

JAY DOLMAGE

West Virginia University

Metis, *Mêtis*, *Mestiza*, Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies across Rhetorical Traditions

The author argues that we have chosen a rhetorical history that normalizes and silences rhetorical bodies. In response, the author exhumes an embodied history of rhetoric, reexamining the myths of the Greek goddess Metis as a means of enlivening rhetorical theory and history. The author then connects these myths to other rhetorical traditions invoked by Hélène Cixous and Gloria Anzaldúa, connecting Metis to Medusa and to mestiza consciousness. The author affirms the rhetorical power of the body, specifically of those bodies that challenge rhetorical norms.

Elizabeth Grosz, challenging a long tradition from Plato to Descartes and beyond, suggests that philosophy can't admit it has a body.¹ In this essay I echo Grosz by arguing that we have accepted an historical narrative in which rhetoric, similarly, denounces the body, overlooks its phenomenological and persuasive importance, and lifts discourse from its corporeal hinges.² I will argue that rhetoric has a body—has bodies. Further, I will show that it also matters *which* bodies we align with rhetoric. I will exhume the myths of the Greek goddess Metis as a means of enlivening an embodied rhetoric and a divergent rhetorical history. I will then connect these myths to other rhetorical traditions, specifically those invoked by Hélène Cixous and Gloria Anzaldúa. The Metis stories refute a canonical view of rhetorical history that not only overlooks the body but also explicitly vilifies the female body and that uses disability as a master trope of disqualification. In retelling these stories, I will focus on the goddess Metis's embodied intelligence and also the threat of her bodily difference—the ways that certain bodies have been not just disregarded but also denigrated in the rhetorical

histories we have canonized. I hope to then connect these stories to other remythologizing by Anzaldúa and Cixous—to show how we might choreograph new rhetorical possibilities for an alternative, embodied tradition to create rhetorical exigence for bodies that have been overlooked and Othered.

The Body of Rhetoric

Rhetoricians and philosophers have always been engaged in an argument over the bodies that matter—who gets to speak, who shapes rhetorical interaction, how we read bodies. But for those who have made Plato and Aristotle the center of a canon and the architects of an epistemology, the body is a distraction or, worse, a deterrence to clear thought. We believe that the focus of the “great philosophers,” clearly, was on the mind and its powers. Ironically, we might actually view the rhetorical moves of Plato and Aristotle as being hypermediated by the body—whether through Socrates’ desire for Phaedrus, his sense of his own bodily difference, specifically his snub nose, or Aristotle’s obsessive categorization of deviancy in *On The Generation of Animals*. As Richard Enos points out, Plato was himself a junior Olympic champion, Socrates was honored by Athens for his accomplishments as a soldier, and Aristotle was uniquely sensitive to his own physical limitations.³ In the *Republic*, Plato explicitly advocates for the training of *both* the body *and* the mind (402e). A more complex view of Greek history reveals that for these philosophers the obsession with the mind does not always (or perhaps ever) fully divert attention from the body. Yet this is not the view we have chosen to canonize. We may conflate Aristotle and Plato, we may mix their many voices and evolving views into a composite, and we may drastically simplify our view of Greek thought; but I will show that it is largely true that despite a close acquaintance with bodily difference, expression, and training, we have chosen to focus on classical denials of the body, and we have erected a rhetorical tradition that also valorizes the split between the mental and the physical. It can also be argued that the body we invoke when we think of antiquity is idealized and made “normal.”

In order for this logic of normativity to function, the male body must remain relatively unmarked. This in turn relies on the supposed aberrancy of the female.⁴ Andrea Lunsford, Cheryl Glenn, Kate Ronald and Joy Ritchie, Sharon Crowley, and others have shown that the rhetorical traditions that have been chosen and taught in our modern milieu overlook—if not explicitly devalue—the female body. Aristotle famously wrote that female offspring is the first step toward “monstrosity”—“the first departure from type is indeed that the offspring should become female instead of male” (*Generation* 70). He states that “the female is, as it were, a mutilated male,” establishing man as the baseline and women both as

pure aberrancy and as responsible for all deviation (*Generation* 68). The binary between the soul and the body is also used to support this view—Aristotle argues that “the rule of the soul over the body is natural, [which makes] the male by nature superior and the female inferior; the one rules and the other is ruled” by the body (*Politics* 4). Women, then, inhabit monstrously different bodies, and this difference rules every aspect of their being, even their soul. In this way, any departure from the bodily norm is seen as potentially “crippling” all other capacities, even the soul. The “crippled” or feminized body is therefore incapable of philosophical thought and is also blamed for any corporeal distractions.

Femininity and disability, then, are classically intertwined. Disability and disease become key metaphors in this history of thought—a history that we have selectively inherited and interpreted. In the *Phaedo*, Plato lectures that “we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body” (*Phaedo* 111). As Kristen Lindgren points out, this fear of the body was attached to a fear of disease—“any diseases which attack us hinder our quest for reality.” The body has been seen as “a distraction for philosophers and an unfit subject for philosophy” (Lindgren 146). This abjuration of the body has always been connected to the perceived weakness and vulnerability of the body—of particular bodies, specifically feminine, diseased, or otherwise “abnormal.” As shown in the quotations from Aristotle above, there is a view that if the body disables thought, the feminine body is particularly disabling and disabled.⁵ This trend is consonant with the notion that, 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 . . . the *concept* of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them” (33).

We have long seen the abnormal female body as the ultimate stigma and contagion, as “mutilated.”⁶ Central to this chosen tradition, then, is a fear of the body and of bodily difference that has limited our ability to recognize and communicate with and from our own real bodies. Beyond these delimitations of bodily possibility, we also see bodies pejoratively associated with rhetoric in order to subordinate the material possibility of persuasion and gild the transcendent “truth” of a fixed “real.” When one needs to malign rhetoric, it is aligned with the body. Susan Bordo claims that “Plato imagines the body as an epistemological deceiver, its unreliable senses and volatile passions continually tricking us into mistaking the transient and illusory for the permanent and the real” (*Unbearable* 3). Indeed, this is one of the dominant views of Plato perpetuated by a long line of Platonists. I use the term *Platonist* here to mark the distinction between what Plato may have actually said or believed and the ways that Plato has been taken up in the philosophical and rhetorical tradition—how he has been reinterpreted

and spoken for by others. I allude here, as well, to a wide range of Platonists—from Plotinus and the neo-Platonists of the third century, with their focus on transcendence and divine intellect, to early Christian neo-Platonists, to the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century and their strong belief in the priority of the mind over matter, to a range of modern neo-Platonists like Goethe and Jung. The unifying thread among these thinkers is a disavowal of materialist epistemologies—therefore, it is no surprise that we now see Plato as a philosopher against the body, regardless of his actual views. This perspective comes across most strongly in his condemnation of the Sophists and their teaching of rhetoric, and so Platonists have focused on his denunciations of the body, aligning this with his denunciation of rhetoric. After tightly delimiting the role of the body epistemologically, Plato seems to use the body to discount rhetoric altogether.

According to an enduring Platonist tradition, rhetoric is denounced as bodily and therefore inferior to philosophy, which is connected to the soul. Rhetoric was thus saddled with an excess of corporeality, the stigma of being bodied. This view can perhaps be most easily inferred from a reading of Plato's *Gorgias*. Socrates suggests that politics concerns itself with the good of the soul, rhetoric (and sophistry) with the pleasures of the body (464b–465d). Therefore, rhetoric is not only inferior to political and philosophical applications of the intellect, but it is also capable of doing harm—inducing “misery” and “wretched[ness]” (479e306; 473a1).⁷ The suggestion is that the philosopher will enable humanity; the rhetorician will disable. Indeed, we are led to believe that the flesh is capable only of deception. In this normative logic, as the male has been set against the female, the body is used to mark rhetoric out, as being everything that philosophy is not: confused and confusing, broken, bodied. This then leaves little expressive capital for the body or for the embodied rhetorician. And this is not some historically distant memory to us today—we must still control and belittle our bodies; to be *bodied* too much or too “abnormally” is still to be in danger of disqualification. Despite the fact that the great philosophers used the stigma of the body to denounce rhetoricians, we have selected a history of both rhetoric and philosophy that minimizes the role of the body, that retains and internalizes much of this stigma. This occurs first in our selective rereading of the classical period, as my brief inventory of attitudes above suggests. And this rereading carries through to medieval rhetoricians such as St. Augustine, who championed the intelligible over the sensible (see Mazzeo), to Renaissance humanists and Enlightenment rhetoricians who prioritized the mind over the body. The body undergoes a general submersion through the narrative of rhetorical history that we have accepted.

But I will suggest that we might respond to this oppressive legacy by using our bodies significantly and making rhetoric significantly bodied. In other words,

rhetoric can reclaim the body. In further words, the extraordinary body can be *the* body of rhetoric.⁸

Mêtis: Embodied Intelligence

Responding to this accepted tradition, and hoping to advance my thesis that extraordinary bodies should be *the* bodies of rhetoric, I have looked for other views of rhetorical facility in the classical period. Thus the engine of this essay and its reclamation project is *mêtis*—cunning, adaptive, *embodied* intelligence. The word *mêtis* means wise and wily intelligence. As Debra Hawhee points out, *mêtis* is always affiliated with crafty figures that “display a somatic cunning” or “bodily intelligence” (46).⁹ Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, in *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, define the ancient Greek concept of *mêtis* as “a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing” (3). They define *mêtis* as characterized by a “complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behavior” (3). Most importantly, Detienne and Vernant situate this body of behaviors and attitudes *in* the body. I will show that because it is first and foremost a bodily intelligence, *mêtis* has been subject to derogation. In Greek, *mêtis* means wisdom, wise counsel—but it also means cunning and connotes trickery. As Randy Lee Eickhoff points out, the form of the word itself is a kind of trick: the Greek words *me* and *tis* mean “no man” or “no one” (n4; 404). But the two words put together label a particular someone: the sort of person whose identity can be elusive, who is unpredictable but resourceful and clever (Eickhoff n4; 404).¹⁰ The word then serves as a useful pun for the body in the history narrated by the great philosophers and those who champion them because in the accepted classical tradition, the body is supposed to be nowhere and yet it is everywhere when we look for it. We choose to hear a chorus of bodily denunciations from Plato and Aristotle: We hear *no body* and we hear the body negated. Yet we can search a bit further and find the body invoked in myriad ways in the classical period. In particular, we can find the unique embodiment of *mêtis*. This essay will confront the idea that no woman and no body exist in the histories of thought that we have canonized. In the final section of this essay, the etymological links between *mêtis*, Medusa, and *mestiza*, and then between my histories and those of Cixous and Anzaldúa, will allow me to extend this wordplay. Hopefully, this will allow me to further reclaim *mêtis*—as the rhetoric of extraordinary bodies.

In the classical world, *mêtis* is enacted as flair, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, cleverness, opportunism, and experience. As Lois Bragg suggests, *mêtis* is an embodied rhetoric that “in contrast to the linear progress of rational thought, never goes forward in a straight line but is always weaving from side to

side and looping back on itself” (32). Michel de Certeau writes of *mêtis* as a means to “obtain the maximum number of effects from a minimum of force” (82). *Mêtis* is timely, flexible and practical. *Mêtis* is an embodied, responsive act that is the “instant of art”; therefore, it always introduces newness or “foreignness” (de Certeau 85–86).¹¹ *Mêtis*, for de Certeau, is the basis for his concept of “tactics”—those practices formed by the relatively weak in order to navigate through the “strategies” of institutions and power structures. Tactics are a way of “making-do” in any given situation, and de Certeau suggests that it is “the discipline of rhetoric [that] offers models for differentiating among the types of tactics” (481). In the Greek context from which de Certeau borrows these concepts, *mêtis* was much more than an important term—it was the *modus operandi* for the entire mythical world, full of reversals and thus demanding resourcefulness. *Mêtis* was also a way to describe the real world, a world powered by persuasion, differentiation, shifting contexts, and meaningful bodies.

Though *mêtis* is underrepresented in rhetorical histories—de Certeau and Detienne and Vernant’s works are both reclamatory for their time and somewhat outside the “rhetorical tradition” in their reception and application—recently rhetoricians have paid closer attention to the concept. Debra Hawhee’s book *Bodily Arts* more fully theorizes *mêtis* as a bodily intelligence, evidence of a syncretic relationship between flexible bodies and the virtuosity of the mind. James Fredal also examines the performance of *mêtis* and the *mêtis* of the performer’s body (see *Rhetorical Action*). Recently, Janet Atwill, Robert R. Johnson, Karen Kopelson, and Michelle Ballif have written of *mêtis* as a pedagogical strategy. But Hawhee perhaps goes furthest in defining *mêtis* when she writes that according to this concept, “thought does not just happen within the body, it happens *as* the body” (58). Hawhee’s explanation of cunning intelligence offers important clarification about the situational nature of *mêtis* as an intelligence that emerges as unpredictable yet responsive action, a way to express the “idea of intelligence as immanent movement” (48). Hawhee suggests that we cannot fully understand rhetorical pedagogy unless we strive to better understand the connection between any “knowing” and the movements of the body. Building on this work, I argue that *mêtis* is a way to recognize that all rhetoric is embodied. This alternative history of rhetoric then disrupts both the idea that Aristotle’s and Plato’s popularized denunciations of the body were the singular view of their time and the idea that they should continue to independently shape rhetorical theory in our time.

Hephaestus: Bodily Difference as Rhetoric

In previous work I have argued that *mêtis* was symbolized in the ancient world by Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire and metallurgy. In vase paintings,

sculpture, and written texts, Hephaestus is most often depicted as having a physical disability, his feet twisted around backwards or sideways. Yet both his bodily difference and his craftsmanship are evidence of Hephaestus's *mêtis*. Having feet that face away from one another doesn't necessarily entail "impairment"—it means he can move from side to side more quickly. In turn, this side-to-side movement had symbolic value. His thinking could also be lateral, slippery, responsive. The word *mêtis* 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 linguistic context of the word *mêtis* worked to call up the extraordinary body: The roots *gu* and *kamp* were often used in words that described *mêtis*, 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). Hephaestus was the perfect symbol for *mêtis* because he was seen as having a "power . . . emphasized by his distinctive characteristic of being endowed with a double and divergent orientation" (Detienne and Vernant 273). This orientation referred to his feet, but also to his bodily, rhetorical cunning. These abilities allowed him to harness fire and to invent metallurgy.

The idea that Hephaestus's physical disability could have had positive connotations seems contradictory to the modern reader. But I have argued that this is the result of an import of bias into the past—Hephaestus was robustly worshipped and celebrated in the Greek context, his bodily difference not fetishized or diminished, not overcome or compensated for, but idealized. A major temple and a festival were both dedicated to Hephaestus (see Dolmage, "Breathe"). It may be easy to believe that, as Leslie Fiedler suggests, "the strangely formed body has represented absolute Otherness in all times and places since human history began" (xiii). But disability, throughout history, has not always represented loss, punishment, perversion, and alienation, but has instead often been seen as an embodied reality, a physical eventuality, even a desirable human variation.¹² As Harlan Hahn writes, "[H]umans 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). The elision of Hephaestus and his *mêtis* from our view of rhetorical history is simply in keeping with a larger pattern of disavowals of Othered bodies and the maligning of embodied rhetoric. But we could move through history differently.

Through the stories of Hephaestus, I have suggested that *mêtis* demands a focus on embodied rhetoric and, specifically, demands a view of the body and its thinking as being double and divergent. I retold the stories of Hephaestus in order to suggest that the rhetorical tradition that we have chosen has overlooked *mêtis*. But there are other stories that are buried, and there are overlapping reasons for the disparagement of *mêtis*. There is work to be done to further explain just why,

and how, *mêtis* has been overlooked, and then to show that rhetoric is always essentially and differentially bodied—that, as I mentioned earlier, extraordinary bodies should be *the* bodies of rhetoric. So I want to introduce Metis, the Greek goddess who is named for this form of intelligence, because I believe her role in myth can be seen as an analogue for the role *mêtis*, the body, and in particular the specter of bodily difference, have been relegated to in the rhetorical tradition. The main argument that I hope these stories carry is that we have focused on different bodies as a way to disqualify the body from epistemology. My argument is an inversion of this historical tendency: a suggestion that bodily difference fires rhetorical power.

The Goddess Metis

The stories of the Greek goddess Metis urge their audiences (then and now) to consider who gets to be cunning, who gets to be rhetorical. The stories of Metis show how the struggle over bodily meanings and embodied meaning-making played out over a mythical geography. This sphere, hopefully, has relevance even far from its original iterations and illuminates a long legacy of attitudes and philosophical assumptions. *Mêtis*, as an embodied intelligence, illuminates a shadowy tangle of body-values, body-denials, and body-power. With what cunning I can muster, I hope to address these rhetorical relationships as I reconstruct a more inclusive story.

Metis's roles in myth yield an often contradictory picture—a complexity that challenges simple constructions, reductions, or dismissals of the important role of embodied intelligence in rhetorical history. Just as I argued that we have chosen to inherit a disembodied view of rhetoric from the great Greek philosophers—despite the many ways they focused on the body—I have also argued that Greek society did not see disability as simply as our history might suggest. Focusing on the mythological role of *mêtis* and the character of Metis herself, I want to fire a fusion between mythology, rhetoric, and the body. I suggest that witnessing a rhetoric embodied in a mythological figure, though such personification may seem foreign to the modern reader, actually lays bare many of our assumptions about any rhetoric.¹³ In telling Metis's stories, I hope to show that Greek society may not have seen women, the body, or rhetoric as simply as we may think, and thus that we need not limit our imagination of what rhetoric can be. *Mêtis* provides a model for the ways we might repurpose rhetorical tensions around bodily values, recognizing the stigmatization and effacement of bodily difference, yet also mobilizing new stories and new expressive possibilities. Re-animating the figure of Metis is a way to adjust our view of rhetoric and of the rhetorical tradition.

Metis is known through Greek myth as Zeus's first wife, as the deity embodying, and naming, the cunning intelligence (*mêtis*) that Zeus would claim for his own when he swallowed her whole.¹⁴ As the popular story goes, Zeus and Metis were married immediately following the victory of the Olympic Gods over the Titans (Apollodorus 1.6). Metis herself had some Titan blood, and her role in this victory was central (Apollodorus 1.8). As Detienne and Vernant write, "[W]ithout the help of [Metis], without the assistance of the weapons of cunning she controls through her magic knowledge, supreme power could neither be won nor exercised nor maintained" (58). The form of intelligence that Metis is to represent as a result of this mythical incarnation, and as explained through this story, was seen as dangerous, as Other, and as eminently powerful. *Mêtis* has always been associated with trickery—those with *mêtis* can see the world slightly differently, can find opportunity to turn the tables on those with greater *bie*, or brute strength, than they have access to. Defeating the Titans, a race of giants, was only possible due to superior cunning. That said, Zeus himself, before joining with and then consuming Metis, was pure *bie*. Zeus respected and feared Metis because of her pivotal role in defeating the Titans. He also foresaw the threat her children would be to him, having inherited her *mêtis*—Metis is pregnant with Athena, whom Zeus knows could one day have the power to usurp him. Zeus saw that Metis's wisdom and ingenuity were a threat to his sovereign power, a power that he attained only with her aid. Not content just to marry her, to learn from her, or to share power with her, Zeus swallows the pregnant Metis and becomes, himself, *mêtieta*—the "wise counselor" (Hesiod 886; Apollodorus 1.20). Metis then lives on in Zeus as a voice in his head. After he consumes Metis, thus evading the inevitable usurpment of his power, Zeus gets a huge headache. In one version of the story, he asks Hephaestus to knock a hole in his temple: Metis's daughter Athena springs out. This action is depicted in Figure 1, in which a tiny Athena is seen emerging from the top of a seated Zeus's head, Hephaestus standing to one side, axe in hand (no physical disability visible). Yet despite this surprise, Zeus has successfully coopted the power of *mêtis*, channeling the cunning of Metis from within.

Some versions of the myth insist that Metis continued to speak to Zeus from inside his head, an adviser only he could hear. In this way, though in Greek mythology there may have been a push for the substantiation of *mêtis* as a rhetoric, *mêtis* was also quickly appropriated in this story. *Mêtis* was wrested from the feminine, its lineage became unofficial, and its uses were coopted and controlled by Zeus. Below, I want to explore the ways that we have also allowed *mêtis* to be subordinated in the rhetorical tradition we have chosen. In this way, we have also subordinated the bodies of Hephaestus and Metis and in so doing, I argue, we have subsumed the body of rhetoric.



Figure 1: “Birth of Athena.” Black-figured lip cup, attributed to the Phrynos Painter. 560–550 BCE. Trustees of the British Museum, London, England.

Eating *Mêtis*

The overwhelming message we get from our reading of rhetorical history is that the great philosophers also ate *mêtis*. As Lisa Raphals suggests, “[T]he abilities of *mêtis* are not so much ignored as appropriated by the dominant philosophical viewpoints of . . . Greek philosophy.” For instance, Plato “redefines certain qualities associated with *mêtis* to suit his own epistemological priorities” (228). The *mêtis* that embraces change and chance, that resists schematization, is *foreign* to Plato’s view of wisdom, to the realm of Truth he idealizes.¹⁵ *Mêtis* must be made to fit into an ordered world, or rejected. Because it calls on changing opinions and positions, Plato allied *mêtis* with charlatanism, and this with the pleasures of the body. For *mêtis* to be acceptable, it had to be digested. Thus, in the words of Detienne and Vernant, we have followed Plato’s lead and “pick[ed] out from the [cunning] skills of the artisan anything that . . . produces in the world of Becoming creations that are as real, stable and organized as possible” (4). More simply, as Fabienne Knudsen argues, “[T]he Platonic truth that has kept haunting Western thought has discarded the kind of intelligence implied in *mêtis*” (63). If *mêtis* exists at all in Western thought, it is *mêtis* with the cunning

wrung out, placed into an ordered, proportional, hierarchized, and cerebral epistemology.

We have come to believe that Aristotle as well “displaced and devalued” *mêtis* (Detienne and Vernant 5). Yet it could be argued that there is an important connection between *mêtis* and *phronesis*, a concept Aristotle explores at great length in his *Rhetoric* and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Phronesis* is roughly translated as prudence, and when it is defined, it shares adjectives (such as “acuity” and “acumen”) in common with *mêtis* (Knudsen 63). When we act with prudence, we are cunning; when we are cunning, we act with prudence. *Phronesis*, however, has been generally separated from *mêtis* with the explanation that *phronesis* is linked more closely to *episteme* (or scientific knowledge) and is regulated by habits of character with the goal of “truth” and wisdom, while *mêtis* has the freedom to be less moral and seeks an isolated result. In this way, *phronesis* “rises above *mêtis*” (Halverson 47). This said, a more-nuanced reading of Aristotle would likely make it difficult for the translator and interpreter to make this distinction so clear-cut. Yet we have generally accepted the idea that *mêtis* is “bad” *phronesis*, that cunning intelligence must be made more systematic and *epistemic* to be acceptable.¹⁵ This also requires a certain disembodiment of this form of intelligence, at least to the degree that its bodily entailments must also be made standard or tacit—not flexible and surprising (see Baumard).

In these ways, claiming a certain version of rhetorical history allows other forms of knowledge to “rise above” *mêtis*, or to convert *mêtis* into a more logical, prudent, systematic, and understandable form. This transcendence requires that the body again be used as the negative ground against which an ideal could take form. In these ways, *mêtis* is digested. And in these ways, the body of this rhetoric is consumed. In this selective reading of the rhetorical tradition, we find an analogue with Zeus’s eating of the goddess Metis. From our viewpoint today, it is difficult not to learn a lesson from this story about the ways that certain bodies have been eaten, while other bodies have monopolized rhetorical power. It is also possible, then, to draw some inferences about why this consumption happened. My argument is that it is no coincidence that the bodies of a powerful woman and a man with a disability have been obscured.

As Lois Bragg writes, Hephaestus is seen as “quasi-feminized” by his cunning intelligence; his “dependence on trickery and magic rather than brute strength” was the “very motivation and modus operandi that Greek mythology typically attributes to women” (32, 31). In this way, *mêtis* is denounced because it calls up bodies, and specifically the wrong bodies: the unpredictable bodies of women (like Metis) and of the artisan (the disabled Hephaestus). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also mentions the stigma against *mêtis*, stating that many believe “that some who are *practically wise and clever* are incontinent” (1037, emphasis

added).¹⁶ The suggestion that lingers over this discussion is that some forms of thought (particularly scientific and philosophical thought) are continent, while others (like *mêtis*, practical intelligence or cleverness) are linked with incontinence. Aristotle suggests that a soul can be disabled or incontinent. He asserts that “exactly as paralyzed limbs when we intend to move them to the left turn on the contrary to the right, so it is with the soul; the impulses of incontinent people move in contrary directions” (*Nicomachean* 951). There is an interesting mirroring here of the double orientation of *mêtis*, of Hephaestus and his curved body. An incontinent person cannot have virtues as he is not “adapted to receive them,” and the suggestion is that the cunning body is a broken body (*Nicomachean* 951). If *mêtis* is not properly digested, if we accept *mêtis* and rhetorical uncertainty, our very soul might be deformed. In turn, the obsessive categorization of what is broken, what is overly bodied, allows an ideal to be generated out of downward comparison (see also *On the Generation of Animals*). The body, *mêtis*, and rhetoric are all at some point (often concurrently) the scapegoats of classical epistemology.

The denunciation of *mêtis* can be seen as reinforced by, and even connected directly with, the denunciation of rhetoric itself. As I have shown, both concepts are seen as too bodily, as irrational, as foreign. Rhetoric becomes philosophy’s Other, soiled by its affiliation with the wrong bodies. As Michelle Ballif asserts, for Plato “rhetoric, like *mêtis*, is characterized by trickery and stratagem and remains a stochastic intelligence, not rational, ordered, nor measurable” (*Seduction* 191). I would suggest that, as Karen Kopelson argues, the “obliteration of *mêtis* is . . . fundamentally related to, if not one and the same with, the denunciation of rhetoric” (133). As I have shown, both denunciations are strongly propelled by a disparagement of the body and aimed in particular at feminized, disabled bodies. Thus, while Aristotle also strongly defended oblique forms of knowledge¹⁷ and while Plato was indeed a cunning rhetorician, and concerned centrally with the body, we have inherited a tradition in which their denunciation of *mêtis*, rhetoric, and the body echoes loudly, informing future epistemologies while fixing a singular and exclusive view of the ancient intellectual world. A long view of this history allows the modern student to view rhetoric, the body, and *mêtis* as allied in disabling thought.

I am not the first person to suggest that the myth of Zeus’s consumption of Metis might be seen as a metaphor for a different violence. Others have also used this myth to highlight the history of the digestion and reconstitution of women’s knowledge by male philosophers and historians. Amy Richlin and Lillian Eileen Doherty each suggest that this metaphor mirrors the challenges feminist historians face. Doherty suggests that feminist historians now live inside the “belly” of a “prevailing andocentric ideology” and that they must reread the past cunningly in order to

overcome normative forms of interpretation (7). And Richlin addresses a classical history in which women's contributions have been overwritten, a sort of symbolic violence much like that perpetuated against Metis (160). I hope to learn from these warnings and also to extend the metaphor. I want to suggest that our histories have been particularly selective about which bodies to eat and that this threatens the rhetorical potential of all bodies. I also want to connect these calls for a cunning historiography to other efforts to remythologize, specifically through the work of Cixous and Anzaldúa.

A Different Tradition, A Different Rhetoric

While there are instances in which Greek society celebrated the alliances between abstract forms of thought and extraordinary bodies (see Dolmage, "Breathe"), the classical tradition we have accepted and taught does not recognize the positive value of such associations. So when we recognize *mêtis* as rhetoric, we must reconnect it to embodiment and to the (rhetorically powerful, while imperfect) bodies I have illustrated. We must remember the rhetorical strategies of the Metis myths, which forcibly masculinize this intelligence; we must remember that the Platonic and Aristotelian epistemology we have canonized often uses the body as the ground against which an unmarked ideal takes form; we should question attempts to make *mêtis* logical and proportional, and to ally it with femininity or incontinence when it is not. Utilizing *mêtis*, we might begin to write a new mythology that values partial and contextual embodied knowledge and that makes space for figures like Hephaestus and Metis—asking us to recognize ourselves in them and to recognize them in our students.

It is important, then, to imagine a different rhetorical lineage. Doing so is an exercise of *mêtis*. What would rhetoric look like (and how would we teach it) if Metis and Hephaestus were the heroes of antiquity, if every move to historicize rhetoric was also a move to embody it? What if our inclination was not to align forms of knowledge against one another in order to champion a single story but to move laterally between traditions as stories gain complexity? I want to suggest that the legacy of *mêtis* can creatively unfurl along a surprisingly different trajectory than the narrative we have inherited. Looking quickly, but carefully, at two more recent mythical and rhetorical retellings—Hélène Cixous's use of the Medusa myths and Gloria Anzaldúa's stories of *mestizaje*—I hope to suggest that there are useful similarities across geographies and eras, all linked by *mêtis*. I also hope to inspire others to make their own further cunning connections. These mythologies illustrate and operationalize the power of *mêtis* rhetoric to recognize the evasion of bodily epistemologies by certain traditions and to

counter the discursive disfigurement of corporeal Otherness. We can move sideways through multiple histories, reviving a range of *mêtis* rhetorics.

Medusa

In the writing of Hélène Cixous, we can find a similar manifestation of *mêtis*, this time also very specifically mythologized through the story of Medusa. The link between Metis and Medusa is first of all etymological: *Mêtis*, the Sanskrit word *medha*, the Egyptian word *met*, and Medusa all share the same root, and all denote female intelligence and wisdom.¹⁸ Medusa, like *mêtis*, also becomes a powerful symbol of “all that is obdurate and irresistible . . . a figure for a remarkable series of public virtues and private terrors: eloquence, fame and admiration; stupor, erotic temptation, and the confusion of genders” (Garber and Vickers 2–3). Medusa’s body is particularly significant: As Fulgentius wrote (circa 500), Medusa’s snakelike head was a direct symbol of her cunning, calling up the curving and polymorphism of *mêtis* (61). More specifically, Medusa becomes a symbol of female embodiment and oftentimes a symbol of the stigma and confusion around, and the powerful, sometimes violent challenges to, women’s embodied rhetoricity.¹⁹ The Medusa myth, as told in the poetry of Ovid and elsewhere, warns that proud women, women who speak out, will be made ugly (*Metamorphoses*, Melville Trans.).

As Cheryl Glenn writes, Cixous’s rhetorical project is to write women, and in so doing to “continue to resist received notions both of history and of writing history” (290). In her reclamation of cunning, Cixous confronts the tradition that has denigrated *mêtis*. She explains that men have “riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss” (“Laugh” 315). Women, as rhetors, can be either heretical or silent. The heretical option—to be Medusa—is to be monstrously bodied, discursively excessive, and thus corporeally oversignificant. See, for instance, the ancient vase painting below of a monstrous Medusa being chased by Perseus (Figure 2).

Yet Cixous implores her female listener to “write her self: [Women] must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (“Laugh” 309). This driving away from the body resonates with Zeus’s consumption of Metis and with the condemnation of bodily intelligence (and of the bodies of cunning intelligence) encouraged by the tradition we have chosen. Zeus’s usurpation is a symbol of exactly what Cixous means when she says that “writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over” (“Laugh” 311). Metis



Figure 2: “Perseus and Medousa.” Vase painting, attributed to the Berlin Painter. Ca 490 BCE Antikensammlungen, Munich, Germany.

becomes a woman’s voice in a man’s head, the hidden body between the neat and ordered, rational and cerebral, deeply inscribed lines of a masculinist history.

Medusa’s story is grisly. In the many translations of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, with differing emphases, the story is much the same (see the translations of Dryden, Humphries, Mandelbaum, Melville, More). Found worshipping in Athena’s temple, Medusa either seduces or is raped by Poseidon—who is overcome by her beauty and cannot resist.²¹ When Athena finds out her temple has been desecrated by this act, she punishes Medusa. The beautiful Medusa is “disfigured,” her head writhes with snakes, or perhaps the arms of the octopus.²² Anyone who looked upon Medusa would henceforth be turned to stone. According to Graves’s retelling of the myth, Medusa was “once beautiful . . . but one night Medusa lay with Poseidon, and Athen[a], enraged . . . changed her into a winged monster with glaring eyes, huge teeth, protruding tongue, brazen claws and serpent locks, whose gaze turned men to stone” (*Greek Myths* 127). These versions tell a story of female jealousy, yet they also clearly describe male fears, fears that lead to violence against Medusa. Perhaps the central narrative motor for all of these myths is the effort to defend or justify both the fear of and the violence toward women.

The myth always ends badly. In the image I have included above, Perseus stalks and murders Medusa (Figure 2). Perseus also removes her head so that he can free his own mother from King Polydectes. In Graves's version Poseidon kills Medusa to have her head to give as a sort of bachelor-party present—a totem of fertility and also women's persecution—to his friend Polydectes (*Greek Myths* 238). In this version Athena flays Medusa and uses her skin as an *aegis*, as wings, perhaps in this way coopting her power, or channeling the cunning of both Medusa and of Athena's own mother, Metis (*Greek Myths* 45). No matter the route, the story always ends with Medusa's decapitation. And just as Metis was eaten and imprisoned in Zeus's head, her wiles incorporated by him even when Medusa was beheaded, her head retained a power harnessed by other bodies, or her blood was used by her killers for its magical powers (Ovid, Melville Trans. IV. 618).²³

While it is at first difficult to understand all of the motivations behind the “disfigurement” and decapitation of Medusa, Cixous provides a single disturbing interpretation, albeit with many complex consequences. Medusa is a dangerous, beautiful, intelligent woman, so she must die. The only remedy to the dangerous power of Medusa, made ugly because of her cunning, is murder. The Medusa myth communicates male fear of women's power, as does the story of Metis.²⁴ When women are recognized as cunning, thus powerful, they can be seen only as a threat and thus must be appropriated, silenced, slain. Cixous uses the myth to show how women have been forced to participate in discourse, and to shape and be shaped by language, based on the terms of a masculinist economy. This also is the economy that leads to the consumption of the classical concept of *mêtis*: It is symbolized by the feminized and incontinent body of Hephaestus, by the threatening female body of Metis; it must be straightened out, disembodied (brought into Zeus's head, for instance), made logical and systematic, or ignored. Of course this economy is also reified in unique, and powerfully masculine and ableist, iterations by Freud and Lacan, the key targets of Cixous's critique. For the history of thought to maintain a disembodied masculinity as its frame, it must focus on the monstrosity of the female body, a perspective through which the male body needn't ever come into focus. Any threat to this order must be consumed.

Cixous's historiography also reveals an important lineage, not just “modernizing” the Medusa story but also connecting the Medusa and Metis myths to a much earlier history. According to Robert Graves, Medusa was a beautiful Libyan Queen who led her troops into battle and was beheaded (*White Goddess* 243). Medusa has been linked to North African goddesses as far back as 1400 BCE (Graves, *White Goddess* 243; Pausanias 2.21.6; see also Siculus; Lucan). In this longer history, it actually becomes unclear whether Medusa and Metis can be separated, while it becomes quite likely

that these two figures were conflated with Athena, the powerful African goddess who predated the Greek figure (see Bernal). Ovidian variations of the Medusa myth trace the fall of Medusa as the descent of the great goddess religions and the ascent of the male gods Zeus and Poseidon (see *Metamorphoses*, Melville Trans.). It could be argued that Medusa's slaying (and Metis's consumption) is actually a symbol of the usurping of a long line of female goddesses and the dying-out of the cultures that worshipped them, to be replaced by masculine-headed, and oriented, culture. This is Graves's argument, as he laments the death of the female goddess and of female goddess culture and its replacement by patriarchal forms (*White Goddess* 322; see also Lerner). Through the stories of Metis and Medusa, symbolic consumptions and eviscerations of the female body accompany this transition and reinforce a silencing of the body.

Cixous, recognizing this vilification of the feminine and of "bodied" expression, and refusing its legacy, asks us to reexamine the myth: "[L]ook at the Medusa straight on" and you'll see that "she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" ("Laugh" 309). This point resonates in multiple ways. Looking, for instance, at two images of Medusa from the same period in Greece, we see that sometimes Medusa is pictured as beautiful, sometimes as monstrous, at the same point in the same mythical narrative. Notice the "monstrous" Medusa (Figure 2), with tusks and wings and a huge toothy grin, physically larger than Perseus who chases her. Then compare this image to the rendering of Medusa below, a serene woman with wings, curly hair, and her head resting peacefully on her hand (Figure 3).

But Cixous's point is also less cosmetic—she is suggesting that Medusa's beauty lies in her ability to threaten and shake up a male-dominated society, that this is in fact where her "monstrosity" *and* beauty come from. The rhetorical joining of these two aspects, then, might be *both* threatening and lovely—challenging to those who have oppressed women and the body and beautiful to those who would reverse this legacy. Cixous's message is this: "Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" ("Laugh" 309). Writing, according to Cixous, is

the very possibility of change . . . precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and the other without which nothing can live. . . . [T]o admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. ("Laugh" 265)



Figure 3: “Perseus Beheading Medousa.” Greek Attic terracotta pelike, attributed to the Polygnotos painter. Ca 450 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA.

Here, the message applies to her own work in interesting ways, as it applies to all of the stories in this essay. This can be a message to feminist rhetoricians and to all rhetorical historians. The body, alternately beautiful and monstrous, normal and abnormal, alive with significance and engorged and muted, gains power from this dynamism. What we need to flee from, following Medusa, are the appeals of certainty and sameness, whether rhetorical, historical, or corporeal.

Cixous also more broadly refers to the act of embodied communication that involves the individual always with the Other and instantiates within the body changing and (at least partially) shared experiences of embodiment that challenge the norm, specifically phallogocentrism, thus being always double and divergent. Indeed, in dialogue with Catherine Clement, Cixous stresses that “there will not be *one* feminine discourse, there will be thousands of different kinds of feminine words . . . until now women were not speaking out loud, were not creating their tongues—plural” (*Newly Born* 39).

This incessant process of creation as change and exchange might be an example of the power of *mētis* as it is driven by Medusa, resuscitated and beautiful. This

power, in some way, should also reconnect us all to a focus on embodiment as we write and communicate; it should certainly remind us that Greek mythology, and then each version of rhetorical possibility that we create, potentially holds counternarratives, is full of other bodies, other tongues, and therefore so are we.²⁵

Mestizaje And Mestiza Consciousness

There are connections between the *mêtis* of Hephaestus and Metis and the stories of Medusa—etymological, mythological, and also powerfully symbolic. Further, there are important connections between *mêtis* and other logics of “doubleness and divergence” from across quite different rhetorical traditions. One example is the tradition of *mestizaje*, what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to when she writes about *mestiza* consciousness.²⁶ This word, like *mêtis*, also connotes mixed blood or miscegenation. In Anzaldúa’s stories the *mestiza* is linked to a colonial legacy in which such mixture was both often forced (through rape, invasion, usurpation) and almost always strongly stigmatized by the supposedly racially “pure” colonizer. Yet Anzaldúa reclaims this word, and this identity, accentuating the generative power of this mixed identity.²⁷ In response to antagonism and in the face of cultural forces that value “purity” and “coherence,” Anzaldúa recognizes the need for an identity and a language with “a malleability that renders us unbreakable” (*Borderlands* 64). The *Mestiza/Mestizo* race is a vision of modern *mêtis* which, “rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool,” resulting in an “alien consciousness” of the borderland, all cultures at the same time (*Borderlands* 77). As Serge Gruzinski writes, “[M]estizo processes are mechanisms that occur on the edge of stable entities,” as disorder imposed upon rationality (25). This language echoes the Greek idea of strength not through brute force (*bie*), but through cunning and adaptability (*mêtis*). Edouard Glissant defines *mestizaje* as “the world’s unforeseeable variations,” emphasizing the importance of mixture and underscoring the idea that we live in a world of chance and change. *Mestiza* consciousness counters an epistemology of purity, survival-of-the-most-normal (60). Anzaldúa also, importantly, centers the body within her theory of knowledge, refusing the “dichotomy between ideas and feelings” (Lu 24), focusing on Othered bodies, and suggesting that embodied difference is power. As Anzaldúa says in an interview with Linda Smuckler, “I want to write from the body; that’s why we’re in a body” (63).

Anzaldúa herself rewrites and revitalizes mythologies, “putting history through a sieve” and effecting a “conscious rupturing and reinterpretation of history by using new symbols to shape new myths” (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 110). Most notably, she tells the stories of Coatlicueh, “she who has dominion over

serpents” (*Borderlands* 49). For Anzaldúa, Coatloapeuh incorporates and enfleshes a threat to the colonial legacy and to the ways that this history oppressed particular bodies, expressions, and ways of knowing. She is a subversive rhetorical figure. Coatloapeuh obviously looks and sounds a lot like the Medusa figure, and likewise the iconography of the snake could be seen to denote a connection with cunning and with sexuality that is threatening to male patriarchy in both mythological semiotics (see Fulgentius; Garber and Vickers). For instance, view the image of Coatloapeuh below (Figure 4), in which she is depicted as having a skirt of snakes, an inversion of Medusa’s head of snakes, yet utilizing the same threatening, sexually subverting, cunning gravity. In these ways, there is consonance between the words and the symbolic bodies of *mêtis*, Medusa, and *mestiza*. There is also alignment through all of these stories of the themes of bodily oppression and derogation, and through their telling we enact a recovery and resuscitation of female goddesses, but also of maligned rhetorics and silenced rhetorical bodies.

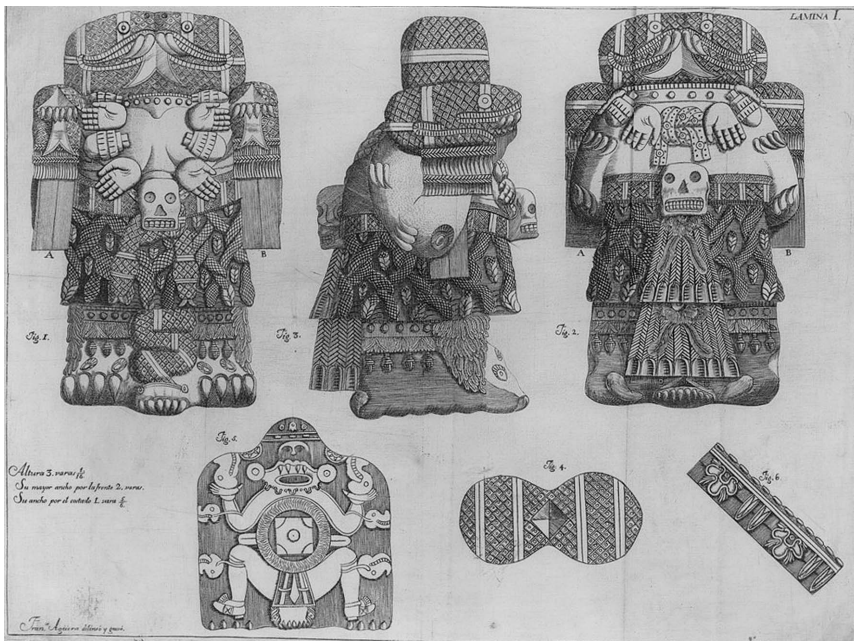


Figure 4: “Coatlicue, Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras que se hallaron en la Plaza Principal de México, 1792.” Antonio de León y Gama. John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

The mode and power of the telling of such stories can also be seen as echoing across my examples. The Coatloapeuh myths come from Mexican Indigenous tradition, and Anzaldúa consciously filters them through the Meso-American, Aztec, Spanish, and Roman Catholic traditions that rewrote them.²⁸ As I have tried to show with the stories of Metis, and as Cixous shows through the myth of Medusa, these narratives themselves lie within a larger cultural story of masculine domination and female disembodiment (and more violently, through decapitation, flaying, swallowing). Anzaldúa writes that “male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities [like Coatloapeuh] underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place” (*Borderlands* 49). As Irene Lara writes, in recovering and rewriting “Mexica histories and Mexica goddess figures from a feminist decolonial perspective,” Anzaldúa advocates for a return to the “gynecentric ordering of life” that used to exist (“Daughter” 44). There are parallels between this work and the ways that Cixous asks us to reevaluate Medusa, as well as the idea that the goddess Metis was once the most powerful Olympian.

These overlaps and links reveal a theme: the idea that rhetorics, across cultures, have been often animated by a spirit of *mestizaje* or *mêtis*—can always be inherently subversive, embodied, powerfully Other modes of persuasion, even while they have most often been seen as the opposite.²⁹ These are rhetorics of extraordinary bodies, reminding us that ours can be bodies of extraordinary rhetorical power.

Conclusions

In these ways, a rhetoric arising from Metis, *mêtis*, Medusa, and *mestizaje* would focus on rhetorical bodies, aware that, in Anzaldúa’s words, “for images, words, stories to have . . . transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone” (*Borderlands* 97). This rhetoric would evolve from an epistemology in which, in the words of Debra Hawhee defining *mêtis*, “thought is that which occurs through the limbs and their multi-directional joints” (58). Through such an embodied rhetoric, we would write and communicate and persuade; we would rhetorically *deliver*, affirming the possibilities and the limitations of the body, and in so doing we would refuse rhetorical and philosophical economies that silence, that deny the body or normalize it. Importantly, instead of stigmatizing embodied difference, we might advocate for a range of body images, an awareness of body values and a critique of the powerful discourses of silencing and delimitation that surround embodied rhetoric. We would look for what is beautiful in what we have been told is threatening (about ourselves and about others). This would mean admitting that the history of rhetoric (and of

philosophy) is fully, strangely, and wonderfully bodied. It means admitting that rhetoric has a body—that rhetoric is perhaps best metaphorized and dynamized not by the proportionate and perfect body but by a range of bodies fighting against imposed ideological limitations with true physical diversity, using cunning rather than brute force to defeat a Titanic tradition that has channeled oppressive strength to delimit rhetorical possibility. Further, such rhetoric invites a remythologization of history, a *mêtis* historiography. And these stories strongly advocate for the centrality of *mêtis* rhetoric across traditions and argue for a recognition of the power and importance of this way of thinking, recovering *mêtis* not just as an idea from another era but as a way to begin describing to ourselves (and to our students) what rhetorical bodies can do.

Notes

¹I thank generous *RR* reviewers Richard Enos and Michelle Ballif for their advice and assistance with this essay.

²In Grosz's words, "[T]he body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory" (*Volatile* 3). The body then becomes "what is not mind . . . implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction or judgment, merely incidental . . . a brute givenness which requires overcoming" (*Volatile* 3–4).

³Thanks to Richard Enos for his thoughtful comments in reviewing an earlier draft of this manuscript.

⁴Disability studies scholars use the term *normate* to designate the unexamined and privileged subject position of the supposedly (or temporarily) able-bodied individual. The word *normative* also converts the idea of normalcy into an active process—norms "are" but they also "act"—we live in a culture in which norms are enforced, a normative society. It can—and has—been argued that in antiquity there was not a concept of normalcy per se. But as Lennard Davis writes, although the word *normal* appeared in English only in the mid-nineteenth century, "before the rise of the concept of normalcy . . . there appears not to have been a concept of the normal, but instead the regnant paradigm was one revolving around the word *ideal*. . . [I]n the culture of the ideal, physical imperfections are not seen as absolute but as part of a descending continuum from top to bottom. No one, for example, *can* have an ideal body, and therefore no one has to have an ideal body" (*Enforcing* 105). Yet Aristotle had more than one concept of ideality—he expounded on the idea of the mean, for instance. He outlined the idea of both an absolute mean, a method for measuring humans against one another, and a relative mean, a system for disciplining oneself (*Nicomachean Ethics* II 6–7). I would argue that the commingling of these imperatives results in a normative culture or society—both the upheld fiction of perfection and the systematic self- and Other-surveillance and bodily discipline of normative processes.

⁵This is true for women particularly, but the stigma of femininity is also applied to men. For instance, Demosthenes was said to have been soft and lame because he spoke with a stutter and had an overly feminine demeanor. Physical disability is mingled with femininity to discredit him—see his exchanges with Meidias in particular and Cicero's investigation of Demosthenes' self-education in *De Oratore*. The story of Demosthenes that has been popularized holds that through rhetorical practice Demosthenes overcame these "impediments" to become a great orator (see Hawhee; Fredal). The possibility that Demosthenes' difference could have queered his bodily/rhetorical performance in a generative sense is not addressed—indeed, any such transgressive possibility is ignored, despite that

fact that other historians convincingly challenge the narratives of overcoming and passing that have been ascribed to Demosthenes (see Martha Rose).

⁶In contrast, an abstract, flawless (male) body becomes a tool for norming. As (Plato wrote and) Socrates said in the *Phaedrus*, “[A]ny discourse ought to be constructed like a living creature, with its own body, as it were; it must not lack either head or feet; it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to suit each other and the whole work” (128).

⁷In the *Phaedrus*, Plato could be seen to change positions slightly, suggesting that certain forms of more “scientific” and therefore “noble” rhetoric might be acceptable (see White; Ramsay; McAdon; Solmsen for a range of readings).

⁸I gesture here to the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, foundational in disability studies. Garland-Thomson was one of the first scholars to show that “seeing disability as a representational system engages several premises of current critical theory: that representation structures reality, that the margins constitute the center, that human identity is multiple and unstable, and that all analysis and evaluation has political implications” (“The New Disability Studies” 19). These premises are also the premises of this essay.

⁹Hawhee’s linkages between *mêtis* and wrestling, and then between wrestling and rhetoric, provide an interesting image for this form of intelligence: “the corporeality of *mêtis*” as “struggle” or “the swarming mass of cunning craftiness and flailing limbs” (46, 45).

¹⁰In Randy Lee Eickhoff’s recent translation of the *Odyssey*, he points out that Odysseus, considered to be another exemplar of *mêtis*, uses the name *me tis* or “no man” as a pun (n4; 404).

¹¹*Mêtis* has the practical advantage (and perhaps theoretical disadvantage) of “disappearing into its own action [so that] it has no image of itself” (de Certeau 82). *Mêtis* cannot be contextualized or schematized because each time it occurs in a context, it shifts that context, and each sequence it is inserted into is distorted (de Certeau 83–84).

¹²In the classical context, Homer, the mythical seer Tiresias, Oedipus, the great orator Demosthenes, Paris’s killer Philoctetes, Croesus’s deaf son, and others form our view of disability. In these stories, typically, disability impels narrative through the themes of overcoming, compensation, divine punishment, and charity.

¹³As I have previously argued, we can also view mythical discourse as, in the words of Susan Jarratt, “capable of containing the beginnings of . . . public argument and internal debate” (35). Despite the idea, advanced by Eric Havelock in particular, that myth was rote and didactic, we might see myth as being connected to the body, as being highly rhetorical, as being an arena for *mêtis*—thus my retellings hopefully honor this spirit (see also Slatkin).

¹⁴The myth of Metis can be traced as far back as Hesiod (*Theogony* lines 886–900).

¹⁵It is worth noting that these ableist accents on the denunciation of *mêtis* are also accompanied by a distinct ethnocentrism and even xenophobia. The word *metic* meant immigrant in ancient Athens. The word is a compound of the words *change* (*meta*) and *house* (*oikos*), and literally meant someone who changed houses. Many of Plato’s attacks on the flexibility, malleability, and the bodily materiality of rhetoric are aimed at the Sophists, *metic* non-Athenians, and are part and parcel with a larger ideological agenda.

¹⁶*Techne* was similarly made practical. As Janet Atwill explains in *Rhetoric Re-Claimed*, *techne*, when it is allied with *mêtis* (as it is by the Sophists), “deforms limits into new paths in order to reach—or, better yet, to produce—an alternative destination” (69). Yet we now refer to *technai*, handbooks full of sets of rules and examples, when we think of *techne*. William Covino argues that “reactions against the Sophists contributed to the establishment of rhetoric as *techne* without magic” (20). This distortion is similar to the attempt to ally *mêtis* only with the forms of knowledge Plato and Aristotle most highly value—to make it precise, a science, as Aristotle does.

¹⁷When defining *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle never truly rules out the idea that one would need some form of cunning intelligence to have “prudence,” and the version of *phronesis* he outlines is certainly an abstract form of knowledge. He suggests that to have prudence one must understand particulars as well as universals. Yet the version of *phronesis* that was later adopted—for instance as one of the Medieval four cardinal virtues—sheds much of this uncertainty and avoids reference to cunning intelligence.

¹⁸There also may have been a familial connection between Hephaestus and Medusa—in some myths the two are sexual partners. Their child, Cacus, was said to be a fire-breathing giant. Cacus was said to eat human flesh and nail human heads to his door. Killing him was one of Heracles’s twelve labors (Graves, *The Greek Myths* 158). This link is not made by all scholars, though the story shows up in Ovid and in Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

¹⁹Often, Medusa was seen to symbolize “artful eloquence.” For instance, Coluccio Salutati in the fourteenth century and Nancy Vickers in the twenty-first both argue for this reading. As Salutati suggests, the snakes on her head might be seen as “rhetorical ornaments . . . instruments of wisdom” because snakes are “reported to be the most cunning” (55). In this interpretation Medusa turns an audience to stone not because of her looks but because of her rhetorical power—her audience “so convinced of what they have been persuaded that they may be said to have acquired a stony quality” (56). Vickers goes further, sourcing this connection back to Plato (254). She also argues that Medusa’s “stoning” be seen as a rhetorical power, an ability to change the audience’s state of mind, accompanied by a somatic effect. Finally, she suggests that Medusa’s rhetorical power might represent the freezing of us all before the specter of the feminine—and she asks what we might do to reverse a legacy of neutralization and appropriation of the Other.

²⁰As an example of the ways that myths crucially disagree with one another, we can see that in Homer’s version of the story, Medusa comes into the world *with* her head of snakes. I think such differences reveal quite marked transitions in and contestations of signification.

²¹Of course it matters very much whether Medusa was raped or not. As Patricia Klindienst Joplin has argued, this rape has often been elided, and responsibility for it shifted away from Poseidon to Athena. She suggests that this shifting of responsibility essentially excuses men’s violence toward women and thus silences women further.

²²Detienne and Vernant write that *mêtis* was often symbolized by the octopus. Thus this connection to the octopus of *mêtis* may not have been coincidental. Certainly the original Medusa myth relied upon a reference to the dangerous, trapping “knot made up of a thousand arms” that the octopus represented and that conveyed a sense of the powerful double-ness and unpredictability of *mêtis* (38).

²³Graves writes that vials of Medusa’s blood were widely distributed: The blood had the power both to kill and to cure (*Greek Myths* 175). There are many contradictory stories about who received the blood, who distributed it, and who used it for good, who for bad (*Greek Myths* 175).

²⁴The myth may also express a male fear of Medusa’s creative power—she is so “procreative” that her children Chrysaor and Pegasus spring from her dead body (Graves, *Greek Myths* 127).

²⁵I would argue that as teachers, we need to avoid the temptation to “eat” *mêtis* and wrest control over knowledge away from students. Students’ cunning strategies and divergent expressions may threaten us or challenge us, but we cannot believe that *mêtis* is something we use on students, that we can be the sole tricksters, holding student bodies captive. Nor can we use the brute force of Zeus or Perseus to coopt their power when it threatens us, to subordinate their thinking bodies.

²⁶The French word *mêtis* is related to the Spanish word *meztilo*, both coming from the Latin word *mixtus*, the past participle of the verb *to mix* and connoting mixed blood.

²⁷In critical theory the concept of *metissage* also locates and interrogates the ways that certain forms of knowledge have been relegated to the margins, and thus this concept links usefully to the

stories I have been reanimating. *Metissage*, obviously etymologically linked to *mêtis* and meaning mixture or miscegenation, has been used as a critical lens through which one might observe issues of identity, resistance, exclusion, and intersectionality. Relying upon metaphors of mixture that are biological and cultural, this concept of *metissage* both is *like* and *is* what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to when she writes about *mestiza* consciousness. (See Steinberg and Kincheloe; Hardt and Negri; Gruzinski; Glissant.)

²⁸Coatlalpeuh later becomes conflated with the Virgin of Guadalupe after the Spanish Roman Catholic conquest of Mexico.

²⁹Carrie McMaster also suggests that we might learn from Anzaldúa's writing about her own bodily difference—having experienced congenital disease, chronic illness, disability—to “draw non-homogenizing parallels between various embodied identities” (“Negotiating” 103). In Anzaldúa's own words, “[T]hose experiences [with disability] kept me from being a ‘normal’ person. The way I identify myself subjectively as well as the way I act out there in the world was shaped by my responses to physical and emotional pain” (“Last Words?” 289). From this we can make some suggestions about the epistemological entailments of *mestiza* knowledge—it comes from unique, never “normal,” bodied experiences. The “leap” that should be encouraged, then, is to see such situated knowledge as vital and perhaps even central to human experience. The “abnormal” body is not something given to women symbolically as a form of derogation; it is an engine for understanding and thus has serious rhetorical power.

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Jay Dolmage is Assistant Professor of English at West Virginia University, where he also coordinates the first-year writing program. His essay "Breathe Upon Us an Even Flame: Hephaestus, History and the Body of Rhetoric" won the 2006 Theresa J. Enos Award from *Rhetoric Review*. He is dedicated to teaching all students—acknowledging that many students have been silenced by traditional pedagogy and that a more inclusive classroom can be created.

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