Studying Disability Rhetorically
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Rhetoric is no stranger to disability; and disability is intimate, albeit anxiously, with rhetoric. In this essay, we wish to illustrate that premise as we elaborate on some of the ways that rhetoric might add both depth and breadth to disability studies. We will focus on key moments or conventions in rhetoric's three largest sub-fields - the history of rhetoric, rhetorical theory, and rhetorical criticism - and illustrate some of the generative ways rhetoric can explain, question, critique, and theorize disability from within those three areas.

Rhetoric's History and Disability

Throughout its 2500 year history, rhetoric has never been particularly friendly to the disabled, the deformed, the deaf or mute, the less-than-perfect in voice, expression or stance. In fact, until fairly recently, one could, without much injustice, define rhetoric as the cultivation and perfection of performative, expressive control over oneself and others. Though rhetorical theory has always devoted much, perhaps most, of its attention to the purely conceptual activities of inventing and arranging the "available means of persuasion," it can never completely lose sight of the oral, performative communication of these means. Thus, in addition to the categories of "invention" and "arrangement" - steps in the composing of a speech - was the category of "delivery," which defined not only proper pronunciation and accent, but gesture, facial expression and general bodily deportment as well. (1) And while rhetoricians almost never afforded the canon of delivery, or *actio*, the same attention as they did *inventio* (invention), many orators were willing to admit that the performance of a speech was the most important aspect of the art of persuasive speaking. (2) The orator Demosthenes, for example, called delivery the first, second and third most important components of eloquence, a pronouncement which Cicero upheld. The persuasive power of a well-conceived and composed oration could be lost with a poor delivery, while, on the contrary, an effective delivery could overcome many faults in a composition.

While the particular principles, rules and proscriptions that make up the art of rhetoric vary from one age to the next, rhetoricians and orators took for granted that anyone who hoped to control the will of an audience had first to control their own voice and body. Most important to the delivery of a speech was the energy and propriety of the orator's voice and body: it must convey the force of the speaker's passionate conviction without transgressing cultural codes of conduct and deportment. If deformities or infirmities warranted a well-deserved death by exposure or "euthanasia" for Aristotle, it was much more the case that orators must be well-

formed and not only fully but perfectly functioning. At its height in pre-Macedonian Greece and, later, in the Roman republic, the *orator perfectus* who led the nation by virtue of his publicly performed orations had to embody all the classical public virtues, including energy, willful self-control, and physical, intellectual and financial resourcefulness. Demosthenes, for example, one of the most famous of the Athenian "Attic" orators, was routinely upheld as an example of human virtue overcoming natural infirmity.

Demosthenes, it seems, was born with a weak and stuttering voice. So shamed was he after his first oration that he shaved half of his head to prevent his going out in public while he practiced his delivery. His practice of declaiming with pebbles in his mouth, or over the roar of a pounding ocean surf - to overcome his natural speaking defects and to gain a more naturally powerful delivery - is one of the most well-rehearsed anecdotes in rhetorical history. Certainly it might also stand as an early example of rehabilitative "technologies."

For the next two-thousand years, rhetoric has periodically added to, remodeled, or refurbished this classical model - the perfectly formed and fully franchised public representative - without substantially altering its foundations or structural supports. Roman rhetoric largely looked to, adopted and denounced, even in the act of borrowing, its Greek antecedents: Greek orators were upheld as models not only of excellent speaking, but excellent public action. Demosthenes became the paragon of the civic leader of the *res publica*: a public-minded citizen capable of uniting, and thereby constituting, a community behind him. This was the model for Cicero as well as for Hume; for Quintilian - an educator and rhetorician in the late Roman Empire - as well as for Thomas Jefferson.

But, curiously, rhetoric has, at the same time, *itself* been denounced as a disabling pursuit. To the degree that persuasion was worked on auditors through such non-rational avenues as stylistic figures, alliterative diction, or emphatic gestures, it crippled men's (audiences as well as speakers were routinely understood to be exclusively male) ability to deliberate coolly and rationally for themselves or to follow the truth. For philosophers like Plato as well as Christian apologists like St. Jerome, arts of persuasion were suspect for their ability to lead people away from the revealed truths of religion or the discovered truths of dialectic. Though rhetoric required perfectly functioning bodies, its detractors also condemned it for appealing to the body and the senses at all: rhetoric used and relied upon the audience's common - i.e. normal - senses, emotions and passions to effect its goals. But even a perfectly feeling body could be deemed irrelevant to pure philosophy or revealed religion. And when the pursuit of truth did admit of rhetoric's usefulness, perfect bodies were again invoked as the conditions upon which this use could be employed. Thus while St. Augustine championed classical rhetoric as useful to the conversion and edification of the faithful, their perfect hearing was essential to

their being accepted into the faith (*On Christian Doctrine*). And while Plato eventually accepts rhetoric as a "hand-maiden" to philosophy, he illustrates their difference through an ableist allegory of two horses pulling the chariot of the soul: one horse is perfect in form and loves the light, the other is "crooked, heavy, ill put together. . . his color dark . . . is shaggy eared and deaf, hardly obedient to whips and spurs" (*Phaedrus*). (3)

Bodily deformity thus at once prevented any rhetorical achievement while, at the same time, it symbolized the problem with rhetoric as a deceptive and sensuous art. When the canon of delivery received renewed attention in the elocution movement (roughly 1700-1900), this relationship went largely unchanged. Elocutionists (and rhetoricians in general) maintained the natural and immediate transmission of thoughts, feelings and beliefs through the stance, gestures, facial expressions, and vocal qualities of the performer. That blacks could not blush signaled an absence of shame; that cripples could not enact or voice their passions similarly signaled some inner spiritual or psychic lack. So pervasive was this Enlightenment fetish for bodily, performative signs of inner states, that we currently use elocutionary terms to indicate characteristics of selfhood and personal agency: "voice," "stance," "position," and "posture." Rhetoricians frequently either borrowed (stole) from deaf communities their gestural and expressive vocabularies for a hearing clientele and readership (John Bulwer, Juan Luis Vives), or they ignored or condemned sign and gesture in favor of rhetoric's most highly prized resource: fluent speech (Alexander Bell, James Rush). The long struggle of deaf activists against oralist education and therapy has its roots, historically, in rhetoric's elocutionary movement. In sum, the historical relationship between rhetoric and disability has hardly been either peaceful or productive.

Rhetorical Theory

Given disability's troubled position within the history of rhetoric, the question might become: why even bother to take a rhetorical approach to disability studies, to bring disability into rhetoric and rhetoric into disability? We think the answers lie in excavating rhetorical theory and rhetorical criticism, for what they are worth, in relation to disability. And in such excavating we would hope to rewrite not only the history, but possibly the present and future, of disability's place in rhetorical history. We would turn first to terms, the very bones of rhetorical theory. When we teach courses in rhetoric, or when we help graduate students prepare for Master's or Ph.D. exams in rhetoric, we find ourselves - for better or worse - with a list of master terms in hand. (4) Here we want to illustrate the potential power of rhetorical theory in disability studies by focusing on a few of these key terms.

Persuasion would be as good a place to start as any. Like any discipline, rhetoric begins with defining itself. And in its beginning, in the first cited definition

for rhetoric given by Corax and Tisias in 467 BCE, *persuasion* figures prominently: "Rhetoric is the artificer of persuasion," they state simply. A hundred years later, in 350 BCE, Aristotle hands us what has become the "standard" definition for rhetoric and he further aligns it with persuasion: "Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion." Cicero (106-43 BCE), reputedly the greatest of the Roman (if not all) orators, echoes: rhetoric is "the art of effective persuasion." And although during the next 2,500 years rhetoric often discarded "persuasion" in favor of other more inclusive or more specific terms (rhetoric, like most disciplines, engages energetically in re-inventing the wheel), the alliance between rhetoric and "persuasion" remained strong. In the 20th century, our principal rhetoricians still imply persuasion as they name rhetoric with phrases like "to form attitudes or to induce actions" (Burke) or "gaining the adherence of minds" (Perelman).

To study the persuasion surrounding the construction and maintenance of disability - medically, aesthetically, linguistically, socially, economically, sexually (to name but a few) - would certainly be a fruitful endeavor. Questions we might begin with, generated by rhetorical definitions such as those offered above, include: Who are the "artificers" of disability? And how do they become so? What are all the *"available* means of persuasion" when disability is argued about? How do those differ from the *existing* means or the *effective* means? How is persuasion used to "form attitudes" or "induce actions" or "gain the adherence of minds" concerning disability? When rhetoricians study persuasion and attempt to answer questions like these they often turn more specific, microscopic lens onto certain other terms and configurations of rhetoric in order to help them then draw the bigger persuasive picture. They look, for example, using Aristotle as their guide, at the three classical appeals (*pisteis*) - *logos*, or the logic of the argument; *pathos*, or the passions of the audience; and *ethos*, the character of the speaker. How (and why, when, and where) is the argument "logically" made (*logos*)? Who is the audience of disability discourses, and how are they appealed to "emotionally" (*pathos*)? How does the character of the speaker or writer get "built" and "delivered" (*ethos*)? To carry out the equation with disability in place: How (and why, when, and where) is a construction of disability established as logical? How is disability emotionally presented? (Why are its emotional tropes so limited to pity, depravation, degradation, inspiration and the like? What weight do these emotions carry in our culture?) And finally, what of the character of the disabled person - or of those who persuade about disability, whether disabled or not? How does their *ethos* contribute to the persuasive endeavor? (We might consider, as but one case, the arguments about *who* can do disability studies in the first place.)

We might also consider the "commonplaces" of arguments surrounding disability. In classical rhetorical theory, "commonplaces" were the standard sources

254

for invention, the places (in the mind) one went to in order to discover (or invent) persuasive appeals. In Aristotelian rhetoric, the "commonplaces" are, in essence, "brainstorming" - where one begins looking in order "to see [all] the *available* means of persuasion" (emphases ours). Establishing the greater and the lesser of the thing is often cited as the most foundational of the commonplaces. "Which is the greater and lesser of disabilities? When is a disability greater or lesser?" Sound familiar? Indeed - these questions are examples of the "commonplace" arguments surrounding disability, perpetrators of persuasion about disability. And there are at least twenty-eight more of these kinds of commonplaces in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* alone. Certainly, it might prove exhaustive and merely a "mental exercise" to examine all twenty-eight of these inventional commonplaces when disability is argued about. But we also think that such an exercise would begin to take us broader and deeper than some of our current limited ventures in disability studies. Such rhetorical studies of disability might have us looking, for example, at more than only medical models, or socio-political ones, or rehabilitative ones, or aesthetic ones and instead at what commonplaces undergird all of these models. And this, we think, would be theory-building at a new level.

Rhetorical Criticism

Currently, most activity in rhetoric is not in the area of theory-building, or even in speechifying, but in the criticism of cultural, ideological, political, or aesthetic discourses. Nor is this criticism restricted to spoken or even written discourse. Current rhetorical critics examine gender portrayal on television, the appeal of family photographs, the actions of anti-nuclear activists or the discursive construction of sports personalities. (5) Rhetorical terms like those outlined above are used to analyze the ways in which meaningful activity shapes our thoughts, our bodies and our lives. For example, a rhetorical critic might examine how manufacturers of prosthetic devices establish their credibility (*ethos*) and appeal to the emotions (*pathos*) of a consuming audience, while explaining what their product does and how it works (*logos*). Thus, cochlear prostheses (implants) originally marketed to implant users failed to produce the demand that the manufacturer (the Cochlear Corporation) hoped for. A rhetorical analysis might explore how The Cochlear Corporation reconceived their appeal to address an audience of (parental) purchasers rather than of actual users, and how this shift necessitated an alteration in their logical and ethical appeals as well (like enlisting FDA approval for its use on children).

Other rhetorical critics, like Walter Fisher, working from the assumption that human understanding works primarily through the coherence and fidelity of stories, examine cultural practices and events as narratives. One might thus examine narratives of disabled persons (Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or the life of Bob Dole) or examine constructions of disability as narratives in and of

themselves. Thus, any category of disability might be seen as a cultural story that is compelled to follow a familiar and appealing plot with predictable characters: the cripple, misfit or freak (rendered, as suggested above, along a few basic lines: pitiful victim, vicious savage, over compensated savant, or gutsy over achiever), the potential (possibly platonic) love interest (consummated to the degree that the disability is overcome, compensated for or remedied), the philanthropic agent of change (the kind doctor, the long-suffering attendant, the disabled person him or herself, the federal government), the evil villain (the disability or the disabled person him or herself, or the cause of the accident, or the deadly disease producing germ). In this critical, *rhetorical* light, Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer works as a misfit-becomes-leader disability narrative that appeals (a traditional term within rhetoric) to children and adults for specific reasons, satisfying culturally specific fears, hopes and desires, as all stories do. Rhetorical critics can read scientific, literary, legal or journalistic texts as stories - allegories about how a culture creates and enforces roles for its members, and the plots according to which those roles are expected to act.

These methods of rhetorical criticism work alongside a number of others currently in use: metaphorical criticism; pentadic (Burkean) criticism; fantasy-theme criticism; feminist, anti-racist, or queer criticism. In general, rhetorical criticism is moving away from attention to the "great speaker, great speech" model, and towards larger, more complex and diffuse social movements, cultural trends and ideological power relations. Rhetorical critics understand theorists like Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Helene Cixous to be rhetorical theorists and critics because of the ways in which they reconceive the power of discourse to shape human thought and action. Rather than "rhetorical criticism," *critical rhetoric* is becoming an increasingly popular term to describe the interest of rhetoricians in calling attention to and advocating changes in existing power imbalances and the "discursive regimes" that maintain them. In this form, then, rhetoric as a theory, a practice and a tool for analysis is well aligned with the current direction of disability studies. Despite its inauspicious beginning, we are certain that rhetoric's long history and extensive vocabulary of textual strategies and tactics offers an unparalleled resource for analysing, understanding, and rethinking the nature of ability and disability, "normal" and "cripple."

Notes

1. Speech making was traditionally broken into five categories or "canons": invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. This order indicate both the steps through which one would proceed as well as the general importance afforded to these activities by rhetoricians.

2. The distinction between orator and rhetorician is something like that

between theory and practice. Rhetoricians established principles for effective discourse while orators were themselves public speakers in law-courts, legislative assemblies, or ceremonial occasions.

3. All references in the first two sections of this essay can be found in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Boston: Beford, 1988. This text is an excellent resource for anyone interested in pursuing the history and theory of rhetoric.

4. A recent list generated in a graduate seminar on the history of rhetoric looked something like this: Invention; Arrangement; Style; Memory; Delivery; Ethos, Pathos, Logos; Kairos; Commonplaces; Enthymeme; Taste; Sublimity; Tropes; Proofs - Artistic and Nonartistic; Metaphor; Reason; Language as: Social Behavior, Intention, Interpretation, Determining Meaning, Creating Knowledge, Ideology, Power; Persuasion; Argument; Discourse; Discursive Formations; Ethics; Practical Reasoning; Speech Acts; Identification; Consubstantiation; Semiotics; Pragmatics; "Grammar"; Episteme (and Epistemic): Dialogue; Dialectic; Deconstruction; "Literary" vs. "Ordinary"; Belle Lettres; Sermonic; Burke's Pentad - Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose; The Rhetorical Triangle - Speaker, Subject, Audience; Presence. And were the challenge ever made, we are sure we could exhaust ourselves by locating the relevance of each of these terms in theorizing disability.

Each of these examples in this section occur in Sonja Foss's *Rhetorical Criticism: Theory and Practice*, Waveland, 1996. This text outlines several of the most common avenues of rhetorical criticism currently used.