides in combination with others and comes from the verb epimeignumi, which has various shades of meaning, including “to add by mixing,” “to mingle with others,” and “to have intercourse.” All these dimensions of epimeiktos suggest that Protagoras’s teachings fostered a mode of relation and response, thus tapping into the “gathering,” response-provoking force of the agôn delineated above.
5. A shared taxonomy

Protagoras’s *logon agônes* emerged from the idea of the contest, most accessible in the form of combat sports like wrestling, boxing, and the pankration. From Protagoras’s time, rhetoric and athletics would come to share a peculiar vocabulary, with archaic wrestling terms wending their way into the classical rhetorical taxonomy. Consider for example, Isocrates’ use of *schêmata*, where *schêma* (the singular form) suggests the form or posture of an athlete as well as a figure of speech (1929, 183). Mirhady and Too point to an instance early in the fifth century of such a crossover in Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, where the chorus claimed the first of the three “wrestling falls” (*tôn triôn palaismatôn*) in a rhetorical dispute (Mirhady and Too, 240 n. 64; Aeschylus, 589, 600); and by late fourth century, as evidenced in Aeschines’ speech *Against Ctesiphon*, the incorporation of agonistic language in the lawcourts was downright common. In her book about language and violence in Aristophanes, Daphne O’Regan suggests that it was the older sophists who “seem to have appropriated this metaphor, revised it, and endowed the imagery of martial language with programmatic significance” (11).

The most famous dictum from the sophist Protagoras—“Man is the measure of all things”—appears in a treatise bearing an agonistic metaphor, *Kataballontes [Logoi]* (DK B 1) where *kataballontes* indicates the act of throwing over, as in wrestling. Protagoras’s penchant for “mixing in” thus likely emerged from his interest in athletics. Protagoras’s writings suggest he was interested in athletics as more than a mere metaphor for his discursive wranglings, for in addition to the *Kataballontes* and a treatise entitled *The Art of Debating* (*Technê Eristikon*), he wrote another one called *On Wrestling* (*Peri Pales*) (DK 80 A 1) wherein he appears to have demonstrated how the art of rhetoric could be of use in the art of wrestling (c.f. Plato *Sophist* 232d–e).

A similar locution occurs in the fifth century Hippocratic text, *Nature of Man*, which begins with a refutation and dismissal of philosophical (read: nonmedical) treatments of the nature of man, a dismissal that culminates in his claim that “such men by their lack of understanding overthrow themselves (*autoi heôrous kataballein*) in the name of words themselves” (32–34). Plato, more than anyone else—perhaps because of his own status as a championship wrestler—exploits the athletic/rhetoric connection. In the same vein as the Hippocratic text and Protagoras’s treatis, *kataballontes* appears twice in Plato’s dialogue *Euthydemus*, first where Socrates nar-
rates how the title character was about to rhetorically “press [the young Cleinias] for the third fall” (to triton katabalôn) when Socrates swooped in to rescue him (277d), and second where he claims that Euthydemus and his brother Dionysodorus have the problem of knocking down others (katabalôn) before falling themselves (288a). This language, of course, makes sense in a dialogue set in a gymnasium framed by a description of the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus as

a pair of pankratiasts . . . most powerful in body and in fight against all—for they are not only well skilled themselves in fighting under arms, but are able to impart that skill for a fee, to another; and further, they are most competent also to fight (agônisthai) the battle of the law-courts and teach others how to speak, or to have composed for them, such speeches as many win their suits. (271d–272a; trans. adapted from Lamb)

This reference to the pankration invokes the violent ancient sport that combined boxing and wrestling, but as the passage goes on to delineate the ways in which the brothers have come to excel as pankratiasts—“but now they have put the finishing touch to their skill as pankratiasts . . . such faculty they have acquired for wielding words as their weapons and confuting any argument” (272b)—it becomes clear that Socrates (in this case) includes rhetoric within the purview of the pankration. The passage thus construes the law courts as yet another sporting venue in which the brothers excel, hence making rhetoric into an agonistic event, and—insofar as it is discussed here metaphorically as part of the pankration (the most difficult event)—an arduous one at that. Euthymedus and Dionysodorus are, of course, called sophists, and curiously, where sophists are present in Plato’s dialogues, agonistic metaphors abound.7

It seems, then, that O’Regan’s claim is on target: the sophists indeed first inhabited rhetoric as an agonistic art. In their work gathering and translating the pre-Socratic fragments, Diels and Kranz detect this important transformation as well, for they list as possible imitation of/allusion to Protagoras an instance of kataballô in Euripides’ Bacchae (DK C 4; 199). Perhaps, then, it follows that the free importation of athletic language into rhetoric might be traced to the sophists. In addition to those already discussed (kataballontes, stasis, schêma), there are other instances of taxonomical crossover from athletics to rhetoric; one example is gymnasidion, which originally signified bodily exercises—the kind of training, as Xenophon has the character Aretê say, accomplished “with work and sweat”
(2.1.28) but came to also mean rhetorical exercises (D. H. Rh. 2.1); Progymnasmata later became a common title for rhetoric books.

Still, this discursive cross-pollination occurs most frequently with terms specific to wrestling (e.g., kataballontes, schêma). Why wrestling and not, say, running? Of all the ancient sports—discus throwing, chariot racing, boxing, the footrace—wrestling is the sport that for the ancients most exhibited a balance between skill and strength. As Gardiner points out in his early article on the sport, “grace and skill were of far more account than mere strength, and the wrestling matches . . . are but one of the many forms in which the Greeks imaged forth the triumph of civilization over barbarism” 19–20). Along these same lines, Pausanias attributes to Theseus the mythico-historical moment when wrestling became more of a teachable skill or art:

Cercyon is said to have utterly destroyed all those who tried a bout with him except Theseus, who outmatched him mostly by skill (sophiai) itself. For Theseus first invented the art of expert wrestling (palaistikê technê), and through him afterwards was established the teaching of the art. Before him men used in wrestling only size and bodily strength. (1.39.3; trans. mine)

With Theseus, then, wrestling was thought to have moved from a reliance on brute force to a more skillful art that depended upon a clever, responsive body. By the second century C.E., when Philostratus was cataloging body types for various sports, wrestling’s need for a clever body has solidified. Philostratus, that is, emphasizes flexibility of the chest and suppleness of the hips (IM 35), and discusses at length the noteworthiness of wrestlers classified as “big little men” (36)—these are men who have an advantage attributable not to mass, but to qualitative differences that make them “lithe, supple, impetuous, nimble, quick, and equable in tension” (36). Such advantages were shared by a compact but wily Odysseus in the wrestling match against the massive Ajax:

As Ajax heaved him up Odysseus never missed a trick—he kicked him behind the knee, clipping the hollow, cut his legs from under him, knocked him backward—pinned as Odysseus flung himself across the chest! (806–810; trans. Fagles)

Wrestling, therefore, is a sport that enables the physically smaller, weaker wrestler to overtake a larger, stronger opponent. As such, wrestling provides the most apt analogue for the sophists’ rhetorical art, which is
commonly known for its capacity to make the weaker argument stronger (Aristotle, 1402a 23–26; DK 80 A 21).

Furthermore, as a more skill-based sport, wrestling has more terminology available for the sophists and others to appropriate in order to produce a “conceptualized rhetoric,” to borrow Kennedy’s term (6–10).

While wrestling’s status as a technê makes it the most appropriate sport for sophists to link to rhetoric, it also (excepting the pankration) features the most opportunity for bodily contact, as all parts are more or less mobilized. As such, wrestling enacted the classic struggle, as wrestlers grappled with legs, arms, heads, skin on skin, muscle on muscle. This relational feature of the sport marks what I will delineate as the general component of agonism that rhetoric cultivates and draws upon. And the effects of a sophistic agôn were apparently much like those of an athletic contest. Socrates narrates one such encounter with Protagoras: “The speech of his won a clamorous approval from many of his hearers; and at first I felt as though I had been struck by a skillful boxer, and was quite blind and dizzy with the effect of his words and the noise of their applause” (339e; trans. Lamb)

The agonistic impulse was also alive in Gorgias’s bold challenge to the audience to “name a subject” on which he would discourse. The sophist Hippias made a similar promise to “speak on whatever subject anyone may choose from those I have prepared for a display, and to answer whatever question anyone may wish to ask,” but Hippias added an extra hint of self-assurance: “For never, since I began to compete (agônizesthai) at Olympia, have I met anyone superior to myself in anything” (DK 86 A 8).8

Here, Hippias refers to competitions in oratory held as part of Olympic festivals in which he and Gorgias were reputed to have taken part.9 Although Protagoras was known as the father of these debates, Gorgias too was remembered for emphasizing the value of agonistic practices, as evidenced in this epigram inscribed on a statue base at Olympia dating back to the beginning of the fourth century:

No one of mortals before discovered a finer art
Than Gorgias to train (askêsai) the soul for contests of excellence (aretês es agônas). (DK 82A.8)

Here, once again, agôn joins with aretê, this time equipped with the art of discourse. Furthermore, in elevating both Gorgias and his art to the best of the arts discovered by mortals, this encomiastic inscription sug-
gests an implicit competition between rhetoric and other kinds of contests—athletic, musical, dramatic—for all these would qualify as “contests of excellence.” So there is a way in which rhetoric was pitted against athletics for the title of the art that best prepares one to achieve areté: an agôn of agônès. It is here, in the contest between rhetoric and athletics, that Gorgias underscores my point about the importance of the encounter in the agon. In a speech Gorgias delivered at the Olympic Games, he explicitly places athletics and rhetoric next to each other: “A contest (agônisma) such as we have requires double excellence (dittôn areiôn): daring (tolmês) and skill (sophia), daring is needed to withstand danger, and skill to understand how to trip the opponent (pligma). For surely speech, like the summons at the Olympic games, calls the willing but crowns the capable” (DK 82.B.8). This Gorgianic nugget is packed with commentary on rhetoric’s double force of areté and how it aligns perfectly with athletic areté. Given the context of his speech—the Olympic Festival itself—the metaphor must have resonated powerfully. It seems insufficient, however, to label this a metaphorical flourish and move on. In his explanation of the two kinds of areté, Gorgias uses a wrestling term, pligma, a noun indicating a particular kind of wrestling move involving a crossing of one’s legs with the opponents ostensibly with the goal of tripping (hence the translation). At this point what seems like a metaphor becomes a metaphor no more, as the contests become indistinguishable on the level of their requisite riskiness and cleverness, in the nature and force of areté required: what Gorgias delineates here is a genre of contests, that which calls the willing and crowns the one possessing the power or ability, dunamenon, as demonstrated in the agôn. Gorgias’s conception of the contest thus called for rhetorical athletes, for a certain kind of cunning and flexibility that enabled a rhetor to think on his feet, to anticipate an opponent’s moves, and to respond with appropriate moves. In their requisite and commended daring and skill, athletics and rhetoric converge as arts of cunning.

When the sophists came on the scene, they forced a confrontation between the two modes of education—the old, archaic, aristocratic mode and the “new” sophistic, democratic mode. This confrontation, I will suggest, produced not a bifurcation of the two schools but rather a new figure altogether: a sophist-athlete. Aristophanes’ Clouds showcases this very encounter in the form of a dramatic agôn.
6. Gathering clouds

At the dramatic center of Aristophanes' fifth-century comedy *The Clouds* is a contest, an *agon* pitting against each other two arguments (*logoi*) for two styles of education, each of which seeks to cultivate different types of character. On one side stands the broad-chested mighty warrior-figure of the old school, *kreitton logos* (strong argument); on the other, the sharp-tongued, cunning sophist of the new school, *hetton logos* (weaker argument). The play also features Socrates as a provider of sophistic training, the shape-shifting cloud-chorus as goddesses of discourse, and one Strepsiades, a comic fool at the heart of the play's action. Strepsiades' name betrays both his character and his quest. The verb *strephô* carries notions of twisting and turning, both in the sense of restless tossing and turning in bed, the state in which Strepsiades appears in the opening scene, and the twisting or turning of a wrestler trying to elude his adversary. Strepsiades the twister seeks out sophistic training, that which he calls *glottostrophein*, or "tongue wrestling," as a way to slip out of his creditors' "holds" on him.

The two participants in the agon, *kreitton* and *hetton*, are generally viewed as caricatures of the old and new schools, binary opposites with *kreitton* defending his training techniques through nostalgia for the good old days when young boys observed custom (*nomos*) and the civic good by submitting to a particular kind of discipline that emphasized self control and good repute (lines 962 and 997; O'Regan 92 ff.). The physically punier *hetton*, however, aligns with the newer sophistic training methods, and is characterized as the proponent of nature (*physis*), set against *nomos* (line 1040) and, devoted to immediate satisfaction, purports to be able to turn strong arguments against themselves to obtain the immediate advantage.

With the Aristophanic stage quite literally set for a showdown between the two schools, *kreitton* and *hetton* prepare to go *mano a mano*, to see which one can win over Strepsiades' son, Pheidippides, as a student. As Daphne O'Regan puts it, "the old-fashioned violence of the hand is pitted against the modern force of the tongue" (89). Critics generally read the contest and its outcome as indicative of which mode of education Aristophanes favors. But the outcome itself is not so clear. On one hand, at line 1100, *kreitton* concedes the victory to *hetton*, suggesting that *hetton* has taken over Athens' educational system. On the other hand, the ending of the play thwarts this easy reading of *hetton* as victor. When Strepsiades burns down the location for sophistic training (referred to as the Thinkery), the play's ending suggests that *kreitton* emerges the ultimate victor, and
the old education (*archê paideia*) prevails. But this reading, like one that crowns hetton the victor, seems too easy given the play’s ambivalence on outcomes in general (Long, 271, and Kastely).

In fact, the search for a distinct outcome misses what seems to be the play’s major point: it is the *agôn* itself, the encounter between the two schools and not a telos or “victory” that matters.12 Here, recall that the *agôn* is more than the one-on-one sparring that gets emphasized in most treatments of the topic; recall, too, *agôn*’s original meaning of “a gathering” or an “assembly.” The Olympic Games, for example, depended on the gathering of athletes, judges, and spectators alike. Similarly, the *agôn* in *Clouds* depends upon the presence of the audience—the Athenians gathered in the theater, as well as Pheidippides and Strepsiades—and the clouds, which are *constituted* by the very notion of gathering. As O’Regan points out, “this crowd is invoked at the beginning of the agon; its presence and conduct are vital to the jokes and the argument that conclude it” (102). Similarly, Kastely observes that in order to appreciate the comedy of the scene, “the audience must appreciate the value of the agonistic exchanges of rhetoric” (34). That is, *Clouds* does more than point to the contrasts between the old and new modes of education; it also offers an occasion to think the role of the *agôn* in both styles of training; for the agon, in *Clouds* at least, is what brings the two together, and arguably remains the shared *between*—the very node at which the two training styles converge. It is this point of convergence, this in-between space, that I want to examine more closely.

The *agôn* proper in *Clouds* is preceded by verbal jousting, exchanges of challenges and threats wherein each promises to smash (*apolô*, lines 892 and 897) the other. The challenges quickly spiral into insults: *kreiton* calls for a bowl to vomit in because *hetton*’s very words make him sick (908); *hetton* calls *kreiton* a silly old man (*tuphogerôn*); *kreiton* calls *hetton* a lecherous man “(*katapugôn*) (909–10). They continue:

*Kreiton:* You’re too cocky.
*Hetton:* And you’re absolutely ancient.
*Kreiton:* You’re the one that teaches our youth not to go to school; thanks to you, Athens will soon be comprised of fools.
*Hetton:* Do you ever wash?
(914–18; trans. Dover)

The hearty insult-exchange continues until the cloud-chorus intervenes, tells them to stop battling (*machês*), and asks them to give their

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respective accounts of their educational methods (lines 933–38). The clouds’ directive intervention marks the beginning of the agon.

*Kreitton* responds by giving a long account of the old style of education which claims to be the kind of discipline used to train the men who fought at Marathon (986–87), a discipline which, as O’Regan points out, relies on a set of prohibitions—not to be disgraceful, not to talk out of place, not to seek out loose women; not to commit adultery—precautionary measures that are taken to preserve one’s good reputation (*eukleia*) (93). He ends by admonishing his son Pheidippides to spend his time in the gymnasium in order to obtain a robust, healthy physique as contrasted with the “big-tongued, small-armed” (*glôttan megalên, pugen mikran*) sophist (1009–18). *Kreitton* thus appeals to the traditional ideals of a strong, lean body suggestive of self-discipline, capable of force.

But *Hetton* appeals to bodily force at the beginning of his speech: “ever since he began his speech I’ve been bursting to blow it to bits” (1036–38). *Hetton* proceeds to confound (*suntaraxai*) *kreitton*’s appeals to a constrained lifestyle by privileging the category of pleasure over restraint. In order to do so, he sets himself up as the first to know how “to speak things contrary to the laws and judgements” (*toisin nomois kai tais dikais tananti antilexai*) (1040). *Hetton* then describes a hypothetical situation to Pheidippides wherein Pheidippides gets caught in the act of adultery and needs strategies to thwart the angry husband’s violent reaction.

If trained in sophistry, *hetton* argues, the young man will be able to construct an argument on the spot; for example, *hetton* suggests Pheidippides could appeal to the immortals by citing *Zeus*’s penchant for passion and pleasure over convention. Going along with the situation proposed by *hetton*, *kreitton* asks “but suppose the man doesn’t take any notice? Suppose he starts applying the radish and ashes treatment?” (1086). (Here, as K. J. Dover observes, *kreitton* refers to the common treatment of adulterers caught in the act: “a radish was pushed up his anus and his pubic hair was pulled out with the help of hot ash” [272].) It is important to note that by suggesting that in his own fit of passion, the husband would ignore the appeals to passion, *kreitton* effectively trumps *hetton* on his own ground.

These exchanges show subtle shifts and turns in each logos’s strategy. Despite what appears to be a clear polarization between these two *logoi*, at different times each one inhabits the ethos of the other. While *hetton* invokes violence and military language generally associated with the old school at line 1038, *kreitton* becomes the clever one in response to *hetton*’s hypothetical situation. The agon’s end comes when *hetton* chal-
lenges kreitton’s moral high ground by pointing out how the entire Athenian audience is, like kreitton, “wide-assed” (euruprôktos) (1083). In other words, it is common for boys in the “old school” to be habitually subjected to anal coitus (Dover, 228)—in short, kreitton and the audience are indeed no different from hetton, who finds pleasure in these activities. It is here that kreitton concedes victory by tossing his cloak aside and jumping into the audience. As O’Regan puts it, “In casting off his cloak before deserting to his rival, the kreitton logos reveals their fundamental identity when ‘naked’” (98). Thus the two logoi are conjoined, even mixed up; the agôn functions to blur the distinctions between the two rather than simply reinscribe them.

One of the upshots of Clouds, then, is the juncture of these two modes of education: their most important shared feature is agonism itself, the use of competition in training. Clouds thus foregrounds the constant encounter between aristocracy and democracy, and between the athletic, bodily training of the old school and the rhetorical training of the sophists. As I have tried to suggest, it is this very struggle, the twisting and turning in-betweenness of these political and educational practices, that form the complicated cultural backdrop of the sixth, fifth, and much of the fourth centuries in Athens. Further, the emergence of rhetorical training was enfolded with agonistic practices as the agôn provided the scene for both discursive and athletic performances, occasions for the enactment of virtuosity. As this analysis suggests, aretê was a matter of actions and could only be demonstrated repeatedly (not won). The agon, especially during the time of the sophists, produced a style of rhetorical training based on movement, for the logic of the agôn depends on a singular encounter, a necessary response.

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Notes
1. See, in particular, Walker, 157–64; Poulakos, 33 ff.
2. Since aretê is so complex and difficult to render in English, I will often simply render it as aretê; my use of the term virtuosity, however—rather than the typical translation of “virtue”—signals this complexity and marks the way in which aretê was an ethical (not a moral) concept, and as such was associated with bodily appearance and action as much as it was conceived of as an abstracted “guide” for such actions.
3. One might object to Vernant’s observation that it was the gods that were anthropomorphic—i.e., that human form didn’t imitate god-form, but vice versa. Vernant, however, disagrees:

   It is rather the reverse: in all its active aspects, in all the components of its physical and psychological dynamism, the human body reflects the divine model as the inexhaust-
ible source of a vital energy when, for an instant, the brilliance of divinity happens to fall upon a mortal creature, illuminating him, as in a fleeting reflection, with a little of that splendor that always clothes the body of a god. (28)

4. See, in particular, lines 179–89, a complicated incorporation of athletics that I discuss in my forthcoming book.

5. Many scholars place the logoi part of the title as implied (c.f. Mirhady and Too, 240 n. 64); Hermann (104) offers the participle form, kataballontôn, “throwing down” as an alternative title. This suggestion is warranted through the fragments from Sextus (DK B 1).


7. See Hermann’s discussion of wrestling metaphors in Plato’s Theatetus.

8. Here Hippias engages in what might today be called a bit of “trash talking,” the element of agonism par excellencé, wherein competitors goad each other by proclaiming their own superiority. While Hippias may come across as a pompous ass who wants merely to call attention to himself, I would suggest that the goading, like that issued by Gorgias, functions to provoke others to enter into the struggle by challenging him.

9. Among others, Aristotle cites Gorgias’s Olympic Discourse, a speech given at the Olympic games (1414b). Whether this was an official contest is hard to know; note, however, the use of agônizesthai in the Hippias passage, along with the two instances (discussed below) of the agôn root used in relation to Gorgias.

11. Here I follow Dover (i–ii), Kastely, and O’Regan in the kretton-hetton distinction, as the dikaios-adikaios (just and unjust) distinction, which contains implicit judgment. For more in-depth discussions of the kretton-hetton contrast, see Daphne O’Regan, esp. 89–105), Nussbaum, and Kastely.

12. For a thorough and useful examination of the agôn in Aristophanic Comedy, see Long, who suggests that “The paradox in the use of the agôn in Aristophanes is not that he goes out of his way to introduce the agôn . . . but that, having introduced a form eminently adapted to persuasion, he never allows the outcome of the agôn to dictate the course of the action in the rest of the play” (286). O’Regan also offers a close analysis of the agôn in Clouds.

Works Cited


