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A WAY WITH WORDS:
WRITING, RHETORIC, AND THE ART OF PERSUASION

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Michael D.C. Drout
WHEATON COLLEGE

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About Your Professor

Michael D.C. Drout

Michael D.C. Drout is the William and Elsie Prentice Professor of English at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, where he teaches courses in Old and Middle English, medieval literature, Chaucer, fantasy, and science fiction.

Professor Drout received his Ph.D. in medieval literature from Loyola University in 1997. He also holds M.A. degrees from Stanford (journalism) and the University of Missouri-Columbia (English literature) and a B.A. from Carnegie Mellon.

In 2006, Professor Drout was chosen as a Millicent C. McIntosh Fellow by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. In 2005, he was awarded the Prentice Professorship for outstanding teaching. The Wheaton College class of 2003 presented him with the Faculty Appreciation Award in that year. He is editor of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Beowulf and the Critics,* which won the Mythopoeic Scholarship Award for Inklings Studies for 2003. He is also the author of *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century* (Arizona Medieval and Renaissance Studies). Drout is one of the founding editors of the journal *Tolkien Studies* and is editor of *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* (Routledge).

Drout has published extensively on medieval literature, including articles on William Langland's *Piers Plowman, Beowulf,* the Anglo-Saxon wills, the Old English translation of the *Rule of Chrodegang,* the *Exeter Book* "wisdom poems," and Anglo-Saxon medical texts. He has also published articles on Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* books and Susan Cooper's *Dark Is Rising* series of children's fantasy novels. Drout has written an Old English grammar book, *King Alfred's Grammar,* which is available for free at his website, www.michaeldrout.com. He has given lectures in England, Finland, Italy, Canada, and throughout the United States.

Drout lives in Dedham, Massachusetts, with his wife Raquel D'Oyen, their daughter Rhys, and their son Mitchell.

Introduction

In *A Way with Words,* esteemed professor Michael D.C. Drout brings his expertise in literary studies to the subject of rhetoric. From history-altering political speeches to friendly debates at cocktail parties, rhetoric holds the power to change opinions, spark new thoughts, and ultimately change the world.

The study of rhetoric not only leads to a greater understanding of how personages such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Winston Churchill elevated the power of speech to majestic heights, but also to a stronger proficiency in using rhetoric in anyone's day-to-day life.

Professor Drout examines the types of rhetoric and their effects, the structure of effective arguments, and how subtleties of language can be employed to engage in more successful rhetoric. In these thought-provoking lectures, Drout also ponders the role of rhetoric in our world and the age-old question of whether it is just a tool for convincing people of things that aren't true, or whether it is indeed a force for good that will ultimately lead to truth.

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words.*

Using Words to Change the World

One simple definition of rhetoric is *How to Do Things with Words,* which is also the title of a very important book by the Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin. We tend to think of "rhetoric" either as something bad and manipulative (when we discount speech as "just a bunch of rhetoric") or as something elevated and perhaps overblown, but in fact rhetoric is simply (and complexly) the art of using words to change the world. This is, of course, the social world rather than the physical world, but words that change the social world can be amplified, through human ingenuity and effort, into changing the physical world as well.

Most courses on rhetoric start with the history of rhetoric and trace things back to the ancient Greeks (see lecture two), but first I want us to think about the different ways that speech can change the world, so we will follow Austin in examining different categories of situations and the types of words that are used in them. The ideas in *How to Do Things with Words* are the basis of what is now called Speech-Act Theory. The fundamental idea behind Speech-Act is just what the name implies: Speech is not just the communication of information, but also a kind of action that people perform and that therefore has social as well as communicative implications.

Performative and Nonperformative Speech

Let us start by looking at a few situations.

> 1a. Bills says, "John and Susan are married."

> 1b. A minister or judge says, "John and Susan, I now pronounce you man and wife."

> 2a. Joe says, "He dropped the ball! The runner is safe!"

> 2b. The umpire says, "You're out."

In the *a* examples, the person speaking is giving straightforward information to whoever is listening: It is a fact that John and Susan are married or that the shortstop dropped the ball, and the speakers are communicating that fact. If the listeners were previously unaware of these facts—that John and Susan are married, that the shortstop dropped the ball—they are now.

But the second type of acts are somewhat different. When the minister says "I now pronounce you man and wife," something changes in the world. From that moment on John and Susan really are married. Likewise, when the umpire says "You're out!," the runner really is out, with all the consequences

for him, and the game, that that entails. The minister and the umpire have changed the world through their speech. Austin calls this kind of speech "performative." The person who uses a performative *does* something as well as *says* something.

This distinction, between performative and nonperformative, is very important for our understanding of rhetoric. Much rhetoric skirts the boundaries of performative utterances, and speakers and writers will often deliberately blur the distinctions between performatives and nonperformatives for the purposes of changing the minds of their audiences. For example, someone may try to *seem* to make a promise (which is a performative action) when he or she really is just giving information (which is not always performative). A promise is performative because after it has been made, a whole variety of expectations and obligations are now invoked. Telling someone that you *will* promise to do something is not the same; nor is making it *look like* you have promised when you have not.

As Austin notes, performatives are constituted in the *social* world. There are social circumstances, dictated by tradition and custom or by law, in which a performative occurs. A random onlooker cannot *decide* to say "I now pronounce you man and wife" unless that onlooker is in a situation in which that power has previously been arranged. Austin calls this situation "an accepted conventional procedure." Some of these are more complicated than others: the marriage example, for instance, requires that the speaker be a minister or magistrate or a captain of a ship in international waters, that the two people actually want to be married, and perhaps even that certain paperwork has been filled out. Likewise, fans can holler "You're out!" all they want to at a baseball game and the players, umpire, scoreboard keeper, and other fans will basically ignore them. The "performative" statement "You're out!" is not performative when anyone other than an umpire, a socially authorized and conventionally empowered figure, yells it. In the mouth of anyone else, it is noise and, perhaps, communication of information ("I think that runner is out" or, for fans of certain sports teams that shall remain nameless, "I'm yelling because I am an idiot who likes the sound of my own voice").

Performative Effects and a Great Trick of Rhetoric

There are various kinds of performatives, not all of which are the same as the "I now pronounce you man and wife" or "You're out!" examples. For example, although not just anybody can say "You're out!" and have it stick, anyone can say "I promise to be there at five o'clock" or "I bet you five bucks the Red Sox will win." The class of individuals allowed to perform these kinds of performative actions is larger than the class of individuals allowed to say "I now christen you the S.S. *Paddleboat.*" In the first case, all individuals except, perhaps, very young children and the severely mentally handicapped can use the performative and make it, in Austin's terms, "happy" (or, in Latin, "felicitous"). In the second case, the person must be the owner of the boat or authorized by the owner of the boat, but as long as the person does own a boat, he or she can christen it.

All of these statements have important performative effects. In some of the occasions, for example, regarding promises or betting, if there are enough

witnesses, a person can be sued if he or she does not follow through, which is one way to tell if something is a performative: There are consequences that occur that would not occur if the performative had not been accomplished (think of the difference between "I think the Red Sox are going to win" and "I'll bet you five bucks the Red Sox are going to win" or "I'll probably get there at five o'clock" versus "I promise to be there at five o'clock").

Note also that a great source of social friction can occur because some statements *seem* like performatives. One person says "I'm pretty sure I'll be at the bar tonight at six" and another takes that as "I promise to be at the bar tonight at six." When the first person does not appear, the second becomes angry. The argument that arises is, at its foundation, whether or not a performative was successfully accomplished. The most famous example of this sort of implied performative in history occurred when King Henry II said, of Sir Thomas Beckett, "Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?" His men took this question as a performative in the category of "order" and sliced off the top of Beckett's head in Canterbury Cathedral. And although Henry had not officially given the order, he was required, by the Church, to act as if he had: His question was (rightly) interpreted as a performative.

One of the great tricks of rhetoric is to take something that sounds like a performative, such as "I promise," and move it into the realm of a nonperformative. Politicians do this all the time, in a variety of ways. For example, if you do not actually *have the power* to perform the performative action, you can promise all you want, but the action cannot—by you—be made to happen. So when a presidential candidate says, "If elected, I will lower gasoline prices," we should note that the President does not in fact have the power to lower gasoline prices. And so if gasoline prices do not go down, the presidential candidate can say, "I sent legislation to Congress and they didn't pass it." On the other hand, his opponents can try to hold him to the performative utterance. A flawed performative thus walks a very narrow line between a statement and, well, a lie. When we are analyzing rhetoric it is very important for us to keep this in mind.

Locutionary, Illocutionary, and Perlocutionary

As well as his identification of the performative and nonperformative, Austin makes a distinction between three separate effects of statements that will be useful to us in our future discussions. Austin labels these *locutionary, illocutionary,* and *perlocutionary.*

Locutionary acts are straightforward: We utter a phrase with a certain meaning and our hearer understands what we have said.

"That large rock is sitting on my foot" is a locution.

Illocutionary acts are a little more complicated, because they involve what the hearer is going to do. So by saying "That large rock is sitting on my foot" I am of course *informing* the hearer, but I am also *encouraging* or *urging* or even *begging* the hearer to move the rock.

> **The following is a useful mnemonic device:** *ill*ocution: *I'll* try something; *per*locution: I have *per*suaded.

The *perlocutionary* effect is still different. When I say, "That large rock is sitting on my foot," I'm *urging* the hearer to move the rock, and if he *does* move the rock, then I have *persuaded* the hearer to do something.

This three-part division is very important for analyzing rhetoric, because quite often what we *want* to do (the illocutionary force) is not obvious from the locution that we use. I say, "It's a little stuffy in here," and the illocutionary force is that I am urging you to open the window, and the perlocution is that the hearer was convinced to open the window. Speakers use the difference between the locution and the perlocution all the time in rhetoric.

When King Henry II gave the locution "Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?" his illocutionary intent was "I would like someone to kill Thomas Beckett," and the perlocutionary force was the knights who decided to go to Canterbury Cathedral to kill Beckett.

Speech-Act Theory gets a lot more complicated, particularly when scholars start to bring things like poems and literature and lies and politeness into the discussion, and there are professors of rhetoric who specialize in Speech-Act analysis, but it gets a little too specialized for our purposes in this lecture (though it is well worth reading). The most important thing to take away from this lecture is the idea of a *performative* act and the fact that there can be a distinction between the locution (what you say), the illocution (what you want to have happen), and the *perlocution* (what actually happens as a result of your speech-act), and that rhetoric relies heavily on these distinctions.

Questions

1. What is the definition of rhetoric? How does this differ from people's common perception of the term?

2. What is the distinction between performative and nonperformative speech?

Suggested Reading

Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words.* 2nd ed. Eds. Marina Sbisà and J.O. Urmson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Other Books of Interest

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Inc., 2004.