



Give Me Liberty!

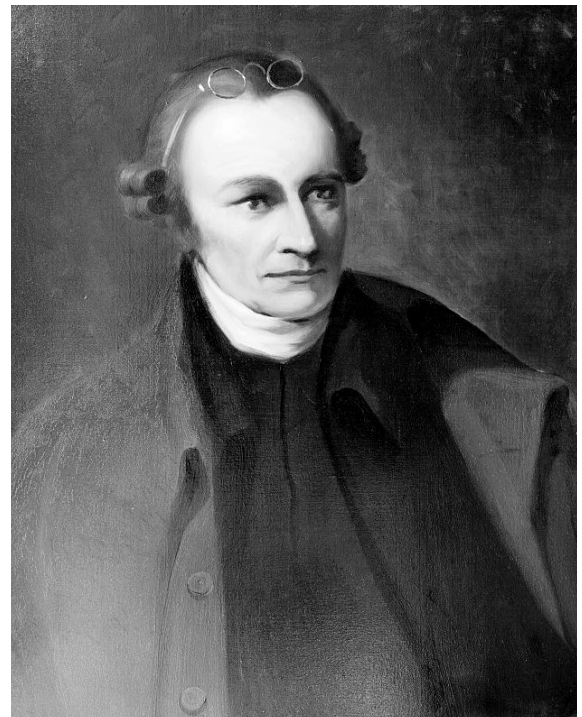
Advisor: Robert A. Ferguson, George Edward Woodberry Professor in Law, Literature and Criticism,
Columbia University, National Humanities Center Fellow
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Framing Question

What arguments, appeals, and rhetorical strategies did Patrick Henry use in 1775 to persuade reluctant members of the Second Virginia Convention to develop a military response to British aggression?

Understanding

In 1775 American independence was not a foregone conclusion. While there had been unrest and resistance in Massachusetts with scattered acts of support from other areas, no organized movement toward revolution existed across the Colonies. Virginia ranked among the largest, wealthiest, and most populous colonies in 1775, and her political and military support for independence would be crucial for success. In this speech Patrick Henry (1736–1799) uses powerful rhetoric to convince influential, affluent, landed men of Virginia with much to lose to move past their current diplomatic posture opposing British aggression to the more treasonous one of open military preparedness.



Patrick Henry (1736–1799)

Text

[Patrick Henry, speech to the Virginia Convention, March 23, 1775.](#)

Background

In 1775 unrest bubbled through the American Colonies. Britain had severely restricted Massachusetts through the Intolerable Acts; towns were voting to boycott British goods, and British soldiers were becoming a common sight in the American Colonies. In this lesson you will explore a famous speech by Patrick Henry (1736–1799), member of the Second Virginia Convention. Patrick Henry is not speaking in the Virginia House of Burgesses [the state legislature] in Williamsburg because it had been dissolved the year before by Royal Governor Dunmore. Resenting this British interference with local government, the members of the House of Burgesses regrouped as a state convention. In order to avoid any interference from British troops, the Second Convention of approximately 120 delegates met in Richmond, Virginia, from March 20 through March 27.

The American Colonies were attempting to negotiate with British in 1775, and many of Henry's fellow delegates wanted to wait until these negotiations were completed before taking action. But Henry felt that delay would be a major mistake. On March 23, 1775, he asked the Virginia Convention to take a defensive stance immediately against Great Britain by raising an armed company in every Virginia county — an action considered by many to be open treason. His speech reflected language and actions far more radical than his fellow delegates were willing to go in public, but Henry based his request upon the assumption that even more aggressive military actions by the British would soon follow. Twenty-seven days after this speech was delivered the Battles of Lexington and Concord proved Henry correct.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

In this lesson you will look at Patrick Henry's speech and analyze his methods for convincing his fellow members of the Virginia Convention to take a military stance against the British. These delegates were wealthy and powerful and they had much to lose; Henry's request was a big decision that many of them were reluctant to make. Henry used not only rhetorical devices but also the strategies of classical argument, making a potentially confusing situation simple and straightforward as he attempted to move all his fellow delegates toward the same result. His recommendations were accepted by the Convention.

The speech divides into the four parts of a classical argument, defined below. As you analyze the individual parts of the speech, look also for how these parts of the argument work together.

1. The first two paragraphs form the introduction (**Exordium**). The Exordium attempts to engage the audience, preparing them for the message to come, and to explain the purpose (thesis) of the speech.
2. The third paragraph provides the statement of fact (**Narratio**) and argument (**Confirmatio**). The Narratio contextualizes the argument, presenting any background information necessary, while the Confirmatio lays out in order the evidence to support the thesis.
3. The fourth paragraph presents and refutes counter arguments (**Refutatio**).
4. The final paragraph forms the conclusion (**Peroratio**). The Peroratio may perform several purposes: to restate an argument, to amplify reasoning, to inspire an audience, and to rouse emotional responses.

Text Analysis

Excerpt 1

Paragraph 1: Exordium

MR. PRESIDENT: (1) No man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the House. (2) But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen if, entertaining as I do, opinions of a character very opposite to theirs, I shall speak forth my sentiments freely, and without reserve. (3) This is no time for ceremony. (4) The question before the House is one of awful moment to this country. (5) For my own part, I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery; and in proportion to the magnitude of the subject ought to be the freedom of the debate. (6) It is only in this way that we can hope to arrive at truth, and fulfill the great responsibility which we hold to God and our country. (7) Should I keep back my opinions at such a time, through fear of giving offence, I should consider myself as guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty toward the majesty of heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings.

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



1. The first paragraph of classical argument, the exordium, seeks to engage the audience and prepare them to hear the speaker's message. Give an example in this paragraph of an attempt to engage the audience and an example of an attempt to prepare the audience.

2. Another function of the exordium is to explain the purpose of the speech. What purpose does Henry establish, and to what is he appealing in order to emphasize this purpose?

3. Why does Henry use the term “gentlemen” twice in the first two sentences?

4. Why does Henry begin the second sentence with “but”?

5. In sentence 3 what does Henry mean when he says, “this is no time for ceremony”? Why does he use the term “ceremony”?

6. What does Henry mean by “awful moment” in sentence 4? Why does he use this phrase?

7. In sentence 5, when Henry states, “I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery,” he commits a logical fallacy. The false dichotomy (either-or) fallacy gives only two options with no choices in between, and Henry uses this intentionally. Why?

8. In sentence 7 Henry argues on the basis of “ethos,” which is Greek for “character.” Such an argument is called an “ethical appeal.” It attempts to win over listeners on the basis of the trustworthiness of the speaker. How, in this sentence, does Henry suggest that his listeners can trust him?

9. How does the ethical appeal in sentence 7 relate to the ethical appeal in sentence 1?

Excerpt 2

Paragraph 2: Exordium, continued

(8) Mr. President, it is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. (9) We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren till she transforms us into beasts. (10) Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? (11) Are we disposed to be of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? (12) For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it.

10. In this second paragraph of the exordium, Henry works to explain the importance and timeliness of his argument by setting up a contrast between illusions and truth in sentences 8 and 12. According to Henry, which will his argument contain and which will it NOT contain?

11. Henry uses the word “hope” several times in this speech. Give an example of an “illusion of hope” that Henry suggests in this second paragraph.

12. Allusions, unexplained references to other sources, are commonly based upon the Bible or mythology. What allusion does Henry use in sentence 9 when he says “listen to the song of that siren till she transforms us into beasts?” How does this allusion contribute to his argument?

13. Henry uses multiple biblical allusions with which his educated audience would be familiar. In sentence 11 he asks, “Are we disposed of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not?” This is from Ezekiel 12:2, when God describes how those who hear Ezekiel’s words and do not listen will be destroyed. How does this allusion contribute to Henry’s argument?

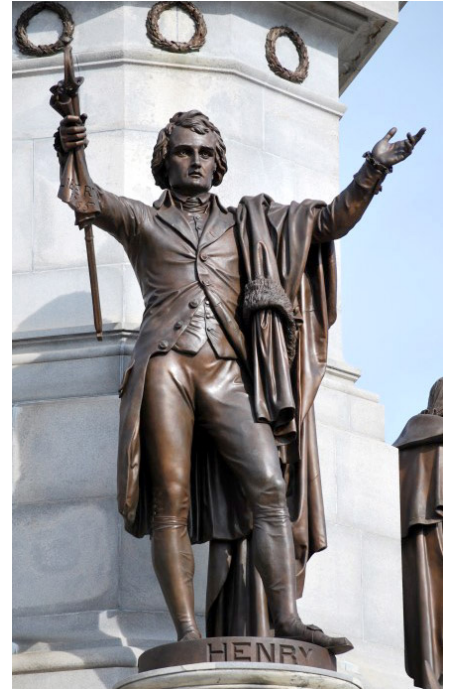
14. Juxtaposition means to put two elements side by side, often for comparison. Henry does this in sentences 11 and 12. What is his purpose in first asking if they are “disposed to... see not, and... hear not” and then stating, “...I am willing to know the whole truth: to know the worst, and to provide for it”?

Excerpt 3

Paragraph 3: Narratio and Confirmatio

(13) I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided; and that is the lamp of experience. (14) I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past. (15) And judging by the past, I wish to know what there has been in the conduct of the British ministry for the last ten years, to justify those hopes with which gentlemen have been pleased to solace themselves, and the House? (16) Is it that insidious smile with which our petition has been lately received? (17) Trust it not, sir; it will prove a snare to your feet. (18) Suffer

not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss. (19) Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports with these war-like preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. (20) Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation? (21) Have we shown ourselves so unwilling to be reconciled, that force must be called in to win back our love? (22) Let us not deceive ourselves, sir. (23) These are the implements of war and subjugation; the last arguments to which kings resort. (24) I ask, gentlemen, sir, what means this martial array, if its purpose be not to force us to submission? (25) Can gentlemen assign any other possible motive for it? (26) Has Great Britain any enemy, in this quarter of the world, to call for all this accumulation of navies and armies? (27) No, sir, she has none. (28) They are meant for us; they can be meant for no other. (29) They are sent over to bind and rivet upon us those chains which the British ministry has been so long forging. (30) And what have we to oppose to them? (31) Shall we try argument? (32) Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years. (33) Have we anything new to offer upon the subject? (34) Nothing. (35) We have held the subject up in every light of which it is capable; but it has been all in vain. (36) Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication? (37) What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? (38) Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves. (39) Sir, we have done everything that could be done, to avert the storm which is now coming on. (40) We have petitioned; we have remonstrated; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament. (41) Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with contempt, from the foot of the throne. (42) In vain, after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation. (43) There is no longer any room for hope. (44) If we wish to be free, if we mean to preserve inviolable those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending, if we mean not basely to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon until the glorious object of our contest shall be obtained, we must fight! (45) I repeat it, sir, we must fight! (46) An appeal to arms and to the God of Hosts is all that is left us!



Statue of Patrick Henry, Richmond, Virginia

15. Henry begins this paragraph with another Biblical allusion, “one lamp by which my feet are guided” (Psalms 119:105). Rather than the word of God, which is the lamp found in the Biblical verse, what is the lamp that Henry uses to guide his feet in sentence 13? Why does he make this connection?

16. Henry continues to use “gentlemen” in this paragraph. Why?

17. What does “solace” mean? Why does Henry use this term?

18. Henry uses parallelism (structuring phrases in similar fashion) several times in this paragraph. Consider sentence 40, especially the verbs. How does Henry use both parallelism and verb choice (diction) to explain that the Colonies have tried many steps to maintain peace?

19. In the second paragraph Henry spoke of the “illusions of hope.” In sentence 43 he says, “There is no longer any room for hope.” Why did he use this term again?

20. Henry again makes a Biblical allusion in sentence 18, “Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss.” Christ was betrayed by his disciple Judas through the kiss of brotherhood, which led to Christ’s arrest and crucifixion (Luke 22:47). Who does Henry believe represents Judas and how does this allusion as a metaphor contribute to Henry’s argument?

21. Antithesis means to put two ideas together in order to contrast them, pointing out their differences. In sentence 20, what does Henry contrast with “love and reconciliation”? What is the effect?

22. Hypophora is a special type of rhetorical question whereby a question is asked and then answered by the speaker (as opposed to a typical rhetorical question, which is either not answered or has a yes/no answer). A hypophora is useful to present to an audience issues they may not have considered in depth. Find at least one example of hypophora in this paragraph and explain its contribution to Henry’s argument.

23. Henry first mentions slavery in paragraph one when he contrasts it with freedom. Find an example of slave imagery in this paragraph. What is Henry’s purpose in using this image in paragraph 3?

24. Rhetorical parenthesis is the insertion into a sentence of an explanatory word or phrase. Consider sentence 42, “In vain, after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation.” Identify the parenthesis and Henry’s purpose for including it.

25. Metonymy and synecdoche are special types of metaphors. In a metonymy, something strongly associated with an element is substituted for it (for instance, “The White House” is substituted for “the President”). In a synecdoche, part of an element substitutes for the whole (for instance, “farm hands” means “farm laborers”). Find an example of metonymy and synecdoche in this paragraph and identify what each represents.

26. Henry finishes this paragraph with an appeal to logic in the form of an “if... then” statement. What is the “if... then” statement in this paragraph?

27. Henry builds to a syllogistic argument, an appeal to logic, at the end of this paragraph. Identify the three parts of his syllogism (Major premise [A], Minor premise [B], and Conclusion), citing evidence from the text.

28. In this paragraph Henry uses emotional appeals, language intended to create an emotional response from the audience. Choose three examples of emotional language from excerpt 3. You may choose words, phrases, imagery, or other language elements. For each of your examples explain how they are intended to arouse Henry's audience.

Excerpt 4

Paragraph 4: Refutatio

(47) They tell us, sir, that we are weak; unable to cope with so formidable an adversary. (48) But when shall we be stronger? (49) Will it be the next week, or the next year? (50) Will it be when we are totally disarmed, and when a British guard shall be stationed in every house? (51) Shall we gather strength by irresolution and inaction? (52) Shall we acquire the means of effectual resistance, by lying supinely on our backs, and hugging the delusive phantom of hope, until our enemies shall have bound us hand and foot? (53) Sir, we are not weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power. (54) Three millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. (55) Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. (56) There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations; and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us. (57) The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. (58) Besides, sir, we have no election. (59) If we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest. (60) There is no retreat but in submission and slavery! (61) Our chains are forged! (62) Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston! (63) The war is inevitable and let it come! (64) I repeat it, sir, let it come.

29. The refutatio presents and refutes counter arguments. In paragraph 4 Henry uses procatalepsis, an argumentative strategy that anticipates an objection and then answers it. What argument does he anticipate and what two rhetorical strategies does he use to refute it?

30. Henry shifts tone in the beginning of this paragraph to irony, the use of language that conveys the opposite of the intended meaning. How does he convey a ironic tone? Cite evidence from the text.

31. How does Henry shift from a ironic tone back to his urgent argument? Cite evidence from the text.

32. In sentence 58, what does Henry mean by “we have no election”?

33. Most of the British military action to this point had occurred in and around Boston. How does Henry attempt to connect the fate of Virginia to that of Boston, and why would he wish to make this connection?

34. Asyndeton is a series of phrases or words with conjunctions deleted. Find an example of asyndeton in this paragraph. What is its purpose?

35. Find an example of Henry’s return to an image of slavery at the end of this paragraph. What is the purpose of returning to this metaphor yet again?

Excerpt 5

Paragraph 5: Peroratio

(65) It is in vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. (66) Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace but there is no peace. (67) The war is actually begun! (68) The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! (69) Our brethren are already in the field! (70) Why stand we here idle? (71) What is it that gentlemen wish? (72) What would they have? (73) Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? (74) Forbid it, Almighty God! (75) I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

Activity: Review Henry’s Arguments

Review the statements Henry makes as he develops his arguments.



36. The Peroratio, or conclusion, has several purposes, including: to restate an argument, to amplify reasoning, to inspire an audience, and to rouse emotional responses. Cite an example from the text of each of these four purposes.

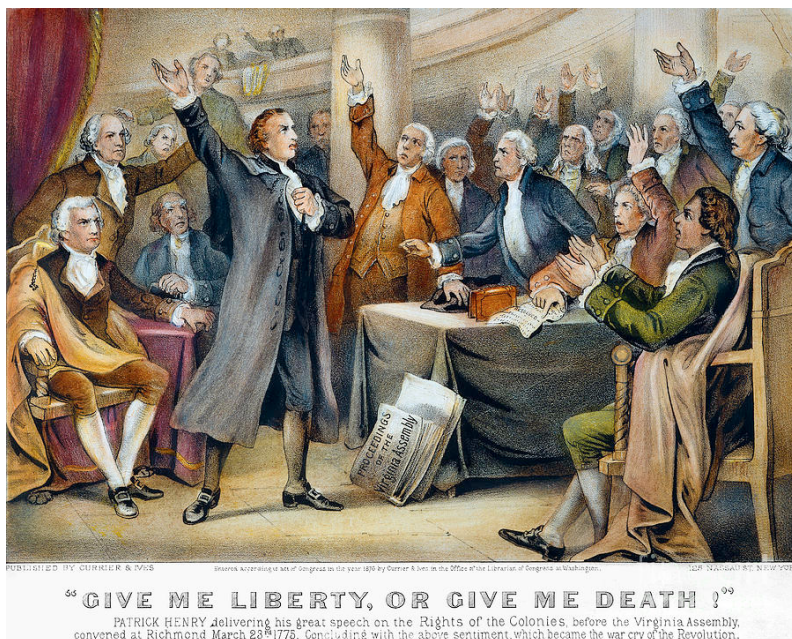
37. What image does Henry use to convey that the battle has already begun?

38. In sentences 70 through 73, Henry uses a series of questions which directly challenge his fellow delegates. What is his purpose in asking these questions?

39. In sentence 75, probably the most famous sentence from this speech, Henry uses antithesis to set up a clear contrast. What does he contrast? What is the effect of this contrast?

40. Sententia, especially useful in speeches, is an argumentative device that uses sound to sum up an argument. What is the sententia in this speech?

41. How does Henry's final statement, "Give me liberty or give me death" represent the courage of both Henry and his audience?



Glossary

entertaining: thinking
moment: importance
magnitude: greatness
revere: highly respect
indulge: yield to desire
arduous: very difficult
temporal: worldly
anguish: great distress
solace: comfort
insidious: deceitful
snare: trap
petition: formal request
comports: agrees with
implements: tools
subjugation: enslavement
martial array: warlike display

rivet: fasten firmly
entreaty: earnest request
supplication: meek request
beseech: to appeal urgently
avert: prevent
remonstrated: forcefully protested
prostrated: totally submitted
implored: begged desperately
interposition: influence
tyrannical: unjustly cruel
slighted: ignored
spurned: rejected
in vain: without result
inviolable: undisturbed
inestimable: priceless
contending: competing

basely: dishonorably
formidable: powerful
adversary: enemy
irresolution: indecision
effectual: effective
supinely: passively
delusive: misleading
phantom: ghost
invincible: cannot be defeated
vigilant: always alert
election: choice
forged: made
extenuate: stretch out
gale: strong wind
resounding: echoing loudly
brethren: brothers

Text

- Patrick Henry, speech to the Virginia Convention, March 23, 1775. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/patrick.asp

Images

- George Matthews, "Patrick Henry, half-length portrait." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/det.4a26383/> [accessed August 2015]
- "Patrick Henry on the George Washington equestrian statue at Capitol Square, Richmond, Virginia." http://www.richmond.com/image_d0936222-3d78-11e2-9cd8-001a4bcf6878.html [accessed September 2015]
- "Saint John's Church, Richmond, Virginia, where Patrick Henry delivered his famous speech." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.34917/> [accessed August 2015]
- Peter F. Rothermel, "Patrick Henry's 'Treason' speech before the House of Burgesses," 1851. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Henry#/media/File:Patrick_Henry_Rothermel.jpg [accessed August 2015]
- "'Give me liberty, or give me death!' Patrick Henry delivering his great speech on the rights of the colonies, before the Virginia Assembly, convened at Richmond, March 23rd 1775, concluding with the above sentiment, which became the war cry of the revolution." Lithograph. New York: Published by Currier & Ives, c1876. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b50326/> [accessed September 2015]