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A Classical Rhetorical Approach to the Petitions to the British Parliament

Abstract: The present study is an analysis of the petitions sent to the British Parliament, which are examined from the perspective offered by classical Rhetoric. The goal of a petition is to persuade, and the main goal of Rhetoric is also how to persuade. This convergence suggests the question to what extent petitions observe the principles of classical Rhetoric. Two things have been set up in order to find an answer to this question: a theoretical framework using key notions from the classical scholars who laid the foundations of classical Rhetoric — Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian — as well as from the book *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and a corpus of 100 petitions sent to the British Parliament during the sessions 2021-2022 and 2022-2023. The analysis identified the features which describe the five canons of classical Rhetoric (*Inventio, Dispositio, Elocutio, Memoria, Pronuntiatio*) and the three rhetorical appeals (ethos, logos, pathos). The result of the analysis on the corpus confirmed two of the classical Rhetorical tenets: the use of logos and the prevalence of enthymemes over syllogisms and examples. At the same time, it highlighted several features that describe petitions but not classical Rhetoric, such as the absence of syllogisms, the very seldom use of figures of speech, as well as of ethos and pathos. Petitions may be described as partly complying with the principles of classical Rhetoric in that they are succinct arguments made up of one or more enthymemes leading to a common conclusion.

Keywords: rhetoric, petition, parliament, corpus linguistics.