Contagion, Battle, and Risk: An Exigent Collection

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The publication of *Rhetor* 8 marks fifteen years since its inaugural 2004 issue, which I edited during my earlier days with the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, now RhetCanada. The introduction I wrote then, "Rhetoric as Liminal Practice," still holds true for the journal today:

> At annual conferences like that of the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, one meets classical rhetoricians, contemporary rhetoricians, professional writers, historians, musical scholars, discourse analysts, composition professors, cultural analysts, literary theorists — the list goes on. It is this kind of eclectic, dynamic community that creates the kinds of energies, intersections, and moments of rhetorical interrogation one encounters in this journal.

Over the past fifteen years, and with a variety of editors, *Rhetor* has continued to publish wide-ranging scholarship, including rhetorical studies of public address, eighteenth-century conversation,

personalized license plates, war and invasion, workplace writing, midwifery, word and image, gaming, literature, public controversy, national identity, Jewish homiletic, and the musical interpretation of textual rhetoric. Its pieces have examined rhetorical theory and theorists, traditions of rhetorical pedagogy, and sites of articulation between philosophy and rhetoric. As Pierre Zoberman writes in the editor's foreword for *Rhetor* 7, both the journal and the membership of RhetCanada are seeing increasingly international representation and vibrancy, with contributions from rhetorical scholars in Europe, Africa, and North America.

Rhetor 8 continues this eclectic and lively tradition. The articles in this collection examine Winston Churchill's 1940 "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" address, the classical figure of prosopopoeia as applied to social media image filters, media framing of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, and the rhetoric of malingering—the exaggeration or feigning of illness. They focus on a pivotal war moment, the final days of a federal election, the early days of a pandemic, and insurance risk assessments. Here we find moments of urgency that call for necessary and timely response and have uncertain outcomes. All of the pieces, if implicitly and in different ways, touch upon the rhetorical notion of exigence.

Within a rhetorical context, it is of course Lloyd Bitzer who first defined exigence as "an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be," an element of the rhetorical situation that, he argued, motivates and can be modified through symbolic intervention or discourse (6). Bitzer's understanding of the rhetorical situation—and exigence in particular—has famously been challenged by critics (most notably Richard Vatz), who argue that exigence

needs to be understood not as an extra-discursive situational given, but as a socially created reality, one rhetorically generated in the first place. Underscoring this point, Carolyn Miller defines exigence as "a mutual construing of objects, events, interest, and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need"F (157).

The first piece in this issue, Michael Fox's "The Anglo-Saxon Origins of Churchill's Elocutio: 'We Shall Fight on the Beaches'" opens with just such a focus on the "events, interests, and purposes" that created the exigencies for Churchill's famous wartime address to the British parliament. There was a lot at stake at this historical moment: the country lacked confidence in the previous government of Neville Chamberlain, Churchill needed to prove himself only four weeks into his Prime Ministerial post, and Britain was facing major setbacks in the war effort. As Fox writes, "Churchill needed to inspire confidence among his colleagues in the House of Commons and among the peoples of Britain, to prepare his country for a protracted fight, to shore up the resolve of France, and to demonstrate to many key players (mainly Hitler and the United States) his determination to continue the war, all while, so far as possible, accurately reporting the facts." In response to this situation, Churchill drew on powerful linguistic, rhythmic, and figurative elements from Anglo-Saxon prose, as well as an age-old narrative: the island of Britain under threat of invasion. Fox's novel hypothesis is that Churchill modeled the "we shall fight" sequence on the native Anglo-Saxon style of Ælfric and Wulfstan, vernacular prose writers in Middle English, to situate his stirring oration within a long and cherished tradition of oral verse. Fox's article contributes to scholarship on rhetorical traditions, generally, and the powerful

affect produced by the echoes and cadences of a resonant vernacular past.

A particularly instructive case study of how exigence is symbolically engendered and produced can be found in Monique Kampherm's graduate student prize-winning essay, "Democratic Prosopopoeia: The Rhetorical Influence of the I-Will-Vote Image Filter on Social Media Profile Pictures during the 2015 Canadian Federal Election." Kampherm demonstrates how social media users, by attaching an image filter to their profile picture, collectively generate urgency or necessity—in this case, to vote. The identity of such users, she argues, operates through the rhetorical figure prosopopoeia, where an absent, imagined, or dead person (or personified animal, abstract entity, or object) is represented as speaking. Through this figure, users become something other than their individual self: they become a manifestation or "acting together" of the multitude or commonwealth of voters in the 2015 Canadian federal election, giving voice from what Kampherm calls "their digital pulpit." Prosopopoeia functions as a present-day means of solidarity building and instruction for what constitutes the ideal, participatory citizen. Kampherm's article not only speaks the link between classical figures and digital rhetoric, but also a traditionally linguistic figure and a visual form, and adeptly demonstrates how an image filter can contribute to the circulation systems—the life and vitality—of the social political body.

Kampherm's essay begins with Canadian comedian Rick Mercer's statement that "voting is contagious." Tess Laidlaw and John Moffatt treat a different kind of contagion, that of the 2009 H1N1 virus. Their paper, right from the start, acknowledges the social exigence of a disease outbreak, which, as they write, "calls into being both

explicit linguistic responses in the form of statements from public health authorities and media coverage, and symbolic responses that operate only implicitly." Laidlaw and Moffatt study the international media framing of the outbreak in its early days, paying close attention to the strategies of management performed by reassuring narratives of containment, which ultimately enhance the ethos of the medical health establishment. In their analysis, constabulary rhetoric (a concept they borrow from Kenneth Burke) applies to the policing narrative readers are encouraged to identify with—not stories about how to protect oneself from disease so much as those that invite identification with the redemptive ethos of medical authorities whose role is to "police" suspiciously ill people and contain disorder. We learn from their analysis that Canadian readers were reassured by stories that suggested they were (symbolically) immune from a disease that affected only Mexico and Mexicans. While Canadian health authorities voiced concern, there was no travel advisory for Canadians travelling to Mexico; they would be in resort environments, safe and "pure" sanctuaries in an otherwise threatening Mexico, whose citizens and seasonal labourers to Canada were specifically targeted as threats. Laidlaw and Moffatt demonstrate how a tale of reassurance for some involves the scapegoating of others, a narrative they strenuously critique and resist in a nuanced analysis.

Shurli Makmillen, in "The Rhetoric of Malingering and the Management of Risk," considers exigence in her study of malingering narratives, reminding us (à la Miller and Segal) that genres aren't merely responses to predetermined exigencies, but "also structure and shape those social exigencies . . . by defining them according to the discourses provided by the genre." Makmillen examines accounts of malingering in medical, psychiatric, legal, and

actuarial discourses throughout history and traces their various motivations. She notes that early institutionalized reports (Hector Gavin's 1834 *On Feigned and Factitious Diseases*, for instance) were motivated by a concern for detection and punishment, as fraudulent sailors and soldiers were seen to pose a threat to the productivity and cost-effectiveness of the military—and to the morality of the social body. Early twentieth-century psychiatric discourses were motivated less by detection and discipline and more by scientific diagnosis and treatment. More recently, insurance companies and forensic psychiatry have again prioritized the detection of falsified claims of disease (through all kinds of surveillance) in order to manage risks around false insurance claims and costly workplace accommodations. Particularly interesting is Makmillan's brief yet generative consideration towards the end of her article of malingerers' tales *as told by themselves* as carnivalesque sites of resistance, pleasure, and art.

These four articles, and the fascinating public discourses with which they engage, are a resonant assemblage indeed. They all critically examine and evaluate the public speeches, symbolic filters, media framing, and institutional discourses that attract, alienate, worry, excite, embolden, define, and electrify various publics, both past and present. They make for an excellent, exigent group in the sense of being compelling, pressing, and worthy of close attention. Enjoy!

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