

“Breathe Upon Us an Even Flame”: Hephaestus, History, and the Body of Rhetoric

This essay challenges accepted versions of rhetorical history by recovering the mythical figure of Hephaestus and the cunning rhetoric he embodied, mētis. This critical retelling offers a new and more expansive perspective on history, rhetoric, and embodiment, as it lays bare many of our assumptions about the available means of persuasion. The author asserts that a cunning approach to rhetoric might allow for the celebration of all of our embodied differences.

In this essay I will tell the stories of Hephaestus, a Greek God with a physical disability—a Greek God who embodied *mētis*, the cunning intelligence needed to act in a world of chance.¹ Hephaestus was the famed inventor, the trickster, the trap-builder, and machine-creator of Greek myth. His body was celebrated, not “despite” his disability but because of his embodied intelligence. I will suggest that Hephaestus’s story has been neglected but that we can now read it as a challenge to stories of rhetorical history that reinscribe normative ideas about rhetorical facility and about which bodies matter. In this essay I will use theory from the field of disability studies in order to analyze the function of such norms and to disrupt our acceptance of an ableist view of rhetorical history. Building on growing interest in embodiment within rhetorical studies, this paper places bodily difference in the driver’s seat. I argue that exclusion has been imported into the classical world. As a result, we have been left with a narrow view of the role disability may have played in the period. Telling the stories of Hephaestus allows me to recover a different rhetorical body. This is true both in the sense that he provides an image of disability as valued by ancient society and because *mētis* is a distinctly bodily intelligence. I want to elaborate upon this embodiment as I trouble mythological and rhetorical history. I will illustrate why we need to tell new stories while I also show that we need to recognize *mētis* as a rhetoric, thus recognizing the body as rhetorical and thereby valorizing our own and our students’ bodily differences as meaningful and meaning-making.



Figure 1: Hephaestus on a winged throne. Red figure cup by the Ambrosius Painter. Attic, ca. 510 BCE. Late Archaic. Inv. F. 2273. Destroyed in WWII. Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Photo credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

Hephaestus was the Greek god of fire and metallurgy.² In Figure 1, Hephaestus appears “able-bodied,” yet he rides a proto-wheelchair, a chariot with wings. In vase paintings, sculpture, and in written texts, Hephaestus is most often depicted as having a physical disability, his feet twisted around backwards or sideways (as in Figure 2). In Figure 1, because he holds his tools and he rides a chariot that he has crafted, his abilities as an artisan are also depicted, and these skills are valued. Homer repeatedly mentions that he is lame, God of the “dragging foot” (Murray, *Iliad* 18.371). But his disability also has positive connotations. Having feet that face away from one another does not necessarily entail “impairment”—it means he can move from side to side more quickly. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, in *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, write that Hephaestus was symbolized by the crab and that his

side-to-side movement had symbolic value. He was seen as having a “power [. . .] emphasized by his distinctive characteristic of being endowed with a double and divergent orientation.” This ability allows him to harness fire and to invent metallurgy. His “disability” was (and can again be) seen as that which allowed him to “dominate shifting, fluid powers such as fire and wind” in his work in the forge. In their version of the story, Hephaestus had to be “even more mobile and polymorphic than these [elements]” (273). Like a crab, Hephaestus’s symbolic movement is not straightforward. Also, like any person who might build himself an extraordinary winged vehicle, like the one pictured in Figure 1, he is crafty. These qualities also conform to, and shape, the particular form of intelligence that Hephaestus was said to symbolize: *mētis*.

Detienne and Vernant define *mētis* as characterized by and embodying a “complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behavior,” as “a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing.” *Mētis* manifests itself as flair, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, and experience acquired over the years (3). In Greek thought, through close alliance with *kairos*, *tuchē*, and *technē*, *mētis* interacts with and circumscribes the world of chance and opportunity—in effect, providing the very possibility of acting in a world characterized by the swirling winds of luck.

Tuchē is defined by Detienne and Vernant as that which “brings the indiscernible future within the realm of possibility.” *Tuchē* is luck, metaphorized as the wind itself, calling for both navigation and artisanship, as the sailor must know when and how to change direction. *Tuchē* is both the wind on the water and the play of the tiller—it “stands for the opportunity to succeed” and is said to match the ambivalence of *kairos* (223). The two terms, in fact, were often seen as a pair. Detienne and Vernant argue that *kairos* was introduced after *mētis* and that it means navigating—looking ahead and seeing a “propitious moment” for steering or “crafting” a product (or an argument). Eric Charles White writes that *kairos* entails a “conception of time as discontinuous occasions” (14). He writes that in such a universe, “there can never be more than a contingent and provisional management of the present opportunity” (13). *Mētis*, then, is the capacity to act in a *kairotic* world; it is the “speculatively mobile form of interpretation” that White insists is necessary to act in the moment (160). *Kairos*, the idea of invention only within shifting contexts, only in the world of *tuchē*—of the winds of chance—demands *mētis*, a way to be even more mobile, polymorphic, and cunning than the world itself. The person with *mētis* perceives the world of *tuchē*, harnesses *kairos*, and has the ingenuity required to think of cutting and building the tiller itself. Janet Atwill writes at length about *technē*, and she suggests that “the significance of *technē* often lies in the power of transformation that *mētis* enables” (56). In her history *technē*

are all of the transformative arts that *mētis* makes possible. The building of tillers, for instance, would be an example of utilizing *mētis* to create a *technē*.

Recently, Karen Kopelson and Michelle Ballif have written of *mētis* as a pedagogical strategy. Also, Debra Hawhee's recent book, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*, more fully theorizes *mētis* as a bodily intelligence, evidence of a syncretic relationship between flexible bodies and the virtuosity of the mind, leading to her argument that "thought does not just happen within the body, it happens as the body" (58). Her explanation of "cunning intelligence" offers important clarification about the situational nature of *mētis*, an intelligence that emerges as unpredictable yet responsive action. She succeeds in arguing for the importance of *mētis* not just as a term from another time but as a way to express the "idea of intelligence as immanent movement" (48). I will suggest that *mētis* is a powerful way for us all (teachers, students, citizens) to move. *Mētis* is a way to think and also a way to think about thinking. Importantly, *mētis* values bodily difference as generative of meaning, as in the example of Hephaestus. Looking at the image of Hephaestus in his chariot, we might feel some ambivalence—he is a disabled God, a "crippled" craftsman, and we might assume that these things are mutually exclusive. One could suggest that he overcame his disability through hard work. Yet both his bodily difference and his craftsmanship are evidence of the particular form of intelligence that Hephaestus was said to symbolize: *mētis*. In this way his disability is his ability.

Disability Studies and Rhetorical History

Humans have always exercised the right to make choices about the anatomical features that they consider desirable or interesting, and, at times, these options have included rather than excluded women and men with disabilities.

—Hahn 30

Disability studies emphasizes the idea of the social or cultural construction of disability while *also* insisting on the materiality of disability. Using a disability studies filter to view composition and rhetoric, I recognize the emancipatory potential of new stories in both the "material" and the social sphere. Disability, in this light, is bodily and rhetorical—two concepts that are tightly united. I see rhetoric as the function of power within language, and I connect it to the body because the body is what has been traditionally defined and (thus) "disciplined" by rhetorics of disability, while at the same time our bodies speak. Creating, as well as uncovering, new stories and alternative traditions—different bodies—is

thus a powerful move. As James Berlin has said, "rhetorical histories are important [because] they explore the relationship of discourse and power, a rhetoric [. . .] being a set of rules that privilege particular power relations" (Octolog 12). I hope to show, first of all, the ways that we read rhetorical history as a normative text and, secondly, how this history (our story of history) has privileged the "normal" body.³ This is of utmost importance because, as Douglas Baynton has written, "disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups. [. . . T]he concept of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them" (33). As Lennard Davis and other disability studies scholars have pointed out, the categories of normal and abnormal, able and disabled, are invented and enforced in service of "a certain kind of society" in service of particular ideologies ("Bell Curve" 9–11). Disability in history, then, always highlights particular power relations, relations that affect everyone. Normalcy in the "modern world" is a useful fiction that marks out unwanted elements while reinforcing the hegemony of the dominant group. Yet ideas of normalcy have changed over time. Davis suggests that "disability was once regarded very differently than it is now," and he mentions Greek society as an example ("Bell Curve" 9). As Harlan Hahn wrote, there has been a noticeable "failure of prior investigations to discover any positive features of the aesthetics of disability" (27). Yet "humans have always exercised the right to make choices about the anatomical features that they consider desirable or interesting, and, at times, these options have included rather than excluded women and men with disabilities" (30). Thus I think that it is important in telling a new story about disability to examine the roots of disability in Western civilization—in order to fully understand the connection between our history and changing ideas about normalcy.

Homer, the mythical seer Teiresias, Oedipus, the great orator Demosthenes, Paris's killer Philoctetes, Croesus's deaf son, and others form our view of disability in the ancient world. These men overcome their disabilities or compensate for them with poetic genius or bear them as punishment. Indeed, Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, the Hippocratic Corpus, and even the plays of Aristophanes act as catalogues of disability as deficit, punishment, or degeneration. Robert Garland, the author of *The Eye of the Beholder*, one of only two book-length studies of disability in the classical period, suggests that "disability would have been familiar to many" in ancient Greece—either through the birth of a "defective infant" or through aging (11, 21). Bad plumbing, malnutrition, young mothers, war, and even violent sports would have been factors that led to injury or disease and then to disability. In Garland's view the roles available to the disabled, rhetorically and otherwise, were severely limited. His history

canonizes the view that as disability theorist Harlan Hahn writes, disability has always symbolized “loss, repugnance and personal tragedy” (31). Hahn (and I) would argue against this pessimistic construction. Yet Garland’s research also suggests that in the ancient world, the question of “normality” was central. In this way he reveals the social “uses” of the stigma of disability. Garland notices that even in ancient Greece, the exclusion and isolation of different bodies was a way to “re-affirm the unity” of the hegemonic group (82). An arena for this re-affirmation, as well as its refutations, was rhetoric.

Expanding on Garland’s history, rhetoricians James Fredal’s and Brenda Jo Brueggemann’s early work focuses specifically upon the ways that rhetoric recognized and shaped disability in the period—but they seem frustrated by what they discover.⁴ There is a tone of resignation when they write:

Rhetoric [was] the cultivation and perfection of performative, expressive control over oneself and others. Deformity at once prevented any rhetorical achievement, while at the same time it symbolized the problem with rhetoric as a deceptive and sensuous art. (131)

This tone of resignation seems to stem from the sense that there could and should be other stories about disability in rhetorical history. Traditional accounts of ancient Greece accept that disability was the opposite of rhetorical facility, yet new rhetorical work in disability studies challenges this tradition. Brenda Brueggeman has argued that while it is difficult to separate rhetoric from speech, we should consider rhetoric’s relation to the body (“Coming Out”). Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson also suggests that rhetoricians must look at the expression of those who cannot verbally “speak” yet communicate through other avenues (“Re-Thinking”). Thinking about *mētis* can also be a way to challenge our ideas about disability and rhetoricity while telling Hephaestus’s story challenges our ideas about rhetorical history.

There is evidence that from the very beginning of recorded history, human culture has had a more inclusive, more generous perspective on ability. There is evidence that exclusion has been imported into the classical world, and therefore we have been left with a narrow view of the role disability may have played in the period. It follows that rhetoric and many, many bodies are the victims of this discrimination. Methodologically, then, I employ a rhetoric that instead of reinscribing a normative reading of history, or a normative rhetoric, challenges and expands both. The vehicle for this reading is *mētis*, and the protagonist of my stories is Hephaestus.

Mētis is specifically *not* identified with the strongest and the best, with the norm, with the unchanging, but rather with an artisan like the “lame”

Hephaestus. *Mētis* represents a “revers[al of] the ‘natural’ outcome of the encounter” according to Detienne and Vernant. They state that in the Greek intellectual world, there was an understanding that “whatever the strength of god or man, there always comes a time when he confronts one stronger than himself” (13). In a world full of such inevitable instances, *mētis* is what the “fittest” employ. I want to analyze Hephaestus’s *mētis* in order to suggest that as Martha Rose also argues, “the distortion inherent in contemporary beliefs about disability is reflected in the portrayal of ancient Greek notions of disability” (3). More simply I want to argue that we have exported our own prejudice into the past. It is thus surprising (to many) to see that there was a very positive association between Hephaestus’s body and his mind: His outward-facing feet and his lateral thinking were allied, and both became a metaphor for *mētis*, the ability to move from side-to-side like a crab, as opposed to the forward march of logic. Pushing this association further, we learn that the word *mētis* shared an association, from its very first usage, with the idea of a physical curve, with the idea of a body not composed in perfect ratio. The roots *gu* and *kamp* were often used in words that described *mētis*, and these roots denote “feet [that are] twisted round or are capable of moving both forwards and backwards” and “whatever is curved, pliable or articulated” (Detienne and Vernant 46). I hope to show that what seems like a simple metaphorical connection between bodily difference and cunning thought can be reclaimed as a means of challenging physical and intellectual norms.

The Greek Myths of Hephaestus

*We do not know what exactly his disability was, nor how it occurred
[. . .] but that he is disabled and that his birth was special, we are sure.*

—Stiker 59

Into this story moves (perhaps sideways or backwards) Hephaestus, Greek God of Metallurgy, God of fire, the forge, and engineering. As a God with a noticeable physical disability, Hephaestus obviously represents an important character as we consider the story of disability in the classical period. How Hephaestus was presented reveals much about how norms of Greek society were figured and refigured—every story, every sculpture, every vase depicting the God wove Hephaestus into the cultural context as part of an artistic and rhetorical process of societal and self-understanding.⁵

Susan Jarratt writes that despite the official view that myth was rote and didactic, there is evidence that the Homeric myths in particular were sites of conflict, conflict “of the kind rhetoric would eventually be formed to negotiate.”

Mythical discourse, in her view, “is capable of containing the beginnings of [. . .] public argument and internal debate” (35). I hope to show that a seed for this emergent rhetoric is the plurality and diversity that Hephaestus represents. Reading of Hephaestus and writing his story, one might expect to see difference, deformity, and silence “re-affirmed,” to borrow Garland’s words. But I want to suggest that these representations did not always reaffirm and reinscribe his difference as deficit. Hephaestus’s role in myth yields an often-contradictory picture—a complexity that challenges simple constructions, reductions, or dismissals of his important role in rhetorical history. The confusion and the flexibility of “norms,” as applied to and embodied by Hephaestus, suggests to me that Greek society did not see disability as simply as our history might suggest. If an arena for the negotiation of a hegemonic “norm” was rhetoric, a symbol of this negotiation was Hephaestus’s body.⁶

Suitably, as I hope to use my radical history to combat a canonical story with fragments and apocrypha, the stories of Hephaestus are loose and diffuse. He is the least represented of all of the Greek Gods, at least in the myths, textual fragments, and artifacts we now have access to. Still, he can be found, even if there seems to be no cohesive or continuous narrative to discover. Hephaestus is in stories, in fact, more than he is a story. The contradictions abound. With this in mind, I think it is worthwhile to create an inventory of many of the things Hephaestus has been, in the context of my own “double and divergent” narrative.

Borrowing from the recorded words of Homer, Apollodorus, and Hesiod, I have been able to nail together a branch of stories, a tangle of representations, a variety of different forms that tell the myth of Hephaestus. I focused on the second book of Hesiod’s *Homeric Hymns*, as translated by Evelyn-White. I read Frazer’s version of the collected Apollodorus. I set Lombardo and Murray’s translations of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* side by side, seeing that in different translations, the stories greatly diverge. Finally, I looked at some of the existent imagery, the iconography of Hephaestus, as found on vase paintings and in engravings. In this way I have first looked to the traditional historical “texts” to find Hephaestus. Of course, I have also worked to make this narrative curve and double back, to avoid smoothing the story into flatness. So my story is hard to read, and it is even harder to see how this myth or any other could have functioned to strictly reinscribe a polarity with any hope of holding its charge.

As Pausanias wrote in the *Description of Greece*, “[t]he legends of Greece generally have different forms, and this is particularly true of genealogy” (8.53.5). Perhaps Hephaestus’s lineage, even more than others, is about “different forms.” He is the son of Hera. He is born of Hera alone, a virgin birth. Or Hera invented this story to cover up an affair. Or Hephaestus is born of Zeus and Hera. In this version of the story, he is also the son of the goddess Metis because

she lives in Zeus’s head. Zeus ate the pregnant Metis to consume the cunning intelligence that bears her name, and after this meal, all cunning must channel through Zeus. Because of this lineage, Hephaestus (and Athena) carry Metis’s *mētis* and are thus a constant threat to Zeus’s control of this, the most powerful form of intelligence.⁷ We are sometimes told that Hephaestus’s feet were crooked from birth. Consequently, he is sent away from Olympus—he is rejected by Hera and by Zeus because of his disability. Yet in other stories, Hephaestus is not crippled at birth but is injured by Zeus for coming to Hera’s rescue when Zeus threatened or bound her. In this version Zeus expels Hephaestus, and it is his long fall from Olympus that injures him. Or is it Hera who throws Hephaestus, hoping to hide his infirmity from Zeus? In any case he finds himself tossed out of Olympus, his very godliness threatened, and as he lies on the ground, we see him as very mortal—he has a “crooked” leg. And then the story gets weird. Hephaestus is rescued by the Nereids, sea nymphs, who take him to their underwater caves. In seclusion Hephaestus proves that he is crafty and creative. He is known as a trickster, but he also perfects the craft of metallurgy, utilizing his *mētis*. He builds two voice-activated tripods, what we would call robots, to help him with his work, and he befriends Cyclops, teaching him to work with fire as well. Throughout these stories he works with others, is a teacher, and often comes to the defense of friends. Descriptions of his bodily movements, while they may seem to the modern ear to clash with descriptions of his industry, become part of a whole—Hephaestus as *mētis* enacted.

Next is the story of his return from seclusion to “civilization” (Olympus). This becomes the tale most often told about Hephaestus. The story is commemorated in numerous works of art, celebrated by archaic vase painters. But again, there are many ways to tell this story. In some paintings and on some pottery, Hephaestus’s disability is made glaringly obvious—for instance, he is shown riding a mule, his leg grotesquely twisted (Figure 2). These works may be meant to focus the viewers’ attention solely upon his disability as an object of pity, or they may denote in a kind of shorthand his ability to think laterally.

It has also been said that before the journey Dionysius gets Hephaestus roaringly drunk and that this is why he rides the mule—this story also makes a fool of Hephaestus. In some paintings he is nearly falling from his mount. In others, his mule has an erection—is about to mount another mule and throw him (Figure 3).

But in many depictions, Hephaestus’s ride back to civilization is heroic. He is now the god of fire, a gifted craftsman. He has resumed his place in Olympus, and he is seen by the other Gods as able even if he has a disability—perhaps because of this disability. His inclusion in the pantheon, then, also subtly (or not so subtly) changes the way Gods are seen. In *The Daily Life of Greek Gods*, Sissa

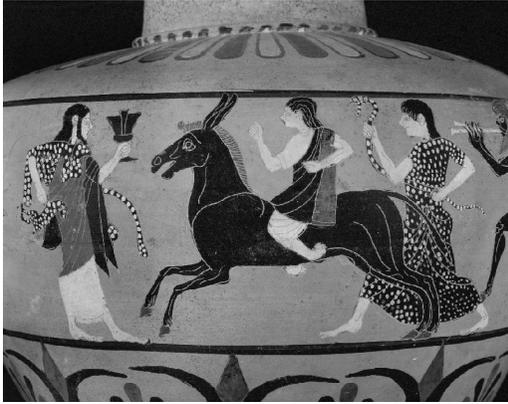


Figure 2: Return of Hephaestus to Olympus, Dionysus, Maenad. Black-figured hydria from Caere, Ionic-Greek (525 BCE). Height 41.5 cm. Inv. IV 3577. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

and Detienne suggest that there is a shift in perceptions of the Gods' effort and industry (29, 50): Hephaestus describes himself as *achnumenoi*, affected by pain; Hephaestus also sweats, proof that he engages in real labor. As a worker, Hephaestus sets a new model for the lives of the Gods (Figure 4). That his body labors and that this labor is itself cunning challenges our modern impression of



Figure 3: Hephaestus, god of fire, bronzework, and of craftsmen, returns to Olympus. Black-figured Attic amphora. End of 6th century BCE. Terracotta, height 40 cm, diameter 27.3 cm. Kunthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 4: The Kleophon Painter (Greek, Attic), Skyphos, Side A, Detail of Hephaestus, ca. 420 BCE. Wheel thrown, slip decorated earthenware. Toledo Museum of Art. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1982.88.

the gods as being lazy, as it changes the message that their stories convey, then and now.

Now back in Olympos, Hephaestus begins his new career. He appears throughout Homer’s stories, making and extinguishing fire, distributing thunderbolts, building clever traps. He builds each of the gods a house (Sissa and Detienne 44). He makes a golden breastplate for Heracles, armor for Achilles (Hesiod 240; Auden). Interestingly, Hephaestus is also said to have built a home and then a scepter for Zeus, his father (Murray, *Iliad* 2.100). He also builds a bronze man, or perhaps a bronze bull, another archetypal robot. In one particularly interesting, perhaps vexing, twist, Hephaestus is credited with creating women. He builds an army of females, golden women who are strong, smart, and able to speak their mind (Lombardo, *Iliad* 18.417). Or in another version, he makes one woman, firing her from clay (Hesiod 60). This woman is Pandora, and Hephaestus gives her a special jar that she is not to open. In these stories we see that *mētis* was more than just an industry, it was a craft of innovation, however complicated. Hephaestus’s *mētis* is at times an actual creation of bodies while it is always an extension of the body. In a sense *mētis* is an application of ingenious bodies to the problems the world presents, answering the shifting contexts of existence with shifting rhetorical, mechanical, and corporeal positions.

In less-favorable stories, Hephaestus is said to have attempted to rape Athena, who, it is said, never had a lover (Apollodorus 2.91). Supposedly, Athena’s son Erichthonius is born from Hephaestus’s fallen seed. In this story there is evidence of the conflation of Hephaestus’s disability with a kind of pred-

atory perversity. Yet the story is also “used,” curiously, to prove that Athenians are “born” of the earth because Erichonius later becomes king of Athens.

Hephaestus is also the one who bound Prometheus with special chains that he made himself (Aeschylus 39).

In his lengthiest cameo appearance in the *Odyssey*, Hephaestus appears for comic relief. He has married Aphrodite, and he finds that she is having an affair with Ares, “who is handsome and clean-built,” he says, “whereas I am a cripple” (Lombardo, *Odyssey* 8.267). Hephaestus fashions a trap for the adulterers and tricks them to have his revenge. He appears as a cuckold, yet he is also represented as crafty, smarter, and the “better man” than Ares, even though Ares supposedly has the superior body.

And so it goes, back and forth, from one story to the next. Hephaestus is never fully a hero, never fully a villain. He is seen reverently—as “renowned smith,” “glorious Hephaestus” (Murray, *Iliad* 18.463, 8.286, and 8.287). Such images and honorifics deify *mētis* as it is performed by Hephaestus, embodied by him. Yet other times he is seen pityingly, reductively, objectively—“God of the dragging foot” (Murray, *Iliad* 18.371).

To summarize: It is true that in comparison to the other Greek Gods, we rarely see Hephaestus. When we do, the eye that beholds Hephaestus sometimes focuses wholly and negatively upon his disability. But sometimes it gazes positively upon his ability. His appearance and his movement send a message about the power of cunning intelligence. Yet there is no one essential Hephaestus. The inventory I’ve just recounted contains within it many contradictions. The way that he is figured is a matter of constant conflict. Of course, questioning the significance of these distinctions is worthwhile. I see the myths and images themselves as a sort of heuristic—a set of questions propelling a cycle of discovery and rediscovery. Here, then, I want to create an interpretive machine, expressed through the questions that matter to me. The trajectory of this vehicle can be determined by how one chooses to discover answers and also via the questions one asks.⁸

Asking Questions

Interpretation [of mythology] is an exercise of mētis.

—Doherty (4)

How are we to see Hephaestus’s trade? Is he in some ways doubly marginalized because he is also “working class”? What does his prolific production signify? How is his craft specifically suited to his body? How does *mētis*,

then, stand as an “accessible” intelligence, something one can develop, something that dovetails with one’s abilities, something syncretic with the body yet not in service of a normate image of the body?

What of the drama of his banishment and return? How does this symbolize the conflict between acceptance of and/or exclusion of people with disabilities or of the disavowal and/or acceptance of disability conceptually? How does this story comment on the cultural value of citizenship in Athens—that Athenians were not wanderers like others but were tied to their city (Jarratt and Ong 21)?

What about the visual images of Hephaestus? Sometimes he is in a chair, sometimes on a horse. And what about his “wheelchair”? Sometimes he stands with crooked feet—in vase paintings his disability is drastically represented (Brommer 159). Other times he has no noticeable disability—in most sculptures his body is “normal” (Garland 113). And he is said to have a very strong upper body, presumably as a symbol of his labor (Murray, *Iliad* 1.607, 14.239). So what are all of the significations of his body and, together, what do they represent? What about the tools and prostheses he wields and crafts? Is his power contained in the tools, in the hands that hold the tools, the body that labors around them, or the mind that trains them upon his craft?

How does Hephaestus “reincarnate” Metis herself? How does the consumption and usurpment of Metis by Zeus mirror the consumption and usurpment of *mētis* by the rhetorical tradition? Plato rejects *mētis*—it is foreign to his view of wisdom, to the realm of Truth he idealizes. Aristotle, as well, “displaced and devalued” *mētis* (Detienne and Vernant 5). I would suggest that these philosophers are also eating *mētis*, digesting it, and, in the words of Detienne and Vernant, “pick[ing] out from the skills of the artisan anything that [. . .] produces in the world of Becoming creations that are as real, stable and organized as possible” (4). In this way Aristotle and Plato make *mētis* logical and systematic; this is *mētis* with the cunning wrung out. Karen Kopelson argues that the “obliteration of *mētis* is [. . .] fundamentally related to, if not one and the same with, the denunciation of rhetoric” (“Rhetoric” 133). How, then, can we fully understand rhetoric in the classical context without understanding what *mētis* is and why it was eaten? How does Hephaestus’s story fit into this denunciation?

Is Hera, his mother, truly ashamed of Hephaestus? The answer to this question would reveal much about the ways a mother regarded, or was encouraged to regard, a disabled child. If Hephaestus’s return to civilization was indeed celebrated, he stands as a symbol of reversal—as Marie Delcourt and Henri-Jacques Stiker have written, there is some evidence from the period of the expulsion and exposure of children with disabilities. Does this story support the idea that expulsion was “not primarily a killing but a return to the hands of the gods”? That Hephaestus was expelled from the heavens may have represented “insecurity in

the face of the divine, linked to the wrongdoing of men and anger from above” (Stiker 40). Were the disabled really seen as “sent from above” as punishment? If Hephaestus is welcomed back by Zeus, the angriest of all the gods, how are the disabled only a “sign of the gods’ anger and [. . .] also the reason for it” (Delcourt 39)? Does Zeus’s acceptance of gifts from this disowned son or Hera’s change of heart signal a change in the perception and valuation of his existence?

Does the fact that Hephaestus is very capable, very much able, very creative, allow people to overlook or ignore his disability? Does a valorization of his *mētis* negate his disability, or does it require it? Might this allow for an identity for the disabled that incorporates a variety of different roles? Is Hephaestus’s presence in myth more about his ability than his disability? Is his cunning, not always used in service of “good,” a form of trickery or a kind of crafty pragmatism? What of the tension between his role as a kind of “exceptional cripple” and his labor and sweat, which seem to be a symbol of the God’s humanity? Is he a symbol of the weakness of gods or of their “normalcy”? Is he a symbol of godliness in the “normal”? Or is he just Hephaestus, a true original?

With each question in my heuristic, we are offered a glimpse of the rhetorical power of the myth of Hephaestus, the challenge that his body and his body of work represents. As Jarratt suggests, my questioning is not out of place; in fact, it is consistent with a view of myth as a site of cultural conflict, conflict that travels back into the middle of the crowd that comprised its original audience. To be able to question Hephaestus in this way reveals his importance. Hephaestus is a rhetorical figure, and he represents the rhetorical power of myth and its cultural importance. He allows us to configure important questions about ability and disability, and to recognize their coexistence with Greek rhetorical theory. This, in turn, uncovers the central importance of the question of “normalcy” to all of rhetoric, and it locates this question in the classical period, allowing us to see it in a new light.

Just as an inclusive view of rhetoric would ask us to look beyond speech and the “controlled” body, I want to look beyond the text, beyond the image. James Fredal, the rhetorician and historian I looked to earlier for a definition of the role of the disabled in rhetorical history, points out that while historians of rhetoric have been obsessing about the “authority” of texts, “important events, trends, places, terms and cultural conditions” have been overlooked. Fredal asserts that such overlooked cultural and societal practices and institutions can “replace the author as focal points for historical investigations” (592). With this in mind, I want to suggest that the study of Hephaestus, the recognition of the richness and complexity of his representation, would be a starting point for further historical study. I also want to suggest that the very rhetorical nature of this study and of the Hephaestus stories themselves might reveal something

about the rhetorical nature of disability and the rhetorical nature of the idea of the norm. The division of “normal” from “abnormal” is an argument. It is an argument I would suggest that Hephaestus might refute.

I want to end this essay as it began, by introducing more, and different, ways of looking at Hephaestus. I’ve been enabled by Fredal’s call to “replace the author as (the) focal point of historical investigations” (592). I am also excited by the work of historian Harlan Hahn, who has suggested that there is archeological evidence that disability was actually held in high regard in the classical period. He says that “the appearance of physical differences seemed to be associated with festiveness, sensuality and entertainment rather than loss, repugnance and personal tragedy” (31). Here is my final story.

In Periclean Athens, around 420 BCE, at a time when metal-workers were in great demand, Hephaestus became, briefly, one of the most popular of mythical figures. The city was being rebuilt on an epic scale after the Ten Years’ War. Workers were needed. “Disabled” or not, if you were skilled, you were in demand. The “norms” were slightly recalibrated. We’ve been given a version of history that asserts that a person’s physical ability to wage war was paramount. Yet as Periclean Athens emerged from the wreckage of war, this was not the case. There was real cultural value assigned to a citizen’s technical ability as a craftsperson—different ways of knowing were valued.⁹ Hephaestus became a symbol for production. This Homeric Hymn to Hephaestus expresses the societal adoration for the god quite clearly:

Hephaestus famed for inventions. With bright-eyed Athene he taught men glorious crafts throughout the world,—men who before used to dwell in caves in the mountains like wild beasts. But now that they have learned crafts through Hephaestus the famed worker, easily they live a peaceful life in their own houses the whole year round. Be gracious, Hephaestus, and grant me success and prosperity! (Hesiod, “Homeric Hymn XX to Hephaestus” II 1–7)

Pausanias tells us that at this time in Athens a temple was built in Hephaestus’s honor, an accolade reserved for only the most major gods (Pausanias 1.14.6). This temple still stands (Figure 5). A large festival was also held, commemorating his return to Olympus and, figuratively, his presence in Athens. Historian Takahiro Saito suggests that this festival, called the “Hephaistia,” served as a citizenship rite for Athenians, honoring Hephaestus and Athena as the parents of this great civilization (par. 20–26). Walter Burkert writes that the festival also took place in the city of Hephaistia, on the isle of Lemnos, and incorporated rituals of rebirth by fire. The *Suidae Lexicon* reports on a similar festival, possibly



Figure 5: Temple of Hephaestus. Copyright Adam Carr, Gnu Free Documentation License, September 24, 2004.

the same one, calling it the Kalkeia (ch. 36). The festivals, it seems, were designed to recognize Hephaestus as a parent of an emerging civilization, as a teacher, and as a hero. Burkert suggests that the festival on Lemnos was a way not only to recognize the craftsmen of the island but also to celebrate the very invention of fire (3). He goes on to write that such festivals are a part of a worldwide tradition: “[F]estivals of the new fire are among the most common folk customs all over the world” (4). But fire in the Greek context is “the triumph of Hephaestus,” and his festival is a celebration of new life (9). According to Saito, the festival in Athens also had the purpose of reminding citizens of their civic responsibilities: “[W]hen the 10 years-long war ended, Athens felt a need to tighten up and reintegrate her citizen body. It was the Hephaistia that was utilized for this purpose” (par. 26). Saito writes that Athena and Hephaestus were situated as the parents of this “new” Athens. In Aspasias’s famous speech, “Pericles’s Funeral Oration” retold in Plato’s *Menexenus*, she too mentions this role for Hephaestus and Athena. That the two are not specifically named is perhaps the result of some historical editing. Yet, at the time of the speech, I’d suggest Pericles’s audience would know exactly to whom he was referring. He praises “the gods who ordered our lives, and instructed us, first of all men, in the arts for the supply of our daily needs, and taught us the acquisition and use of arms for the defense of the country” (Ronald and Ritchie 4).¹⁰ Plato also mentions Hephaestus’s “fatherly” role in his *Critias*, lamenting that over time (the time between his own and that of Periclean Athens), society had failed to recognize the importance of Hephaestus (par. 7). Since then, unfortunately, he has been even more neglected.¹¹ Yet the festival of Hephaestus at the time was an impor-

tant and unprecedented event. Sissa and Detienne suggest that his festival was one (unlike nearly all others) where metics or foreigners were welcome and not just the upper class celebrated (200). Norms of class, ability, and citizenship/ethnicity were all challenged.

Clearly, Hephaestus’s image in Athens, and on Lemnos, was not burdened by the stigma that historians like Garland suggest disability entails. I would go so far as to suggest that the stigma comes from a modern reading and writing of the history. Clearly, there are ways to view disability as something worth celebrating. Hephaestus wasn’t expelled from the city; he was heralded as Athens’s father. Hephaestus’s disability is not his sole characteristic. The invention of fire is his triumph, evidence of his *mētis* as an embodied knowledge concomitant with his bodily difference.

In addition to his reputation for industriousness and ingenuity, Saito suggests that instead of stigmatizing physical difference, Hephaestus actually defied it—his disability is not hidden but becomes part of his godly image. Herodotus wrote that “at Athens there is a much-praised statue of [Hephaestus] by Alcamenes, a standing figure, draped, which displays a slight lameness, though not enough to be unsightly. We shall therefore deem god to be lame, since tradition represents [him] so” (*De Natura Deorum* 1.24). The positive perception of his mind, his craftiness, was balanced with—not negated or superceded by—the positive symbolism of his disabled body. Detienne and Vernant write that “the peculiar shape of his feet is the visible symbol,” not of weakness, but of “his *mētis*, his wise thoughts and his craftsman’s intelligence” (272). As I have suggested, *mētis* can be seen as a rhetorical framework, a way to move, rhetorically. Thus, instead of reaffirming the unity of the hegemonic group based upon a narrow view of ability, Hephaestus may have dissolved it—he may have allowed the monologue of unity to morph into a polyphony. His body might stand as a symbol of power, rhetorical facility, godliness, disability—these terms might in fact be inclusive of one another.

If Hephaestus has so many stories, why should we believe that disability was silenced in ancient Greece? If Hephaestus was so respected and celebrated as a tradesman and an artist, why should we believe that craft and art, that rhetoric and expression, are exclusively the realm of the “able-bodied”? Hephaestus might become not just a model for “alternative” versions of agency but also a model for the agency we might all have access to, once we are willing to consider reversing, moving sideways, facing traps. This is not to suggest that disability should be erased. Just because Hephaestus might symbolize the ways we all move, the rhetoric we all have access to, does not mean that we are all disabled, nor does it mean that disability does not exist. Instead, I want to suggest that the world we write (through our histories, our research, or in our class-

rooms) partially constructs disability. So we can see disability as deficit, or we can recognize potential. I argue for the latter.

It is now time to return to ancient Greece, guided by Hephaestus, father of this civilization, and to revise our perspective, exporting all of the exclusions we have imported over time. In the end this is not about superimposing a new history over the old; it is instead about enlightening the many stories of Western civilization with the fire of an even flame.

Conclusion

Hephaestus has led me to question some of the foundational concepts of rhetoric. Hephaestus pulled me into the myths, into the art, and I brought along the lens of disability studies. This view of history allowed me to trouble the idea that rhetorical facility was and is only about controlled, measured bodies and speech. Hephaestus's *mētis*, as Detienne, Sissa, Vernant, Ballif, Hawhee, and Kopelson have also shown, presents a rhetoric that challenges the linear, the logical, and that separates the mind and the body. The doubleness and divergence of his stories also forces us to see history as cunning. Thus we need to carefully examine the uses of rhetorical or mythical texts as histories. The celebration of Hephaestus, his craft, his cunning, his ability, as well as the deification of his disability, are means of challenging held perceptions about the mythical character but also about all of us—defined as we all are by concepts of ability, by rhetorics of normalcy. I want to conclude this piece by repeating an Orphic hymn, written in tribute to Hephaestus. Yet I also want to pause here to suggest that as historians and teachers of rhetoric, we can all look to celebrate Hephaestus each day as we move into the classroom. Telling Hephaestus's story makes a difference. As we retell it and reinterpret it with one another and with our students, we make a difference. As Kopelson, Ballif, and Hawhee have suggested, I think we need to use *mētis* ourselves. Yet, more importantly, I think we need to recognize our students' cunning intelligence. This means that we must move like a crab through the rhetorical history we present. This means that we must recognize students' embodied knowledges, specifically by valorizing double and divergent bodily and intellectual orientations. This means that we must recognize and provide opportunity for students to forge their own rhetorical tools. This means that we might see disability as strength, as fit for a world that is also cunning, changing, and changeable.

Hephaestus
Your hammer and pincers
Master every art

Molten bronze and gold
Flow from your workshop.
Volcanoes, lava, flame from earth
Pure clean light of the shining sun,
That is all we see of you.
You are the heat and strength of fire.
Father of tribes, builder of shelter, inventor of cities we honor you.
Our strong bodies your handiwork.
Breathe upon us an even flame.
(Taylor, “The Hymns of Orpheus” 198)

Notes

¹I thank *RR* reviewers George Kennedy and Edward Schiappa for their generous guidance. Enthusiastic thanks as well to my mentors Cindy Lewiecki-Wilson and Kate Ronald.

²Hephaestus’s role in the development of this particular rhetorical history, my own radical one, and “our” Western one could be found elsewhere. Hephaestus’s name may have come from an Egyptian word for the god Ptah, or Thoth, evidence of, at the very least, a connection to Africa (see Poe). Loki, a giant and enemy to the Norse gods, was also a god of fire and cunning (see Dumézil). Kitsune is a shape-shifting trickster in Japanese mythology (see Radin). Vulcan is the Roman version of Hephaestus, also often seen with a disability. The stories of other characters, like those of Hephaestus, would offer us insight into the ways disability, mythology, and rhetoric intersect.

³The term *normate* has been developed in the field of disability studies to connote the ways normalcy is used to control bodies—normalcy, as a social construct, *acts* upon people with disabilities. Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines *normate* as “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8). Rhetorically, normalcy functions not to define itself but to mark out what it is not.

⁴Others have noted that there is at least one example of an oration written specifically for a speaker with a disability, though it is unclear whether the speaker wrote the speech, or simply delivered it. The speech, recorded in *Lysias* 24, concerns whether or not the speaker is eligible to receive a pension. Martha Rose cautions that we neither assume that Greeks had a form of welfare specifically for people with disabilities nor that the speaker in *Lysias* is made to “prove” that he is disabled. She stresses that the court simply ruled on a person’s ability to make a living and gave those who could not some monetary support (98).

⁵Havelock writes that the performance of myth—the oral, repeated iteration of the myth—committed stories to the “cultural encyclopedia” (123). Indeed, the performance of myth was said to lull the audience into near hypnosis, and, according to Susan Jarratt, “the present [was] seamlessly interwoven into the past” (33). Yet Laura M. Slatkin writes that the *Odyssey* “continuously repositions itself with respect to a tradition made up of alternative narrative possibilities [. . .] each performance/composition must necessarily reflect, and participate in, the evolution of possible alternatives to the version it actually presents” (226). Slatkin suggests that each myth “embodies, in its many weavings, its reversals, its twisting of time, a *mētis* of its own” (237). Recognizing this change and evolution allows me to suggest that cultural ideas about disability also changed, as they were told through myth.

⁶I recognize the danger that in studying a mythical figure, I further mythologize disability.

⁷I would argue that Hephaestus's disability also symbolizes his *mētis* to Zeus—the disability is a reminder of Metis, and thus of the threat that her descendants pose to his sovereign power. Therefore, it is impossible not to read Metis into the drama of Hephaestus's banishment. It would not be a stretch to say that, in the same way that Metis is eaten because she embodies *mētis*, Hephaestus is thrown because his disability is evidence of his cunning intelligence.

⁸I hope that in emphasizing the partiality of my own interpretation, I'm not, as Xin Liu Gale suggests, doing so only to privilege the truths I do present, and actually “excluding the competing truths” (372). My intention is to present multiple interpretations, as well as multiple questions and multiple interpretive openings.

⁹As well, at the time, according to Alison Burford, “metal workers and miners were especially vulnerable to injury” (72). However, “having acquired a physical impairment, [they] would have had no reason to stop working or change trades” (72). In some ways the celebration of Hephaestus as metalworker could have reflected the idea that this trade was actually one of the only inclusive trades in the culture. Or his image could have been “used” to attract people with disabilities to the trade, to get everyone working. I prefer my version of the story: that the respect shown for Hephaestus was motivated by an acknowledgment of the ways a society relies upon a wide range of contributions.

¹⁰Notice the parallelism between these words and those of the Homeric Hymn previously quoted (“he taught men glorious crafts throughout the world, men who before used to dwell caves in the mountains like wild beasts”) as well as Hephaestus's role as metalworker, building arms for the Gods.

¹¹Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong point out that Plato mentioned Aspasia as well, and despite this she has been largely ignored.

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