

OUTWARD, VISIBLE PROPRIETY

Stoic Philosophy and Eighteenth-Century British Rhetorics

Lois Peters Agnew

In her examination of the eighteenth-century transition from classical to modern perspectives in British rhetorical theory, Lois Peters Agnew argues that this shift was significantly shaped by resurgent influences of Stoic ethical philosophy. Eager to preserve the stability jeopardized by changing political, social, and economic conditions, theorists of the period found in the Stoic principle of *sensus communis* the possibility of constructing a collective identity across a fragmented society. To that end, Agnew states, prominent rhetoricians turned to the works of the Roman Stoics and to their ethical system as adapted in the writings of Cicero and Quintilian in particular.

Familiarity with ancient thought enabled British rhetoricians to craft from Stoic ideas distinctly eighteenth-century perspectives on how rhetoric could not only accomplish specific practical goals but also prepare individuals to fulfill their ethical potential to the community. This private and public mission is best illustrated through the development of four important rhetorical concepts during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—common sense, taste, sympathy, and propriety—each of which supports the broader Stoic objectives of individual vision and civic harmony. Through these concepts Stoicism offered eighteenth-century thinkers a forum for envisioning the ethical interplay of individual experience, collective judgment, and civic responsibility.

Lois Peters Agnew is an assistant professor of writing and rhetoric at Syracuse University and coeditor with Richard Leo Enos of *Landmark Essays on Aristotelian Rhetoric*.

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