Maxims in Greek Oratory and Rhetoric

By the fourth century BC there was already a long history in Greece of gnomic utterances by sages and in the elegiac poetry of Theognis. Isocrates notably followed this tradition in the To Demonicus, and the advantages for the speaker of employing maxims (gnomai) were emphasised in the rhetorical treatises of both Aristotle (Rhetoric 2.21) and Anaximenes (Rhetoric to Alexander 11). Where, however, Aristotle deems there to be four species of maxim, Anaximenes restricts himself to two. Later Greek theorists such as Aphthonius and Hermogenes also employed gnomai in their preparatory training exercises known as Progymnasmata. In this paper, as a contribution to the ancient history of the soundbite, I propose to examine the various forms of advice offered to speakers by Greek rhetoricians on the use of gnomai, which were recognised as being key parts of a speech’s argumentation.

Mike Edwards

University of Roehampton, London