

Review

## Rereading and Retelling Rhetoric's Embodied Stories

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Dolmage, Jay Timothy. *Disability Rhetoric*. Syracuse University Press, 2014. 349 pages.

A powerful and exciting project for those readers in rhetoric and writing studies who are familiar with disability studies, Jay Dolmage's *Disability Rhetoric* offers an accessible entry into this important conversation for readers from a range of backgrounds with either disability studies or rhetoric and writing studies, from undergraduates to senior scholars. *Disability Rhetoric* asks us consider what kinds of disability futures might be possible if we reconsider our understandings of rhetoric, disability, and, at their intersections, disability rhetoric, all through disability historiography and disability futures. Put another way, in *Disability Rhetoric* Dolmage asks critical questions of the stories we have told about certain bodies, the stories we have ignored, and the stories that need to be retold. Importantly, he gives readers the tools to continue asking these kinds of critical questions and to teach our students to do so as well.

Part historical, part theoretical, and part applied rhetorical analysis, *Disability Rhetoric* argues that we can and should reread bodied rhetorical history and embodied rhetoric as powered by an ongoing and longstanding tension around notions of normativity. Through such a disability historiography, we might re/shape potential disability futures. The introduction, "Prothesis," provides readers with an overview of the book, its structure, and a preview of some of Dolmage's central arguments. In chapter 1, on "Disability Studies of Rhetoric," Dolmage explores the rhetorical history of the disability studies concept of normativity, drawing on the work of disability studies scholars such as Martha Rose and Lennard Davis and scholars of rhetoric such as Andrea Lunsford and Susan Jarratt, among others. In

chapter 2, "Rhetorical Histories of Disability," Dolmage turns his attention to the classical roots of the field of rhetoric and asks that we "expand our ideas about who our rhetorical teachers might be, and what types of intelligence they might valorize, as well as what forms this intelligence might take in body and mind (always together) in action" (67). Chapter 3, "Imperfect Meaning," examines the ways that disability has been constructed and defined as deficit, as well as proposed models and theories of disability as unique, imperfect, powerful, and meaning-making.

Chapter 4, "*Métis*," is one of the book's most important chapters, focusing on the mythical stories of the disabled Greek god Hephaestus, "his craft, his cunning, his ability" (193) and challenging commonly held perceptions about this figure. Chapter 5, "Eating Rhetorical Bodies," continues the work of chapter 4 and looks at the figure of Metis, the Greek goddess named after *métis*, the form of intelligence, alongside mythical and rhetorical retellings of *métis* myths, notably Helene Cixous' use of the Medusa myths and Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestizaje*, among others. In Chapter 6, "I Did It on Purpose," Dolmage focuses on the Oscar-winning film, *The King's Speech* because it is both a movie about rhetoric and a movie about disability, as a space in which to apply the questions and ideas of the book in order to argue that such questions and ideas "have real, contemporary significance" (225). Finally, in the book's conclusion, or "Prosthesis," Dolmage considers the stories the book has told and the future stories that the book might help readers tell about disability rhetoric. Among the progression of these chapters Dolmage has also included two interchapters, an innovative new genre that provides useful and quite powerful takeaways for readers to apply to their own classrooms, writing programs, and scholarship.

The two interchapters Dolmage includes in *Disability Rhetoric* are worth discussing here in depth because of the important accessibility they provide for readers new to the field of disability studies. The first, located after chapter 1 and titled "Archive and Anatomy of Disability Myths," charts persistent disability myths in order to demonstrate the ways that disability is rhetorically shaped. Dolmage provides a chart constructed of three columns—Myth, Description, and Example—and traces a range of disability myths, such as Physical Deformity as Sign of Internal Flaw, Disability as Isolating and Individuated, and Disability as a Sign of Social Issue through a variety of contemporary and historical rhetorical artifacts, including novels, speeches, films, and the Bible. Of particular use in this section is what Dolmage describes as the "Disability Myth 'Test.'" Similar to the Bechdel Test, developed by Alison Bechdel as a way to interrogate how female characters are positioned in a movie, Dolmage proposes versions of a Disability Myth Test to interrogate how disability is positioned in a movie and asks

that readers continue to problematize and theorize such a test and the texts to which we could apply it. This test, along with Dolmage's broader list of disability myths, would be a useful way of introducing undergraduate students to a disability studies perspective they might turn on the cultural texts they consume in their everyday lives.

The second interchapter, located after chapter 4 and titled "Repertoire and Choreography of Disability Rhetorics," proposes a range of disability rhetorics: "means of conceptualizing not just how meaning is attached to disability, but to view the knowledge and meaning that disability *generates*" (125). Contrasting his inventory against that of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), Dolmage describes this work as labeling a range of conditions—in this case, rhetorical conditions—but in a way that frames them as potential rather than deficit (126). Recalling Jeanne Fahnestock's definition of rhetorical figures as departures from the expected order of words, Dolmage extends this definition further and argues that "in this way, all rhetorical figures are nonnormative or 'disabled': they are the abnormality that fires newness and invites novel and multiple interpretations" (126). The rhetorical figures Dolmage includes in this interchapter, then, have the potential to generate nonnormative meanings, and Dolmage provides examples of how to do this kind of reinterpreting work so that readers might adapt, activate, and make their own meanings. Much like the chart Dolmage includes in his first interchapter, this inventory of disability rhetorics is also in the form of a chart with three columns: Rhetoric, Description, and Example. Dolmage's full list is too comprehensive to include here, but one example can demonstrate the usefulness and importance of this addition to the book.

Describing Situated Knowledges as "an elaboration of the concept of standpoint epistemology," and recalling Donna Haraway's explanation that "subjugated standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world" (191), Dolmage provides the following explanation of how we might consider disability as situated knowledge framed with an emphasis on potential rather than deficit: "One example of disability as 'situated knowledge' offering a 'transformative account' of the world is that many of the technologies developed first for people with disabilities (such as optional character recognition texting, or email) have reshaped communication for all" (130). This simple shift in perspective is a powerful one, and one that could be particularly useful when deployed in the classroom. How else might we take rhetorical figures and re/figure them taking into account the potential of disability for generative meaning-making? How else might we reread embodied rhetorical strategies as disability rhetoric?

One of Dolmage's central arguments is that the body has never been fully or fairly understood for its role in shaping and multiplying our understanding of rhetoric as deploying every available means of persuasion. Some bodies were neglected from the story of rhetoric's beginnings while others (or, "Others"), like those with disabilities, were positioned as arhetorical through which discourses on rhetoric were shaped. Exceptions to this arhetoricity were figures Dolmage identifies as super crip, a disability myth Dolmage expands on in interchapter 1 and traces from Greek mythology through contemporary texts. He expands on his goals by explaining:

An emphasis on rhetorical embodiment, when coupled with this disability studies perspective, offers ways to interrogate how our ideas about bodily norms have conditioned our experience of rhetoric and offers ways to analyze how and why, and to what effect, we have projected our visions, feelings, and experiences of rhetoric into this narrow, nearly fictional world, invested in a particular kind of body, imprisoned in the geometry of the norm. We may never fully escape this normative conditioning, but we can engage with the ongoing work of critical realignment. The first step is to recognize the *canon* of bodily denigration and then to begin shaking it, both from within the specific rhetorical histories we have chosen and from without. (71; emphasis original)

Throughout *Disability Rhetoric*, Dolmage returns to the stories that make up rhetoric's canon and shakes them out. In so doing, he also asks us to shift the ways that we consider the rhetorical implications of contemporary texts, and offers readers critical tools through which to do so.

While not every first year writing seminar or writing program includes attention to disability rhetoric, perhaps it should. In fact, perhaps all post-secondary writing and rhetoric instruction should attend to disability rhetoric in some way, from content-focused discussions to critical approaches to assignment design (see also the review in this volume by Annika Konrad for examples of how a politics of wonder uncovers unexamined assumptions about disability in classrooms and writing programs). As I have written about here already, one of the most engaging and compelling aspects of *Disability Rhetoric* is that it is filled with stories: stories of Greek gods and goddesses, stories of classical philosophers and mythical figures, stories on the screen, stories on the page, stories we tell ourselves, stories we have forgotten, and stories we have ignored. Most importantly, in asking us to re/consider the stories of where rhetoric and disability, and the intersections of the two, have come from, Dolmage also asks us to re/consider the future of stories of disability rhetoric. In his "Prosthesis" to *Disability Rhet-*

oric, Dolmage writes, “*Métis* is a model for adaptation, change, critique, uniqueness, prosthesis, recursivity, invention, intercorporeality, ambiguity, and abstraction. What if these were our central educational values (instead of accumulation, retention, comprehension, compliance, reproduction)?” (289). We might extend this question one step further and ask, “What if these were our central cultural values?” *Disability Rhetoric* was published in 2014 but now, more than ever, these questions must be asked, especially as we work to shape the stories of our futures. Dolmage’s concluding lines to *Disability Rhetoric* are powerful ones, and it seems fitting to use them here: “This book, like the ‘even flame’ of Hephaestus’ metallurgy, might offer some illumination and heat. But it is up to you to forge and to adapt your own tools” (291). Luckily for the wide range of readers this book has likely already attracted, Dolmage has provided us with the means to do so.

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