History matters. Focused though we might be on the cultural and literary challenges of today, the rhetorical past has in many ways defined the present. In this seminar, our subject is the early history of communication itself, as exemplified by the theory and practice of rhetoric. The art of persuasion—along with its many incarnations, iterations, aggressions, retractions, and subversions—lies at the heart of multiple milestones in the history of literacy, from ancient Greece to the Internet.

In this seminar, we return to the primary sources that inspired many of the modern theorists whom participants will likely have read (Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, etc.). Readings from Antiquity and the Middle Ages will be placed into productive intertextual dialogue with representative literary and theoretical writings from later periods. The concept is twofold: 1) I will stage the rhetorical readings from Antiquity and modernity with a literary selection from my own area of expertise (the Middle Ages); 2) Each participant will then complete the dialogue with a vision from his/her own area of expertise (the focus of the oral presentations). E.g.: Aristotle's rhetoric of torture will dialogue with Elaine Scarry and with the crucifixion scenes of medieval art and drama (with, e.g., a participant focusing on the rhetoric of the disappeared in Argentina); Lucian of Samosata's rhetoric of effeminacy dialogues with Judith Butler on performing gender (with a participant focusing on the politics of performing 21st-century gendered identity); Saint Augustine's Latin preaching will dialogue with the notoriously Anti-Semitic Caxton Play of the Sacrament (with a participant focusing, say, on contemporary Israeli literature or on what is lost and found in contemporary translation theory).

The rhetorics of Plato, Lucian of Samosata, Aristotle, Cicero, the Pseudo-Cicero, Quintilian, Saint Augustine, and many others then set the stage, literally and metaphorically, for the performance and communication of identity in an ever-evolving public sphere. Each week, we focus on a different comparative topic in literature, rhetoric, and culture, with likely foci including:

- Law, Literature, and the Narratives of Civilization
- Faith and Skepticism
- Violence and Creation
- The Production of Truth
- Rhetoric, Music, Social Harmony
- Performing/Translating Identity
- Race, Class, and Community
- Modes of Literacy: From Script to Print to the Internet
- Pedagogy
- Performativity & Social Change

In their seminar papers, students will have the option of either writing on a particular aspect of rhetoric or engaging in rhetorical analysis of a literary or historical work of their choosing. Taught in English, this seminar is designed for any graduate student with an interest in the history of communication, especially those in Comparative Literature, Classics, French, Romance Languages, English, History, Medieval Studies, and Theater. It is set up so that, regardless of field or period, it offers a broad training that will enhance the credentials of specialists and generalists alike.