

Recovering Turkish Principles of ‘How to Perform Rhetoric’ from Yusuf’s *Wisdom of Royal Glory*
Elif Guler (gulere@longwood.edu), Longwood University

Presentation Abstract: This presentation reports on a significant example of Turkish rhetorical tradition from its Islamic period: *Kutadgu Bilig* (often translated as *Wisdom of Royal Glory*). Written by Yusuf Has Hacib and presented to a Turkish Khan in the 11th century, *Kutadgu Bilig* is a poetic text that deems the appropriate use of language essential to living a fulfilled life. Still, this example of wisdom literature has never been analyzed from a rhetorical perspective—nor has it been studied to reveal its understanding of rhetoric. This speaker discusses this text’s principles of how to perform in/with language.

Kutadgu Bilig revolves around the symbolism of an idealized notion of a well-rounded persona (who carries such characteristics as freed of all vices, laureated with good habits, follows justice in all dealings, etc). The author delineates the characteristics of this ‘ideal person’ not in a vacuum but within the framework of a society—by focusing on this individual’s social affairs and relationships with each other as well as the state. *Kutadgu Bilig* suggests that an ideal social agent should use words with caution and, thus, needs to discipline his or her tongue accordingly by studying language carefully. The purpose of rhetoric is to instruct and share knowledge which is an essential tool in a life path that leads to *kut*, a divinely sourced bliss.

With its particular focus on the notion of *kut*, *Kutadgu Bilig* digresses from an understanding of rhetoric evident in classical Greek rhetoricians’ works (i.e., rhetoric as a means to persuade or as a counterpart to dialectic in the search of truth). While *Kutadgu Bilig* considers the proper use of words a crucial aspect of a proper way of living and one that can lead to an individual’s eternal bliss, it also positions the improper use of words as a possible cause of one’s demise (often stated in terms of metaphors such as *losing one’s head*). Overall, the text aims to educate an ideal agent who has to study language so s/he can effectively communicate with and utilize authority and power. The insights from this text can help contemporary writing students explore different definitions/purposes of rhetoric and a moral understanding of rhetorical agency.

Below is an example of an informal writing assignment which encourages students to explore the life concept of happiness (drawing upon *Kutadgu Bilig*’s emphasis on using language to attain bliss) and its links to other notions as well as the use of language. Other assignments for classroom discussions could be developed on other related concepts such as morality, ‘what is a moral way to use language?’, and so on.

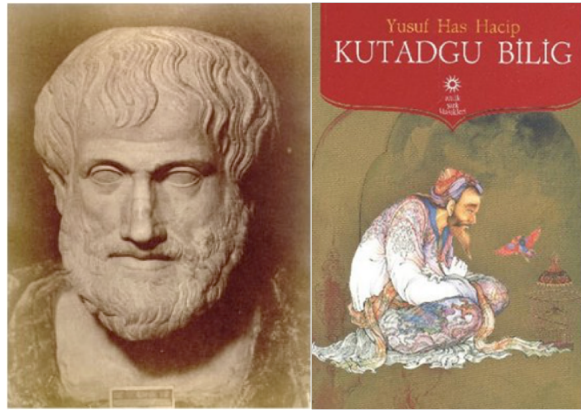
SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

Objective: The objective of this low-stakes assignment is to expand students’ knowledge and change their attitudes about different cultural perspectives on the notions with rhetorical implications. Students are asked to reflect on their own definition of a life concept (i.e., happiness), extract a definition of this concept from the translated excerpts of both a Western (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book I, chapters 4-7) and a non-Western (Yusuf’s *Kutadgu Bilig*) thinker’s (and rhetorician’s) writing, and compare these definitions. One of the end goals in this process is to help students understand different purposes and definitions of rhetoric (purposeful use of language) in different cultures. In this example, the assignment encourages students to see how the study of language is linked to the attainment of happiness in a non-Western context.

WRITING PROMPT:

Respond to the prompts below by the end of the day on April 6th. Then, review at least one of your peers’ responses until the end of the day on April 7th, and provide your response to them; what do you agree/disagree with? Anything in your peer’s response that resonates with you? Feel free to respond in any meaningful way. (We’ll review and discuss your responses in our next classroom meeting.)

1) Brainstorm and write down your definition of happiness. What is ‘happiness’ to you?



2) Read the texts below. One of the following texts belong to Aristotle, the ancient Greek rhetorician/philosopher (3rd century BC). The other text belongs to a 11th-century Islamic thinker, Yusuf Has Hacib (we'll call him Yusuf, which is variation of Joseph). Conduct an analysis of the texts, and write down what each text suggests about how humans can reach happiness (the source of happiness, etc). You can construct this definition through the text's key words, central concepts, and main ideas. (Make sure to provide a response in the form of sentences, and be specific.)

Text #1 (Yusuf Has Hacib):

I have uttered my discourse and composed my book. It will be a true guide so that you may grasp both the worlds and be blessed with happiness.

Speech descended from blue heaven to brown earth, and it is by means of speech that man ennoble his soul. Man's heart is like a bottomless sea and wisdom is the pearl that lies at the bottom; if he fails to bring the pearl up out of the sea it could just as well be a pebble as a pearl. Gold that lies in brown earth's bosom is only ore, but when it is extracted it becomes the ornament of princes. As long as the wise man does not bring out wisdom upon his tongue, his wisdom may lie hidden for years and shed no light. Fine things indeed as wisdom and intellect; put them to work, if you possess them, and you will soar to heaven!

The tongue is interpreter to intellect and to wisdom. Know that an eloquent tongue causes a man to shine. It is the tongue that brings a man esteem, so that he finds fortune, and it is the tongue that brings a man dishonor so that he loses his head. The tongue is a lion crouching on the threshold—householder, take care, or it will bite off your head!

What is born dies, but words remain as a sign, so speak good words and you will be immortal. If a man has two things, he does not grow old: one is good deeds, the other good words.

Text #2 (Aristotle):

We choose happiness always for self and never for the sake of something else, but honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

Since happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue, we must consider the nature of virtue; for perhaps we shall thus see better the nature of happiness. The true student of politics, too, is thought to have studied virtue above all things; for he wishes to make his fellow citizens good and obedient to the laws. ...But clearly the virtue we must study is human virtue; for the good we were seeking was human good and the happiness human happiness. By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness

also we call an activity of soul. But if this is so, clearly the student of politics must know somehow the facts about soul, as the man who is to heal the eyes or the body as a whole must know about the eyes or the body; and all the more since politics is more prized and better than medicine; but even among doctors the best educated spend much labor on acquiring knowledge of the body. The student of politics, then, must study the soul, and must study it with these objects in view, and do so just to the extent which is sufficient for the questions we are discussing; for further precision is perhaps something more laborious than our purposes require.

He is happy who lives in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life.

3) Compare and contrast your initial definition of happiness to the ones you extracted from the texts from Aristotle and Yusuf. What did you learn from Aristotle and Yusuf about happiness? Do you agree? How could you now further revise your definition according to Aristotle's and Yusuf's suggestions?

SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE

1) What is happiness? What are its critical attributes?

Happiness is hard to define because it changes for everyone. I would argue that happiness stems from being satisfied with one's life or the direction of one's life. This satisfaction can be a result of human connections, the fulfillment of dreams, or helping others (good deeds).

2) Text #1

Yusuf discusses the importance of the pearl of wisdom, and that without this pearl, nothing can come from life. Essentially, wisdom is the key to obtaining a good life and a happy life. Happiness derives from one's own wisdom and the growth of one's intellect. The wise man that speaks eloquently will have a happier life than the fool who speaks without thought.

3) Text #2

Happiness is not the one thing you desire. Aristotle says that people often claim that wealth will make them happy if they are poor or that health will make them happy if they are sick. Happiness is not based on the attainment of what you think you want. Happiness is when all of the virtues align and are perfected. These virtues include honor and reason. Without reason, you cannot have happiness. This is similar to Yusuf's statement about wisdom. An individual becomes happy when he or she utilizes reason to perfect their virtues.

4) Comparison

Yusuf and Aristotle both consider wisdom or reason to be the starting point to happiness. The fool cannot obtain happiness because he is ignorant and therefore unable to develop and become virtuous. Aristotle includes in his definition the concept of virtues. Yusuf leaves these out and chooses to instead focus completely on wisdom and speaking eloquently. Aristotle asserts that reason is what allows us to develop virtues and from here we can obtain happiness. It is a step-by-step process that develops over time. Happiness is something that is achieved over time, and not something that can be instantly gratified. My definition is similar in the sense that I included "good deeds" which are connected to the concept of Aristotle's virtues. However, mine differs in that I include human relationships and dreams. According to Yusuf and Aristotle, neither of these things is necessarily important unless they both connect directly to reason. While I agree with Aristotle that true happiness is different from temporary happiness, I differ in that the wise are not the only happy ones in the world. There are many people in the world that will never be classified as genius, but they are happy with their lives.