

Constructing and Deconstructing Identity in Theon's *Progymnasmata*  
Arti Mehta (Indiana University, Bloomington)

In the *Progymnasmata* Theon discusses narrative and elocutionary acts along with ekphrasis and other rhetorical devices within his program to assist teachers of rhetoric to train young men in public speaking. Since no book-length studies of Theon as a rhetorical grammarian or philosopher of language exist in English, even a cursory examination of the commentaries and texts of the *Progymnasmata* (Kennedy, Patillon, also Heath and Milette) requires one to ask why Theon chose to offer his audience these particular oratorical and narrative sound bites? That is, what themes dominate his discourse, and what overarching goals, if any, appear within his pedagogical agenda?

In providing examples of rhetorical exercises Theon's manual seems to address students directly rather than through the medium of their teachers. Although Theon's own writing is replete with the very virtues he recommends for his audiences' students, these "preliminary exercises" also seem to entertain or charm as one supposes students of any era require. The instructional content of Theon's *Progymnasmata* appears to fluctuate between what may be called stylistic and thematic suggestions – including the goals and ambitions inherent to students' composing declamatory and narrative passages – and attention to teachers' expectations of building character in their students. These themes and examples thus offer even the least experienced teachers the raw material to develop their students' *ethos* or habitual nature, thereby contributing to the students' ability to become skillful and persuasive speakers.

In this paper I examine the constructions of character – both the literary forms of characterization that occur within examples of prepared passages and the dispositions towards articulation and good behavior created therein – that Theon uses to address the tensions of the individual within the community. It seems to me that the fictional (or legendary) figures presented in the exercises, rather than merely inculcating good behavior through their exemplary nature (cp Kennedy), instead suggest a partial form of literary characterization, or what post-modern literary critics call characters constructed by the interactions of characters, narrative and reader (Docherty). So the fictional figures demonstrate a layered approach to characterization that makes accessible “end-points” of the meaningful self to the rhetoricians' students for examination. I consider Theon's discussions of literary and other passages for how they show the extension of features such as articulateness, self-possession and wit emergent from the fictional figures in order to mold the dispositions and habits of the implied audience, the students. The movement or extension of behavioral and personality traits functions through what in philosophical studies of metaphor is called *epiphora* (Ricoeur), or the ‘carrying through’ aspect of an event. That is, the progression of the action or narrative movement occurs even as a speaker engages in or comments upon an event. Theon's demonstrations of the figures' features thus serves to disassemble or deconstruct those figures as cohering characters in order to facilitate the assimilation of privileged features into the *hexeis* or pre-dispositions of the students. The students' dispositions may further evolve through their envisioning of the narrative examples in order to improve their imagining of what has been said and thereby to assist students in both their internal and external struggles. Internally, students may increase their capacity to envision possibilities (as Aristotle required of orators) and externally, they may aspire to succeed in verbal altercations occurring within the socially-predetermined hierarchies of the times. I conclude that Theon's philosophy of teaching is to prepare students for speaking occasions in such a way that when interlocutors in the external world seek to impose behaviors upon the speakers, the students will – by cogitating upon possible actions and deliberating over their own preferences – emerge into their own decision-making abilities, thereby contributing to their own future sense of self-satisfaction.