Contest(ed) Writing

Contest(ed) Writing:
Re-Conceptualizing Literacy Competitions

Edited by

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This book is dedicated to my parents,
Bob and Rhea Lamb

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INTRODUCTION

MARY R. LAMB

Contest is a part of human life everywhere that human life is found. In war and in games, in work and in play, physically, intellectually, and morally, human beings match themselves with or against one another.
—Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*

Our collective creativity seems to be tied up in devising new ways to produce winners and losers.
—Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*

But this [composition] room is populated by persons who may not be able to work in harmony, since they inevitably bring with them the patriarchal, racist, or classist discourses of the dominant culture—unless, of course, they identify primarily with one or another minority culture. As a result, they may not always speak (if they speak at all) in mutually constructive terms.
—Sharon Crowley, "Reimagining the Writing Scene: Curmudgeonly Remarks about *Contending with Words*"

Academics, too, know that it is easy to ask challenging questions without listening, reading, or thinking very carefully. . . . Critiquing relieves you of the responsibility of doing integrative thinking.
—Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*

[Composition teachers and students should] become allies in contention with the forces of oppression troubling us all.
—Susan C. Jarratt, "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict"

Let there be no mistake: a contending narrative, that is, an argument of genuine consequence because it confronts one life with another is a threat, whether it is another's narrative become argument impinging upon or thundering into ours, or our own, impinging upon the other's. . . . Argument is emergence toward the other. That requires a readiness to testify to an identity that is always emerging, a willingness to dramatize one's narrative in progress before the other; it calls for an untiring stretch toward the other, a reach toward the other.
—Jim Corder, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love"

This collection is about writing contests in particular, and competition waged through words in general, from contests' earliest practice as rhetorical performance in ancient Greece, to current academic and popular writing contests, such as poetry slams, and to electronic practices such as podcasting. The book explains contests in their historical contexts and also looks at "contest" as a metaphor or motive in various writing situations that highlights competition. Contests are so ubiquitous they seem commonplace and, thus, often escape our scrutiny. This collection addresses this gap, focuses scholarly attention on this under-theorized practice, and demonstrates the importance of this vibrant strand in rhetoric.

Indeed, almost of us have experiences with writing contests. As a child growing up in the 1960s and 70s, I knew my father's cousin, Gloria, entered contests of all sorts, but mainly recipe contests, part of the "contest age" that ushered many women into public life in America. She lived several states away so I did not know her well. I have some of her recipes, though, scrawled in her own hand in my recipe book, with text and notes curling non-linearly around the page, dotted with food stains, as she recorded her actual baking process. Always written across the top, though, were the words: "Do not enter into a contest." She was quite protective of her work and her authorship of each recipe. Once my family went to our post office and picked up a package addressed to my brother: a BB gun from Gloria. Another time, she won my sister a doll. The biggest win was for my grandmother (living with us at the time), a new, blue Ford Escort. Gloria's son drove it from Texas to North Carolina to give it to her. "I" never won even though, as Gloria explained, she was indeed entering me. This odd habit of hers was just that—part of family lore about an eccentric, distant relative. I always admired her efforts and her independence. She worked from home, she explained to our family, and this gave her both freedom to attend to her housework and also purpose beyond the home.

Another memorable contest my brother entered and won was a 1976 Daughters of the American Revolution writing contest celebrating the Bicentennial, and I recall that my mother worked with him many nights to write this essay. I remember that year quite clearly compared to other childhood years, and the contest was part of it: it drew out, marked, and solidified a collective memory for our nation and my family. Recently, a student relayed a similar experience winning a state contest on the Constitution in 1976. Indeed, I do not remember the content of my brother's essay, but I remember feeling part of a cultural and historical moment that must have been important enough to take my mother away

from chores and my brother from playing to spend hours at the kitchen table writing.

Ironically, academic writing contests did not mark my memory in the same way, though I won my share for literary contributions and editing my high school literary magazine. My curiosity about contests recurred, though, during my first semester at Texas Christian University as a graduate student in rhetoric and composition. In Richard Enos' *Roman Rhetoric*, I read that Romans supported Greek rhetoric through "sponsorship of literary and rhetorical contests," and that "so extensive was Roman support of these events that a recording of this sponsorship would appear like the catalogue of ships in Homer: historically invaluable but tediously long" (87). This quote remained with me, sitting patiently in the corner of my mind, and I recalled it through the years every time I read about or participated in another writing contest. In fact, as a graduate student, I judged a local high school writing contest celebrating Martin Luther King Day, and I felt the odd honor of moving from writer to judge. As pervasive a cultural practice as contests are, I still did not give them serious scholarly attention until I was browsing a magazine one day in the early months of my daughter's life. I glanced at the cover of *Mothering* magazine, which advocates for natural and environmentally-sustainable parenting practices and offers readers an alternative to mainstream pediatric advice. I was drawn to the caption on strategies for encouraging literacy in children. I turned to the essay eagerly, and was surprised to read the advice, which I'm now quoting from memory: "*Never* enter your child's writing in a contest. Everyone can write, and everyone owns language." Clearly, this advice was stunning, running contrary to so many pedagogical practices that purport to motivate students and encourage writing with essay contests (Appel; Karnes; Moses; Platt; Whitaker). On the other hand, I knew that essay tests often produced the opposite effect in students—writing block, discomfort, and anxiety. The implications of contest as bestowing the "right" to literacy or somehow taking ownership away from the writer struck me, and since then, I have discovered contests as a pervasive writing practice in every cultural period. Indeed, contests are as old as rhetoric itself.

This collection moves contests from a footnote in rhetorical history and theory to a more prominent place in our rich tradition. Part of the reason contests are under-theorized is that in a sense, all writing is contested, or adjudicated by an audience, and it is easy then to just lump contests with the larger practice of "contestation" or in Walter Ong's terms, battle. There are distinctions, however, between the central idea of communication—a sender and receiver—and the type of competitive contest I'm discussing

here. I don't want to overlook a vibrant, rich rhetorical tradition just because it is so pervasive as to escape notice. This pervasive, normative, but un-theorized cultural practice does indeed deserve our attention as a facet of our collective writing ideology, which very often goes unnoticed since it's naturalized. In order to draw out this history and consider the cultural work of this practice, I define contest as writing: (1) done outside a course requirement or grade, (2) written only for contest or testing guidelines, (3) carrying rewards (money, position, rank, reputation, credentials), and/or (4) requiring specific spatial and/or time constraints. I argue that our current writing contests grew out of practices began in Ancient Greece with poetry and oration contests that judged the best among others and directly influenced emerging university teaching, leaving a legacy of contested writing for generations of students.

Theoretical Approaches

Admittedly, the sweep of this collection is wide, and no single theoretical framework accounts for each contest in these chapters. Considered as a whole, though, each chapter theorizes the cultural work of some facet of writing contests. Within each, the authors thread other frameworks that most accurately illuminate their particular practice.

The collection takes its starting point from cultural-rhetorical studies of writing practices that study the way symbolic acts interact with each other in culture. Each chapter shares the premise that writing is culturally situated, both reflecting and changing our values and beliefs about literacy and the topic at hand, a premise fleshed out by Steven Mailloux's *Rhetorical Power* and Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs*. The collection aims to extend the lines of inquiry that Anne Ruggles Gere, Kathleen Yancey, and others have begun by examining writing outside of academic contexts. Anne Ruggles Gere's work persuasively explains the cultural work of American clubwomen's literacy practices at the turn of the century by drawing on Jane Tompkins' study of the rhetoric of popular nineteenth-century fiction. In particular, Tompkins defines "cultural work" as "expressing and shaping social context" (200). Similarly, Gere studies the practices that "(re) defin[ed] and disseminat[ed] culture," including:

> reading, discussing, and writing about books; composing their own poems and papers; establishing or raising funds for museums, symphonies, and scholarships for artists; founding libraries and monitoring the reading of others; and writing or producing their own plays and pageants. (176)

For Gere's clubwomen, this cultural work is accomplished through the literacy practices they enact together in their meetings. Gere argues that clubwomen helped refashion the country's definitions of various cultural concepts, including the gendered nature of academic, professional literary study. Gere notes that, "through reading and writing, social practices embedded in the historical circumstances of turn-of-the-century America, clubwomen engaged with and helped transform perplexing issues of their time" (Gere 5). I argue that writing contests, too, draw on their historical antecedents in rhetorical contests, on contemporary values regarding what constitutes "good" writing, and on the "ideological rhetoric of [their] historical moment" (Mailloux 61) to "express and shape" their cultural contexts. Thus, the chapters in this collection will illustrate how contests accomplish cultural work in their historical period, how they engage questions of shifting ideas of literacy, how they foster debate about public education and assessment of learning, and how they create debate about current social issues and topics.

These contests accomplish cultural work in various ways. First, the sponsors identify a need, the guidelines, and the criteria, all of which shape and reflect values. Next, writers create an essay, which extends our collective thinking about the topic. The judges read the works, and then the winners are publicized and circulated, all of which continues to heighten the audience's awareness of the topic. For example, we can say, as above, that all writing is adjudicated by an audience and we can measure its effect in various ways (the proposal is accepted, the product's sales rise, the refund was granted, the book sells, etc.). Contests provide an even more forthright adjudication of some aspect of the writing—either the rhetorical acumen exhibited and/or the ideas the essay espouses. Examining the criteria and winning entries in these contests yields insight into the values of the culture in which they were produced.

In this sense, the contributors to this volume all read the contest specifications and the "interpretations" of the judges rhetorically for what these illuminate about cultural values of the time. Similarly, Patrocinio P. Schweickart has argued for feminist scholars' continued work in reader response theory since reading is the *praxis* of literature and "literature acts on the world by acting on its readers" (39). She argues for a dialogic model of reading that recognizes "validity not as a property inherent in an interpretation [but rather] a *claim* implicit in the *act* of propounding an interpretation" (56). Her rhetorical view argues that "validity is contingent on the agreement of others" and frames the problem for feminist literary criticism as one of persuasion and assent (56). In this way, interpretation shapes our understandings of not only texts but also social and cultural

configurations and, in turn, helps us understand these configurations. Contests, then, provide a lens into various communities' values and belief.

All of these approaches taken together in this collection offer the first cultural-rhetorical history of writing contests, an analysis of their cultural work, and their implications for writing pedagogy. Thus, while one individual essay might not weave all these threads by itself, taken as a whole, the collected essays make an argument about contests by looking at various historical and cultural practices through various theoretical lenses.

Chapter Overview

Part I: Historical Contexts of Contested Writing

Part I contains essays that examine contests in various historical periods; taken together, Part I argues that contest has played a substantial role in rhetorical education and in cultural continuity since at least the classical Greek and Roman periods in Western culture. No doubt contest and competition through words is pervasive in many literatures and time periods: the Serpent manipulates Eve into sin through rhetorical strategy in Genesis, and Samson uses both riddles and physical prowess over his enemies in Judges in the Bible, as does Odysseus in Homer's epic. This collection begins in Greece, and the first four essays offer rhetorical histories of contest in particular periods. In Chapter One, "Mythic and Legendary Origins of Writing Contests: Competitions of Intellect in Greek and Roman History, Rhetoric, and Literature" Beth Burmester explores the language we use to define and describe contests, sketches a history of cultural origins and contexts in Archaic Greece, Periclean Athens, and the Roman Republic and Empire that gave rise to competitive discourse practices in education, civic festivals, and domestic occasions that included entertainment and pleasure, and traces the mythology and literary representations of contests as rhetorical events. Similarly, Chapter Two, "Finding the 'Good' in Nero: The Emperor as Patron of Rhetorical and Literary Contests," by Richard Leo Enos takes up a controversial historical figure, one most scholars would not readily associate with rhetoric. He offers an historical account of Nero's role as a contest sponsor. The essay not only examines Emperor Nero's participation in, and patronage of, the rhetorical arts, but also discusses a rare inscription that the author discovered on site at Thebes, which sheds light on Nero and his contributions to the history of rhetoric in the Roman Empire.

From there, the collection moves to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, as Lynée Lewis Gaillet's essay traces writing contests through

Scottish educational history as well as rhetorical and pedagogical history. She explains the work of George Jardine at the University of Glasgow (from 1774-1824), that includes an essay entitled "On the Institution of Prizes" in his major pedagogical treatise. In this essay he outlines his plan for awarding prizes for lecture summaries, paraphrase and emulation writing, awards for what we label peer-editing, prizes for essays written during vacations, end-of-term writing prizes, and departmental prizes. This chapter discusses the implications and influences upon future writing theory and pedagogy.

Moving from Scotland to nineteenth-century American history, Joonna Smitherman Trapp argues that contest-as-debate played a role in re-defining cultural values. In Chapter Four, "The Southern Junior Lyceum Movement: Living like a Band of Brothers," Trapp links Roman schools of declamation to junior philanthropic societies, debating clubs, and literary societies that were an important component of the lyceum movement in the antebellum South and of the culture's preparation of leaders for the next generation. Drawing on archival materials, Trapp argues that the contested rhetorics of the debating society grew out of public contested rhetorics in which the South tooled itself to engage the North in serious issues regarding which cultural values would predominate in educated America.

Part II: Academic and Extracurricular Contests

The next set of essays looks at how contests leverage competition and reward in educational settings and speculates about these implications, which might include celebration of specific writing qualities, celebration of various cultural values, or the squelching of individual motivation. For example, Alfie Kohn argues that contests in education are misguided: "competition is an inherently undesirable arrangement" (9) since it produces an "all-or-nothing" approach to social goals (184). Others object to contests' constraints on students. For example, Michael Clark, in criticizing rhetorical advice to students taking timed writing tests, argues that:

> It is impractical, of course, to identify the ostensible and real contexts completely, since few students at any level could write comfortably to a panel of anonymous English Teachers. It is possible, though, to establish ostensible contexts that are familiar enough so as not to threaten the students while, at the same time, being close enough to the real context of the test so as to decrease the interference between the two sets of contextual variables. (223)

Indeed, opening up academics' distrust of contests and our sometimes plainly confusing directions about high stakes writing might help us remember the "plasticity," to use Rich Enos' term, of rhetoric and the inherent "oppositions," in Peter Elbow's words, of writing. It is both private and public; both natural and uncomfortable when tasked with public performance, and the tension between the two leads to much confusion on the part of writing assessors and test-makers as well as teachers. Chapters Four and Five elucidate some of these issues in contests.

In Chapter Five, "Contest and Student Achievement in the Medieval University," Carola Mattord traces our current competitive writing assessments to predecessors in medieval educational competition. Considering the role contest played in the medieval university helps us to understand the legacy of competition that we inherited. Mattord remains sympathetic to competition's role in education although she encourages us to continue to develop standards and measurements of students' learning that are nuanced and accurate. Chapter Six continues to expand the history of rhetoric and writing instruction by focusing on debate. In "'They Argued in White Shirtwaists and Black Skirts": Women's Participation in Debate," Lisa Mastrangelo takes up Robert Connors' assertion that the change in the late nineteenth century from oral rhetorical practices to written ones was largely due to the influx of women into the collegiate system. Connors labels this shift as one that moved from "agonistic" rhetoric—the rhetoric of contest that oral rhetoric had encouraged—to "irenic" rhetoric—a more peaceful and democratic method of communication (49). She argues that this depiction ignores the rich history of debate in the United States, both at co-educational and women's colleges. Working primarily through the lens of debating history at women's colleges, this essay explores this history and works to revise Connors' assertion. In many ways, while co-educational debates were rare, women's colleges pursued debating with the same vigor as their male counterparts. While Connors asserts that the presence of women in the classroom modified oral rhetorical practices for everyone, scholars like Egbert Ray Nichols show that debate was not waning between 1903 and 1913, but was actually on the rise. Debate, the ultimate rhetorical contest, was pursued both in the classroom and in intramural debate clubs. Debates were often democratic (audiences voted on who had won and who had lost) and colleges developed debate leagues in order to compete against one another. This history, as it played itself out in women's colleges, is a significantly different history of "contest" than the one that Connors suggests. Our

histories of composition and rhetoric will be much richer and more clearly defined with this essay.

In Chapter Seven, Amy E. Robillard examines academic essay contests in, "Incentive, Citation, and Ownership in Scholarship Essay Contests." She explains that every year, high school students across the country are given the opportunity to win money for college by writing a winning essay about, e.g., the importance of the Second Amendment or creating change in our society. Such contests reward originality and promise not to tolerate plagiarism, which is largely understood to be a failure to cite sources. In this chapter, Robillard rhetorically analyzes a variety of essay contest rules for what they can tell us about how influential organizations trade the promise of an education for culturally conservative theories of authorship. Thus, implicit in contests are authorship values, and many tease out collaborative, singular, and blended types of authorship. Indeed, both the sponsors of the contest and the writers become collaborative authors when written texts are produced in this context. More specifically, the contest writers remain the physical scribes, but the sponsoring organization often takes on the role of author in a manner similar to what Deborah Brandt has noted in corporate examples of ghostwriting. Indeed, Robillard's essay demonstrates the pervasiveness of a fundamental distrust of student writers, a distrust each student must individually overcome as he or she writes his or her way into a scholarship that will cover just a tiny fraction of college tuition. Thus, contest writing in this sense illuminates larger cultural attitudes toward literacy and writers.

Another type of academic, extracurricular contest is discussed in Chapter Eight, "Contested Writing in a Second Language: Authorship, Identity, and Genre." Margaret Anne Clarke examines how all types of writing competitions are based on one underlying premise: that the process of composition by the student is essentially a monolingual one. That is, the works entered are composed in the student's mother tongue, the language that the contestant has acquired from birth, and no other. Clarke explains an emerging competitive writing practice, creative writing in English as a second language, or in another modern or "world" language. She demonstrates the cultural work accomplished by these contestants when they cross these linguistic boundaries.

Part III: Mainstream Contests

Contests not only exist in educational settings, but also may be more popular in non-educational settings. The last essays in the book focus on a few of these writing and oral language contests in popular culture to

demonstrate the cultural work they achieve. Two of these chapters take us full circle, back to the oral roots of contest, one by examining poetry slam and the other podcasting.

Susan Weinstein, in "The Points Are Kind of the Point, But They're Not the Point: The Role of Poetry Slam in Youth Spoken Word," writes about youth spoken word (YSW) poetry programs that have proliferated across the United States and internationally. The official history of poetry slam has it starting in the mid-1980s at a bar on the north side of Chicago. Marc Smith is credited with developing the idea of slam in order to draw non-elites to poetry and to emphasize the genre's potentially populist nature. While many participants get caught up in the competitive aspect of slam (see the 1998 documentary *SlamNation* for examples of how poets strategize for points), there are traditions that serve to undermine the validity of the competition: slam hosts regularly lead audiences in chanting "The points are not the point—the poetry is the point!"; judges are meant to be laypeople, not poetry "experts," and are usually chosen randomly from the audience; audience members are encouraged by hosts to heckle the judges if they don't agree with the scores traces the history and the nature of the relationship between slam and Youth Spoken Word. It describes the role slam currently plays in YSW, looking at local, regional, and national competitions and at how different YSW programs negotiate these. The chapter also explores three themes that emerge from the ways the youth poets in Weinstein's study talk about the slam experience: the artist in relation to other artists, the artist in relation to competition, and the artist in relation to craft. She analyzes the ways that slam as a contest both enriches and, at times, complicates the ways that young writers, as artists, theorize these themes and position themselves within them.

In "Winner Takes All: The Cultural Work of Twentieth-Century Writing Contests," Mary R. Lamb, examines writing contests with corporate and non-profit sponsors. From the "contest era" of the 1950s and 60s, chronicled in the book by Terry Ryan, *The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio: How My Mother Raised 10 Kids on 25 Words or Less* (2005) to the current age of *American Idol* and the slate of reality-competition programs to the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), contemporary society seems fascinated with how competition and quick wit bring fame and fortune to a few silver-tongued average citizens. This essay provides an overview of these writing contests using Deborah Brandt's framework of literacy sponsors and Carolyn Miller's definition of genre as "social action." It analyzes how these contests perpetuate social values about current topics and about writing.

Moving from corporate sponsorship to self-publishing, Chapter Eleven, "Casting the Contest and Rebellion: Podcasting as Contested Writing," by Jennifer L. Bowie, argues that podcasting is a new form of contested writing. Podcasting brings contested writing back to its oral roots in Ancient Greece, while adding other media (such as text transcriptions, music, album art, and other visuals) and expanding the potential audience for such writing. This essay presents the results from interviews with ten podcasters. Each of these multi-year podcasters began as an independent grassroots podcaster. However, many of them have since begun their own businesses based on podcasting and have become famous. Bowie discusses the podcasters see their podcasts as contested and as writing and examines how each began podcasting to fill some need they saw that traditional venues, especially the print publishing industry, did not meet. Drawing directly from each of the podcasters, Bowie explains that podcasting is a form of contested writing that integrates its oral roots with new media and rebellion.

Thus, this collection makes the argument that writing contests are a vibrant form of rhetorical practice and as such, deserve further study. In many cases, they serve as measures about what society values in writing. In many cases, they are reductive and conservative in their expectations about writing and instead use literacy for their own marketing or rhetorical goals. All contests, though, frame writing as an important skill and practice to have, and demonstrate the variety and range of uses to which writing is put. Finally, the book demonstrates that we cannot assume one writing assessment is effective because it has "always been done." Rather, this collection invites speculation about how we might harness our rich rhetorical strands for expansive uses, to motivate students as well as assess them, and that we must make sure our assessment criteria encourage the writing we hope students will produce. The book does not offer all the solutions or answers but rather hopes to enrich the conversation about how writing contests reflect our current values about writing and lead us to consider what other possibilities our own teaching might take up.

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PART I

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF CONTESTED WRITING

CHAPTER ONE

MYTHIC AND LEGENDARY ORIGINS OF WRITING CONTESTS: COMPETITIONS OF INTELLECT IN GREEK AND ROMAN HISTORY, RHETORIC, AND LITERATURE

BETH BURMESTER

> No one of mortals before discovered a finer art / Than Gorgias to arm the soul for contests of excellence.
> —Inscription discovered in Olympia, 1876

> What is a myth today? I shall give at the outset, a first, very simple answer, which is perfectly consistent with etymology: myth is a type of speech.
> —Roland Barthes, "Mythologies"

> A rhetorician would make his name in part by displaying his literary talents in public contests: such opportunities for star turns and for building an independent reputation were part of the rhetorician's greater visibility.
> —Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language*

Where did writing contests come from? What cultural form do they now take? Perhaps we could argue that the contests from Archaic Greece through the Second Sophistic, those that lasted through much of the Roman Empire, have given us the wildly popular *American Idol* television franchise, which premiered in 2002 as a reality television show, and is in its eleventh season. This competition is based on singing performances, judged by both a panel of experts and the audience, which includes not only those in the studio observing the competition first-hand, but anyone watching it on television (or via the Internet) who can "vote" for contestants with their cell phones. All the contestants, winners included, have names and photos on the Fox Broadcasting American Idol website, creating something akin to the engraved monuments and statues memorializing the

contest winners in the ancient contests around the Mediterranean. The contestants and winners become celebrities, not unlike some of the sophists during their historical moment. Certainly the original contests and *American Idol* are social and cultural events that entertain large audiences and create a forum and genre of popular culture.

Classicist Tim Whitmarsh warns us, "It is hard for moderns to grasp the central cultural importance of this practice without resorting to misleading parallels: pop concerts, sports events, religious gatherings" (3), so making the jump to *American Idol* may now seem a flawed move. But it does bear closer examination, based on its attributes and those of sophistic rhetoric. John Poulakos emphasizes the roles of entertainment and theatrics to sophistic rhetoric and the competitions that the Sophists engaged in. Specifically, he argues, "The culture in which sophistical rhetoric emerged was not only a culture of competition, it was also one of spectacles. When the sophists converged on Athens, the most accomplished form of spectacle was the drama of the theater" (39). They blended the drama festival with competition, and "shaped rhetoric in its image, making public discourse a matter of performance and exhibition" (39). Furthermore, Gorgias is said to have stated in his Speech at the Olympic Games, in a much-cited fragment, Fragment 8, (e.g. Poulakos 34; Consigny 75) attributed by Sprague to Clement's *Miscellanies*, that "A contest such as we have requires two kinds of excellence, daring and skill; daring is needed to withstand danger, and skill to understand how to trip the opponent [?]. For surely speech, like the summons at the Olympic Games, calls him who will, but crowns him who can" (Sprague 49).

Poetry for the Greeks was sung to music, so a competition based on performing songs can be seen as a logical legacy of their art. Even so, the contestants on *Idol*, unlike the Hellenic poets, are singing *other people's words*. They are being judged on delivery only, and sometimes arrangement—but not for their invention and composition. This is a significant distinction. The legacy of the rhetorical contests, then, must be one that engages *rhetorical activities* with intellect. Like contests of strength or sport, the rhetorical contests, especially as conceived of by the Greek sophists, celebrated individual achievement, but they did so within the realm of language skill and critical thinking. The performance is key, but it has to be inherently connected to the mind, and more often, to a mind trained by wisdom and education. If we wish to see more of rhetoric within a history of contests, we have to keep digging underneath what we think we know, and look in new places for evidence and allusions of influence. For example, to get a sense of the depth and richness of intellectual competitions, we should include the drama festivals in Attica,

a reexamination of Archaic culture, the mythic uses of competitions, the personification of contests into deities and patron gods and goddesses of competitions, and the portrayal of contests and competitions in myth, epics, and literary texts. In this chapter, I will first look at the language we use to describe and define contests, then sketch a history of the cultural origins and contexts that gave rise to competitive discourse practices. After touching on the historic intellectual competitions and their contribution to our definitions of rhetoric and rhetorical practice, I then turn to a discussion of literary representation of contests in classical myths, drama, and poetics. I conclude with a consideration of what this history leaves out, and where further study should proceed.

Word Origins: The Language of Language Contests in Greece

Like Plato and Aristotle, I find it necessary to first define key terms. While most of the Greek roots indicate a struggle or battle, the other side of competition and contests is playful, alluding to games. Like definitions of rhetoric itself, contests contain both the threat of force and the civility and promise that persuasion offers as an alternative to force. The English word *agonistic* derives from the Greek *agon*. Both refer to competition and have more than one use. An *agon* is usually translated as "contest" (Consigny; Poulakos; Schiappa; Woodhouse), and agonistic defined as "competitive." But they have other shades of meanings too. *Agon* also specifically refers to athletic contests, and an *agon* can be a struggle or fight, while *agonistic* can describe an individual who is combative. For the Athenians, contests and competitions were linked to synonyms like "struggle, wrestle, contend, argument, battle, rivalry" (Woodhouse Dictionary). Agonistic also means "striving to overcome in argument," and "straining for effect," as well as "the range of activities associated with aggressive encounters between members of the same species" (dictionary.com)—all of which tie in with the early history of the Greek agon.

According to Scott Consigny, Tim Whitmarsh, John Poulakos and Friedrich Nietzsche, competition and battle were at the very heart of Greek life. Nietzsche wrote,

> Every talent must unfold itself in fighting: that is the command of Hellenic popular pedagogy…And just as the youths were engaged through contests, their educators were also engaged in contests with each other…In the spirit of the contest, the sophist, the advanced teacher of antiquity, meets another

> sophist…the Greek knows the artist only as engaged in a personal fight. (qtd. in Consigny 74)

Whitmarsh shows the extent of what he calls "the zero-sum game," which also amplifies Nietzsche's argument:

> Greek culture had always been competitive (or agonistic), presenting numerous opportunities for social aspiration to be satisfied or frustrated through conflict with peers: not only through athletics and warfare (the obvious examples), but also through the lawcourts and state politics, where the winners won, and were seen to win, at the expense of the losers. (38)

One of the keys to the competition was an audience: the contest involved everyone—spectators and contestants. As Consigny asserts, "Thus the agon is always a community undertaking, involving rival rhetors and a judge or audience of the contest. Indeed, the Greek term agon denotes an 'assembly' of people, typically people who gather for a competition, as well as the competition itself" (83), expanding the meaning of agon to include not merely an event, but all the human players participating. Thus, Consigny expands the definition of contest beyond a mere struggle into a cultural practice that unites and has far-reaching benefits.

Closely related to agon is *mache*, which means a fight, or a battle, as well as a contest. "Refutations" can be rendered from *kataballontes*, which means "literally, knock-down arguments" (Poulakos 35). A physical contest is called *machetikas,* while a "competition in disputation" is called an *eristikas* (Whitmarsh 12), recalling the word *eris*, meaning discord and rivalry; and, eventually, linking all of these terms back to agon, and the description of competition and contest as a battle, whether in war or sports or words. These multiple terms also reveal the complexity and degrees of contests and their social functions.

This cluster of competitive practices also extends to schooling and education. Wrestling schools, where sophists often taught their pupils, were called palaistrae. Deborah Hawhee has argued for making more visible the connection in ancient cultures between "rhetorical training" and "athletic training." Hawhee's research demonstrates that the Older Sophists did not solely teach in private homes, but indeed were connected to wrestling schools and gymnasiums, so that the study of rhetoric and philosophy accompanied the exercises and moves of sports—wrestling, boxing, and running—in a competitive *and* public environment. Virtually all male teenagers frequented the gymnasiums and they were seeking, as Hawhee states, "a citizen ethos" (144). To be an ideal citizen in Athens was to be both educated and athletic; the mind and body needed practice

equally. Each palaestra had a musician who played a reed instrument called the aulos. This created the proper rhythm for the physical movements and for the speaking exercises (Hawhee 146), which were coordinated to go together.

In other words, sports and speaking were linked as contests, which meant contests also linked mind and body, intellectual and physical talents, pursuits, and rivalries. Physical competition paralleled intellectual training in practice, and then in discourse it was used metaphorically. Both Gorgias and Protagoras connected wrestling "with verbal disputation" (Poulakos 35). Plato has Gorgias say, in his dialogue, "our use of rhetoric should be like our use of any other sort of [agonistic] exercise" (Plato *Gorgias* 456e; qtd. in Consigny 75). So in effect, in ancient Athens, and later in the Hellenistic world, education itself is not just *like* a contest—*it is a contest in every way*.

The sophists as a group "combin[ed] two heterogeneous elements—athletics and discourse" (36), and even Aristotle put physical contests and intellectual competitions "in the same category," classifying them as "games or amusement" (Poulakos 36). For the Greeks, "to use speech is to engage in athletic or military contests" (Consigny 75). In a fragment written by Empedocles, he "exhorts Pausanias to encounter his teachings with a certain intensity," especially by his use of the word ereisas, "which has the force of 'push,' 'thrust' and once again 'struggle'." Thus, "in other words, Empedocles holds that cunning intelligence (metis) emerges from the encounter with the immediate" and that this encounter "is a bodily production, a mutually constitutive struggle among bodies and surrounding forces" (Hawhee 150). Animation of words, and their immediate connection to a physical being is also clear in Alcidamas' speech arguing for the superiority of spoken over written words: "the speech which comes directly from the mind, on the spur of the moment, is full of life and action, and keeps pace with the events like a real person" (qtd. in Poulakos 63). These examples support Gorgias' belief that "language is a form of human action" (Consigny 75).

A term focusing on the character of contestants, and especially used within the Second Sophistic, is *philotimias*, which literally means "love of honor," but idiomatically represents the idea of "ambition," and reveals the spirit of the competitors: not merely victors, but honorable men (Whitmarsh 12; Woodhouse). Whitmarsh translates this term as "an ethic of competition" (12). A similar term in sound especially is *philoneikia*, which can mean either rivalry, or "love of quarrels" (Whitmarsh 13). The confusion of these two terms contributed to the negative attitudes directed against the Older Sophists by Plato and Aristophanes and others