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FEARLESS SPEECH: PARRHESIA, IMITATION, AND RHETORICAL DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Classical training in the art of rhetoric involved exercises in which students memorized and performed model speeches of the past. Students learned in practice what could not be conveyed by other means: an embodied sense of practical wisdom and rhetorical judgment. In modern times, the importance of memory and delivery has fallen by the wayside, leading some to pronounce them the lost canons of rhetorical pedagogy. In this essay, I discuss the importance of the oral performance of historical speeches “of the people” as part of a rhetorical democracy oriented toward thinking and speaking a better world. I argue that imitation, as conceived by Isocrates and Cicero, in conjunction with the classical concept of *parrhesia*, conceived as speaking truth to power, can enliven our efforts to fortify democracy through rhetorical education.

Keywords:

Imitation, parrhesia, democracy, rhetoric, Michel Foucault, Isocrates, Cicero

FEARLESS SPEECH: PARRHESIA, IMITATION, AND RHETORICAL DEMOCRACY

There is perhaps no better place and time than Doha, Qatar, in 2013, to host the Fourth International Conference on Argumentation, Rhetoric, Debate, and the Pedagogy of Empowerment. Qatar has cultivated an internationally recognized reputation for diplomacy, and promoting deliberation between nations, even as it has wisely invested in its own educational and civic infrastructure. The theme of the conference, where this essay was first presented, indicates nothing less than the scope and the stakes of the intellectual work before the conference attendees: thinking and speaking a better world. We are indebted to and receive inspiration from Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser (2013), for pointing out the timeliness of our efforts in her opening address for the conference: “after centuries of clashes and resentment, of power struggles and conflicts, we now have unprecedented opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding.” While discussing the importance of civic engagement among the youth, Her Highness also stressed the importance of the manner in which we strive for this better world: “in the past, our young people were mere recipients of information and boundaries. Their reality was set for them by traditional institutions. But today their role in society has undergone a major shift. Our young people have levels of awareness and education that allow for a structure of awareness to be built from bottom to top, not vice versa.”

The central concern of this essay involves the role that rhetorical scholarship and education can play in thinking and speaking a better world—if, by *better world*, we mean one in which public policy and civic participation are underwritten by a mutual commitment to expanding the horizons of democracy and freedom. In order to avoid an unwitting betrayal of this commitment, we are compelled to reflect upon the importance of the manner and the means of thinking and speaking used to bring freedom and a more democratic world into being. In other words, our means must themselves be consonant with our ends—a prefigurative transformation that does not come from the outside but instead unfolds in an immanent self-transformation among the people. As Michael Hardt (2007) points out, “this relationship between means and ends is... something like an expanding spiral... democracy... expands through the process of self-training, so too expands the democracy aimed for, the horizon of self-rule.... [which furthermore] constantly nourishes... the powers of political imagination and desire” (p. xxi). This means, on the one hand, that spontaneous revolution, however warranted, will not suffice if it is enduring traditions and lasting institutions of democracy that we seek. On the other hand, it also means that democracy cannot be solely dictated from above by the representative elite, however benevolent and well-intentioned that elite may be. Democracy must be learned by the people and it must be learned by doing.

It is well-known that rhetorical education has long served as the chief means of cultivating the habits of civic engagement and self-rule among the people. Here I would like to advance a somewhat counterintuitive argument for the central importance of the mostly forgotten or neglected practices of *mimesis* (imitation) and *parrhesia* (speaking truth to power) to any rhetorical education aimed at fostering liberty and habits of self-rule. Mimesis, or *imitatio* (Latin), has fallen out

of favor due in part to the modern emphasis on authentic self-expression; while parrhesia, or *licentia* (Latin), has been associated with philosophy and, indeed, provocatively theorized as the opposite of rhetoric by Michel Foucault (2001, 2011a, 2011b). However unlikely these terms, considered individually, may seem as part of the democratic project of rhetorical education, I argue that in relation to each other, they establish a dynamic of invention that equips contemporary students to respond to present exigencies by learning how others have responded to past exigencies. Perhaps more to the point, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, we scholars and teachers of rhetoric and debate are compelled to test our assumptions about rhetorical education and civic engagement against the reality of the demands for democracy issued in so many ways and by so many voices across the Arab world. Need I add that Her Highness and the organizers of this conference have already begun to illuminate the path that we should take? It is with an eye towards addressing these historical circumstances that I offer (1) an explanation and defense of my theoretical argument, (2) a brief consideration of my own experience implementing imitation and parrhesia in undergraduate classrooms in the United States, and (3) suggestions regarding the implementation of imitation and parrhesia in a global context.

IMITATION: INTERPRETATION, INVENTION, AND ETHICS

Imitation was an important part of classical rhetorical education in both Greece and Rome. In order to begin to grasp how it functioned in these contexts, it is necessary to forestall modern assumptions about imitation as derivative repetition or as the production of a mere copy. Isocrates, in *Against the Sophists*, explains that those who would profess rhetoric “must...set such an example of oratory that the students who have taken form under his instruction and are able to pattern after him will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm which is not found in others” (74). This tradition is continued in *De Oratore*, where Marcus Tullius Cicero remarks that model speeches functioned as a way for students to develop the habits mind that were necessary to enter into “the fighting-line of public debate” (I, XXXIV). Students are encouraged to “carefully consider whom we are to take as patterns, whom we should wish to be like” (I, XXXIV). Moreover, he claims, “we have to study actors as well as orators, that bad practice may not lead us into some inelegant or ugly habit (I, XXXIV). In addition, “the memory too must be trained by carefully learning by heart as many pieces as possible both from our Latin writers and the foreigner” (I, XXXIV). Thus, for Cicero, memorization and recitation cultivate in students the capacity to distinguish the habits of eloquence from inelegant speech (a critical interpretive function) and provide resources for the invention of future arguments to suit new circumstances (a productive inventional function).

Michael Leff (1997) illuminates the importance of imitatio to classical rhetorical education in his insightful essay “Hermeneutical Rhetoric.” Leff explains that in contrast to the handbook tradition of rhetoric—which amount to collections of abstract rules of eloquence—imitatio could “show what the rules could not tell” (p. 202). Students would first “learn to identify strategies and forms as actually embodied in a historical [speech] text and to judge their significance relative to the

construction of the text as a whole and its situated rhetorical purposes” (p. 202). Students would then be instructed to re-embodiment the strategies and forms of model texts in ways that address new situations. In this way productive and critical interpretive dimensions of imitatio, as a practice of rhetorical instruction, interact in a bi-directional logic of influence: “the old text leaves its impression on the rhetor’s product, but the rhetor’s productive act...[leaves] its interpretive impression on the original” (202).

For Cicero, imitatio and other practices of rhetorical instruction are not only meant to cultivate the art of speaking well, for “eloquence is so potent a force that it embraces the origin and operation and developments of all things, all the virtues and duties, all the natural principles governing the morals and minds and life of mankind, and controls the government of the state, and expresses everything that concerns whatever topic in a graceful and flowing style” (III, XX). “For in old days,” Cicero remarks, “at all events the same system of instruction seems to have imparted education both in right conduct and in good speech; nor were the professors in two separate groups, but the same masters gave instruction both in ethics and in rhetoric” (III, XV). In subsequent passages Cicero chastises Socrates for separating the oneness of eloquence into the two of ethics and rhetoric.

Leff (1997) is therefore firmly within the Ciceronian tradition when he claims that imitatio, far from being a simple “technical classroom exercise,” has the potential to transmit from the past to the future, not only models of good speech, but also, ethical character embodied within those models (202). Imitatio may therefore be a key part of an ethical tradition of rhetorical instruction or, to say the same thing, a rhetorical tradition of ethics. In any case, this mode of cultivating ethical conduct through speech training is neither completely determined by past examples nor completely contingent (and therefore determined in the last instance by total relativism). Instead, as Leff points out, imitatio suggests the potential of rhetorical education for “stable innovation—building community through tradition without becoming mired in a staid traditionalism” (203).

To rephrase an earlier point, the very idea of thinking and speaking a better world, suggests that it is necessary to consider the implications of the means we would use to achieve our aim, lest we renege on our commitments. The classical practice of imitation is useful here as an example of a constitutive rhetorical practice in which the speaker learns by doing: he or she *does* what he or she wants to *become*, and in the process, expands his or her structure of awareness, rhetorical capabilities, and ethical sensibilities, *from the bottom up*. While it may seem like a somewhat obvious point, the intellectual stakes are high. The conceptual formulation of imitation as a constitutive rhetorical practice, in which doing and being unfold in an immanent expanding spiral of becoming, bypasses thousands of years of repression of the inherently *monist* tendencies of rhetorical theory. The seed of imitation, once planted, has the power to upend the dualistic foundations of Socratic thought: the true idea and the copy, thought and speech, being and doing, and philosophy and rhetoric. Although this point is heavy with consequences, I leave further explanation for another time and direct readers to my previously published work (May, 2012, 2011, 2009) and, for a literary

demonstration, to *Zen the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig (1999).

The ultimate concerns of this essay are far more practical. If democracy, like ethics, is something that one must learn, and one must learn by doing, what sort of learning by doing fosters a commitment to expanding the horizons of democracy and freedom? While imitation provides us with the formal elements of a process through which this immanent transformation takes place, it does not expressly stipulate the content of the transformation (or what that transformation, in other words, manifests). What sort of speech-texts or oratorical strategies should we set as models for ourselves to imitate, and therefore to develop from, if our ultimate purpose is to develop lasting habits of engaged democratic citizenship? What sorts of rhetorical exercises can help us to be what we want to become without either determining that becoming in advance or leaving it, willy-nilly to any becoming whatsoever?

PARRHESIA AND IMITATION

Readers familiar with Michel Foucault will note that the title of the present essay borrows a locution, “fearless speech,” from a series of lectures that Foucault delivered near the end of his life. These lectures were part of his seminar “Discourse and Truth,” given in English at the University of Berkeley in 1983 on the Greek, and later, Roman, concept of *parrhesia*. Foucault (2001) explains that the user of *parrhesia*, “is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through discourse” (12). He further specifies four main characteristics of *parrhesia*. The first characteristic of *parrhesia* is frankness in speech: the speaker means what he says and says what he means. Second, the purpose of such frank speech is not the demonstration of truth, or at least not primarily, but rather the criticism of one’s interlocutor. Third, one who uses *parrhesia* does so from a position of inferiority (for example, a philosopher advising a king, a student criticizing a teacher, or a citizen criticizing the majority). Finally, by virtue of the preceding characteristics, *parrhesia* also involves risk. Put simply, frank speech that is delivered from a *parrhesiastes* to a superior interlocutor or to a hostile majority—that is to say, *truth spoken to power*—can be dangerous.

Considered together, these characteristics of *parrhesia* involve the *parrhesiastes* in a relationship to self, truth, and duty. For what is spoken when one speaks truth to power need not be spoken at all. One is always free to *not* speak frankly and to spare oneself the risk of retribution. The *parrhesiastes* knows he or she is free to not speak but does so anyway, and in so doing, reveals a specific kind of truth of the self: how one speaks reveals how one chooses to exist, to be in the world and in relation to power. This truth of the self is not the disclosure of an a priori self-same Cartesian cogito; rather, this truth of the self is constituted, that is to say, spoken forth, in the utterance of *parrhesia*.

Foucault contrasts *parrhesia* with rhetoric and unfortunately reduces the latter to the mere artifice of language. Rhetoric, for Foucault, involves techniques of telling

one's interlocutors what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear. Thus Foucault invokes Plato's distinction between rhetoric and parrhesia in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, while mostly ignoring the importance of parrhesia in the rhetorical tradition. For example, noting that parrhesia is discussed in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* as *libera oratione*, Foucault (2001) acknowledges that parrhesia is a "'figure' among rhetorical figures but...that it is without any figure since it is completely natural...the zero degree of those rhetorical figures which intensify the emotions of the audience" (21).

In a recent essay, Arthur E. Walzer (2013) persuasively argues that "historians of rhetoric are...likely to be disappointed in the genealogy of parrhesia that Foucault provides.... [because] claims to speak frankly always have rhetorical implication... [and] parrhesia has a history within rhetoric" (2). Wouldn't parrhesia, as a figure without a figure, be the nth degree, rather than the zero degree, of rhetorical figuration? Furthermore, what sort of training, if not rhetorical training (*de facto* or *de jure*), would provide students with the practical know-how and wherewithal to engage in speaking truth to power? Is not truth, when it is defined in opposition to rhetoric, most infected by that which it claims to oppose? A rather off-hand comment in Cicero's (2001) *De Oratore* is instructive here: "what impressed me most deeply about Plato in that book [the *Gorgias*] was, that it was when making fun of orators that he himself seemed to me to be the consummate orator" (I, XI). Here I register only in passing that I do not take these various and sundry seminar lectures on parrhesia, unedited and unrevised for publication by Foucault, to represent his final thoughts on the subject, even though I consider them of seminal importance to rethinking a materialist history of truth and the production and care of the self in Western thought. Indeed, Professor Walzer argues that, "Foucault's important examination of parrhesia as a type of veridiction or mode of truth-telling could have interesting implications for rhetoric, especially for a theory of a rhetoric of counsel" (18).

Yet it will be readily admitted that Foucault's lectures provide a limited and partial perspective of the relationship, or at least the potential relationship, between rhetoric and parrhesia. In more specific terms, the reification of the binary division of parrhesia and rhetoric, inherited from the Platonic dialogues, partakes in an ontological dualism that threatens to foreclose the radical potential of parrhesia as a constitutive *rhetorical* figure. As a constitutive rhetorical figure, the subject is spoken forth through the performative embodiment of parrhesia - in other words, the parrhesiastes is constituted in and through the act of parrhesia. As a constitutive rhetorical figure, parrhesia may be reconsidered as part of a rhetorical education in which students come to terms with their duty to speak truth to power in a democratic society, not through channeling the muses, but through practice.

If we agree with the more or less self-evident observation that truth spoken to power is crucial to expanding the democratic horizons and liberty of the people, particularly when an imbalance of power makes such speech both necessary and dangerous, parrhesia may provide a crucial democratic content to the formal properties of imitation. More specifically, parrhesia and imitation could be productively combined as part of a rhetorical education in which students are

provided with model instances of truth spoken to power. The purpose of these models would be to fortify students' ability to understand how strategies and characteristics of speaking truth to power were adapted to fit past historical circumstances (the critical interpretive function of imitation) and to re-embody those strategies and characteristics in ways that are adapted to new contexts (the productive function of imitation).

Returning to an earlier point, rhetorical exercises in modeling truth spoken to power have the potential to fashion the democratic ethos of student-citizens through stable innovation (Leff, 1997). This mode of stable innovation is not determined by the past or purely relative to the contingencies of the moment. Instead, students learn to become citizens through practicing what it is the duty of citizens to do: to speak truth to power. They furthermore engage in a democratic process of becoming—a process that is neither dictated from above nor forged in the fires of spontaneous rebellion. This process may contribute to one of the preconditions of expanding democracy, what Her Highness (2013) refers to as a “structure of awareness that must be between people across society and must be rooted in education.” Once this structure of awareness is vested directly in the bodies of the citizens, Michael Hardt (2007) argues that “those formed in this process can be trusted...to rule themselves without a master and, in fact, will attack violently any potential master who tries to usurp their power” (p. xxi).

CONCLUSION: PUTTING PARRHESIA AND IMITATION INTO PRACTICE

My practical experience putting parrhesia and imitation into practice primarily stems from my occupation as a university professor in the United States. For the past five years, and in different contexts (a small liberal arts institution and large land-grant universities), I have sought to incorporate exercises in imitation and parrhesia in my courses in rhetoric and public address. For example, in my courses on the history of American public address, students are assigned two anthologies of historic speeches, each of which offer a different perspective on traditions of eloquence and the transformative power of public speech. One anthology provides a rather conventional representation of the canon of American public address. The other anthology, *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove (2009), provides a documentary people's history. This anthology includes primary documents, speeches and other texts, that were formative of social justice movements in America - including movements against Indian removal, the civil rights movement, the labor movement, and the movement for the abolition of slavery, to name only a few. Zinn and Arnove point out that the commonality between the voices of these movements, “is that they have mostly been shut out of the orthodox histories, the major media, the standard textbooks, the controlled culture” (p. 24). Zinn and Arnove further argue that, “the result of having our history dominated by presidents and generals and other ‘important’ people is to create a passive citizenry, not knowing its own powers, always waiting for some savior...to bring peace and justice” (p. 24).

A number of the speeches included in *Voices of a People's History of the United States* provide examples of parrhesia. For example, in an 1873 Susan B. Anthony's address, taken from *The United States of America v. Susan B. Anthony*, she employs a frank defense of her right to vote, despite its illegality, to one Judge Ward Hunt, whom is about to pronounce her sentence. Students are given an assignment to select one of these speeches, memorize it, and recite it in front of the class. An important caveat is that they must, without changing the words of the speech, try to use vocal inflections and other techniques of delivery to communicate the relevance of the speech to their classmates. My students and I have discovered that to adapt a historical speech to contemporary audiences, without changing the words of the speech, requires much more critical thought than memorization and recitation might seem to require. The process of completing the assignment teaches students what simply cannot be conveyed in other ways: an embodied sense of what it can mean to speaking truth to power. Furthermore, as students become more familiar with the importance of parrhesia as a vehicle of social change, they start to break down the barriers in their minds that separate education from civic engagement. They begin to see that university is not isolated from the real world of politics and civic engagement but instead can function as part of that world—at least as a training ground where the skills required for politics and engagement can be sharpened.

I am acutely aware of the highly situated and contextual nature of my endeavors to incorporate parrhesia and imitation in the classroom. I nevertheless hope that my theoretical argument is relevant across regional differences, and that similar exercises could be instituted in diverse circumstances, so long as historical and cultural specificities are taken into account. For example, while speeches by secular feminists may be relevant to students in the United States, more appropriate examples may be drawn from Islamic traditions to speak to students situated in Arabic cultures. As in other educational contexts, it is important to formulate lesson plans and assignments that meet students where they are, rather than where we would like them to be.

In conclusion, giving students the tools that they need to themselves become models of civic engagement and political participation is an investment in democracy, not only in democracy for ourselves and our students, but for subsequent generations. It represents a commitment to expanding democracy from below and putting in motion lasting safeguards to protect that democracy from the aberrant winds of history. It is to those ends that I dedicate this essay and submit it for consideration to a candid world.

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