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# FIGURES

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## Introduction

This volume of *Greece & Rome* offers something a little different: a selection of essays around a single theme. The theme we have chosen is 'Figures', understood in the rhetorical sense. Each of the contributors has chosen a single figure and woven around it a discussion of an aspect of Greco-Roman culture. In this we follow the lead of a recent book on *Renaissance Figures of Speech* (ed. S. Adamson, G. Alexander, and K. Ettenhuber, Cambridge, 2007). But whereas that collection is strictly historicist, focusing on figures that the Renaissance authors in question could be supposed to have known, we have ranged much more broadly. Our aim is to show not just that ancients thought in terms of figures; we have suggested that modern critics do – or at least should do – too.

We have not insisted on a strictly classical understanding of what constitutes a figure (as distinct, say, from a trope). Quintilian's catch-all definition ('a linguistic formation that deviates from the obvious and ordinary', *Inst.* 9.1.4) will do for all of the articles here, but not all of the 'figures' under discussion here would be recognized even by that most compendious of oratorical theorists. In the first article, Tim Whitmarsh's discussion of classical Greek drama focuses on metalepsis, a term that – while appearing in Aristotle – only fully attained its

canonical, modern meaning with Gérard Genette's *Figures III* (Paris, 1972). Metalepsis, the breaking of narrative frames (so that, for example, an author meets a character), might be thought of as distinctively modern; Whitmarsh argues, however, that it is latent in all performed genres, and bursts to the fore at various moments in classical Athens. Froma Zeitlin, too, discusses a term that bears a different meaning now: ekphrasis. Ruth Webb (*Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* [Farnham, 2009]) has influentially argued that this term should be understood in accordance with the prescripts of ancient rhetorical handbooks, as any kind of vivid description. Zeitlin argues, however, that the more modern definition, restricting it to descriptions of works of art, has purchase on ancient texts too: focusing on the Greek novelists and Lucian, she shows that the artwork, as represented within a literary work, was a privileged site for reflection on aesthetics and erotics. Lawrence Kim turns to a device that ancients certainly would have understood as a figure: aposiopesis, and its variants. Aposiopesis is the act of deliberate self-silencing. Kim uses this figure to answer a notorious critical puzzle: what exactly is it that Dio Chrysostom accuses the Tarsians of when he describes their activity of *rhegkhein*? If the figure itself was known to the ancients, however, Kim's conclusion – that it enacts a deliberate semantic ambiguity – suggests a strikingly modern, sophisticated approach to meaning in the early imperial orator. Finally, Edmund Thomas discusses chiasmus, which has been claimed as the master figure of ancient – or, at least, archaic Greek – literary production. Although Thomas' interests lie not in Homer and Herodotus but in later art and architecture, he demonstrates that chiasmus poses the same kind of reading puzzle here: it posits a significant relationship between the elements, without always fully disclosing the nature of that relationship.

Greco-Roman culture was, of course, saturated in rhetoric. From the late fifth century onwards, it lay at the very foundation of all elite education. Taken as a whole, these four essays demonstrate not only how the ancients organized their own conceptual universe in rhetorical terms, but also how these rhetorical structures can still play an energizing role for us, too, in the interpretation of that culture. In these days when the traditional, Eurocentric idea of direct, linear 'inheritance' from the Greeks and Romans is (quite properly) being fiercely challenged, it is right to reflect on how our interpretative categories both build on and differentiate themselves from

those of the Greeks and Romans, on which they have – until relatively recently – been closely modelled.

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