Talking of ritual

Meta-discourse, meta-representation, and the rationalization of language use

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Non ut visa, sed ut audita
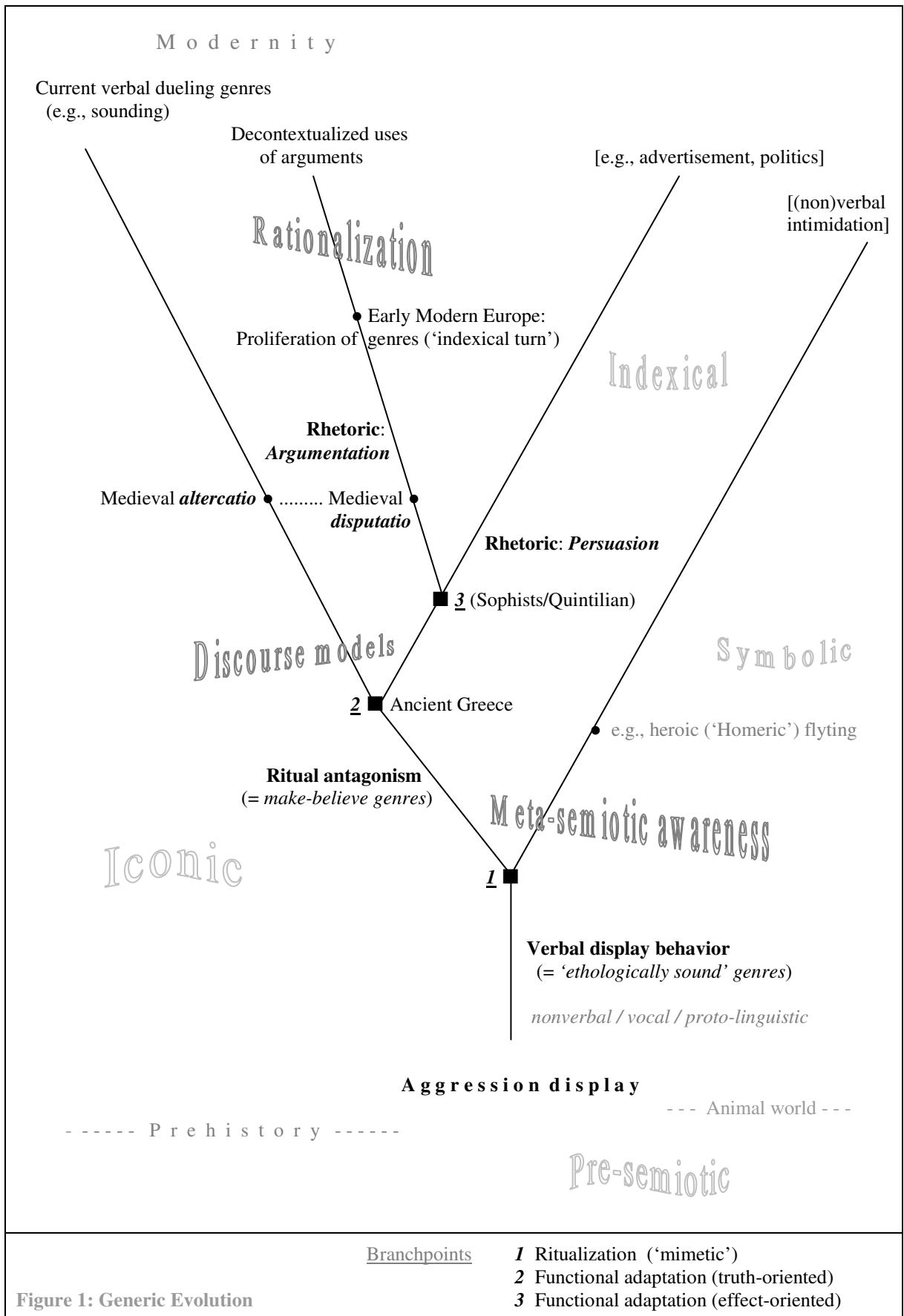
Dolopathos, ca. 1180

Summary

This paper is concerned with the historical and diachronic dimensions of a now widespread verbal practice, i.e., the settlement of conflicts on the basis of reasonable arguments. Although it is generally accepted that argumentation and reasoning, that currently feature in a wide variety of spoken and written discourse genres, epitomize forms of rational language use that have their origins in ancient and medieval rhetoric, there is to date no consensus about the roots of rhetoric itself; neither do we have a clear insight into the generic backdrop of the early rhetorical text and discourse types that furthered the use of rational arguments.

Drawing an analogy between the textual fabric of a *quaestio* from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* and the speech-actional make-up of various forms of ritual contention that we have been handed over by history, I shall argue that—in the context of medieval rhetorical exposition—the dialectic model of oral altercation served as a model for the structure of the scholastic disputation. In a wider—in effect evolutionary—perspective (cf. Figure 1 below), it will be posited that the presently favoured method of settling conflicts by rational means marks a "functional adaptation" of agonistic ritual problem-solving devices that are ultimately continuous with aggressive bluff display as found at large in the animal realm.

Regarding the development of essentially dialogic argumentation as exemplified by, for instance, the medieval *disputatio* into "unipartite," or monologic, forms of rational discourse, I will argue that judging from 16th- and 17th-century (literary) examples of the "externalization" of inner conflict, along with certain other written discourse phenomena of that time, the propensity for—if not in fact the necessity of—constructing and presenting argumentations according to the *altercatio*-derived bipartite discourse model lasted well into the early modern period.

On the assumption that the ever-increasing rationalization of discourse fits in with a much more wide-ranging cultural change—i.e., the rise and spread, during the late medieval and early modern periods, of indexicality—I will hypothesize that the transition from ritual altercation to rhetorical disputation marks a development that is consistent with Merlin Donald's (1991) general theory of the evolution of culture and cognition. In particular, the development from ritual to rational language use evidenced by this generic adaptation may be held to exemplify, and instantiate, the evolution from mimetic culture, via the mythic-symbolic stage, to theoretic culture. From the perspective of semiotics and semiolinguistics, the emanation of the scholastic argumentation model from ritual contention points towards a development from primarily iconic to primarily indexical, specifically inferential, modes of signification, communication, and discourse (cf. van Heusden 2004; Bax 2002, 2004, forthc.).

M o d e r n i t y

Current verbal dueling genres
  (e.g., sounding)

Decontextualized uses
  of arguments

[e.g., advertisement, politics]

[(non)verbal
intimidation]

Rationalization

● Early Modern Europe:
Proliferation of genres ('indexical turn')

Indexical

Rhetoric:
Argumentation

Medieval *altercatio* ● .... Medieval ●
                              disputatio

Rhetoric: *Persuasion*

■ *3* (Sophists/Quintilian)

Discourse models

Symbolic

2 ■ Ancient Greece

● e.g., heroic ('Homeric') flyting

Ritual antagonism
(= *make-believe genres*)

Meta-semiotic awareness

Iconic

1 ■

Verbal display behavior
  (= *'ethologically sound' genres*)

nonverbal / vocal / proto-linguistic

A g g r e s s i o n   d i s p l a y

- - - Animal world - - -

- - - - - - P r e h i s t o r y - - - - - -

Pre-semiotic

Branchpoints	*1* Ritualization ('mimetic')
	2 Functional adaptation (truth-oriented)
Figure 1: Generic Evolution	*3* Functional adaptation (effect-oriented)

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