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Light or Fire? Frederick Douglass and the Orator's Dilemma

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Abstract: *Most scholarship on political rhetoric views it as an exercise in changing the minds of an audience. However, we see numerous examples of political speech aimed at those who already agree with the speaker, to motivate them to act on judgments they have already made. This kind of discourse is often dismissed as pandering, or the "red meat" rabble-rousing that contributes to polarization. I draw upon Frederick Douglass to render a more complete account of this speech, which I term "hortatory rhetoric." Douglass draws upon the prophetic tradition of Black Christian preaching to develop an alternative for when persuasion has reached its limit. This kind of speech raises a set of normative difficulties that differ from those raised by the rhetoric of persuasion, which Douglass helps us to think through. He provides a framework for understanding when it might be permissible or even desirable to abandon persuasion for exhortation.*

Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* conceives of rhetoric as the art of "discovering the possible means of persuasion" in any situation. To be persuaded in this sense means simply to change one's mind, to make a new judgment. On this account, what separates rhetoric from pure dialectic or the rules of deliberative discourse is that it does not simply address the listeners' reason; it appeals also to their emotions, passions, and even prejudices in this effort to change their minds. But changing minds is always the goal, and this exhausts the potential purposes of political rhetoric; "the modes of persuasion are the only true constituents of the art [of rhetoric]: everything else is merely accessory" (*Rhetoric* 1354a).

Political science scholarship—both theoretical and empirical research—has largely followed Aristotle in focusing on the ways in which rhetoric can affect the judgment of audience members.[1] Many theorists contributing to the revival of rhetorical studies follow Garsten, who aligns himself explicitly with the Aristotelian tradition when he says: "I follow a long tradition of understanding rhetoric as speech designed to persuade. If this definition leaves out a whole host of familiar rhetorical practices, including certain techniques of manipulation and deception… that is because I do not aim to defend those practices here—or at least, I am to defend them only insofar as they can be viewed as necessary to the politics of persuasion" (Garsten 2009, 5).[2] In empirical research, the most prominent example of this way of thinking lies in studies of voting, where the success of political speech during campaigns is often measured in terms of "persuasion" (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010; Gerber et al. 2011; Hill et al. 2013; Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Jacobson 2015; Kalla and Broockman 2018).

But in fact, a cursory glance at the state of contemporary political discourse could well lead to the conclusion that rhetoric aiming to persuade those not already in agreement has become vanishingly rare. In the myriad examples one could give from political campaigns and movements, we encounter speakers who seem uninterested in persuasion, or at least for whom persuasion is not the primary goal: stump speeches, speeches given at rallies to crowds of supporters, or at marches to crowds of activists. In many cases, these are examples of speech that is likely to alienate those who disagree with the speaker,

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[1]As discussed below, there are a few exceptions to this, and more still can be found in the separate field of rhetorical criticism.

[2]Other normative theorists of the "rhetorical revival," who defend rhetoric from the point of view of persuasion include Abizadeh (2007), Goodman (2018), Kapust and Schwarze (2016), and Remer (1999).

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and even those on the fence seem at least as likely to be repelled as attracted by addresses that make little effort to accommodate someone not already in the speaker's camp. No one would deny that these are examples of rhetoric, but they are not of this classical mold.

When such unpersuasive speech is recognized as distinct, it almost always appears in a negative light. For instance, worry about increasing political polarization is so prevalent as to be nearly cliché (Barberá et al. 2015; Prior 2013). Much of this concern focuses on virtual and real-world "echo chambers," where people interact solely or primarily with those who agree with them (Prior and Stroud 2015; Strickler 2018).

In this article, I seek to render an account of the practical logic of deploying this kind of nonpersuasive rhetoric and to defend it as a mode of speech that can—under the right circumstances—serve a legitimate purpose, while also pointing to the limits of that legitimate use. To do this, I turn to Frederick Douglass. Amid the recent Black Lives Matter protests, it is not uncommon to see quotations taken especially from Douglass' "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" address. In that speech Douglass straightforwardly acknowledges he does not seek to persuade opponents or even those on the fence concerning slavery: "some one of my audience say… would you persuade more, and rebuke less, your cause would be much more likely to succeed." (Douglass 2016, 58). Douglass rejects this suggestion and instead proposes to "pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke" (58).

In doing so, Douglass draws lessons from an even older tradition of speech than classical rhetorical theory: the language of Biblical prophecy.[3] Many other scholars have noted that we can recognize the content—the moral vision, political concern, themes, and tropes—of biblical prophecy in Douglass' rhetoric against slavery and Black disenfranchisement (Andrews 1982; Bennett 2016; Blight 1991; Shulman 2008). This article builds on that work. But what has not been recognized is that Douglass' use of these features of prophetic rhetoric reveals an understanding of the powers of rhetoric that applies beyond any particular content or theme. He recognizes that this type of rhetoric rests implicitly on different assumptions about human nature and psychology, and it aims at a different relationship between the speaker and audience than those put forth by Aristotle and his modern heirs, who focus solely on persuasion.

I term this broad species of speech, which seeks to motivate rather than persuade, "hortatory rhetoric." Such rhetoric comes in a wide variety of modes, and it can appeal to different passions, emotions, and moral outlooks. Douglass deploys his particular style of hortatory rhetoric when engaged with audiences that already agree with him on the issue in question. His approach accepts that human beings regularly fail to act on their own considered judgments. Action requires motivation, which in turn often depends on a person's affect or emotional state, and these do not always correspond to their judgment. In such cases, Douglass views his role less as one who seeks to change listeners' minds about the right course of action, and rather as a spur to heed their own inner voice of justice. This in turn requires a thoroughly different rhetorical approach than one adopted by someone who seeks to change minds, and it uses correspondingly different tools. The tactics of persuasion are exchanged for those that shame, inspire, arouse, and energize.

Contemporary empirical scholarship on voter mobilization often deals with this kind of rhetoric. But that scholarship nearly always frames such speech as merely persuasion on a different subject: the relative importance or urgency of the desired action. Here audience members' judgments are still being changed: rather than address the question "which candidate should it vote for?" the speaker focuses on: "should I vote at all?" Voters are given reasons why voting should matter more to them than it initially appears (Jacobson 2015, 8). It is true that mobilizing rhetoricians often engage in such rhetoric. But Douglass recognizes that there is another kind of rhetoric, which does not seek to alter judgment at all; it takes judgment for granted, yet accepts that judgment alone is inefficacious without emotional motivation.

The reason for turning to Douglass in particular to help us understand the normative and theoretical stakes of this speech is not that he is the first to use it, but that he provides in his speeches and writing a theoretical account of the logic for deploying it, and of how to recognize its differences from persuasion. Douglass' powerful rhetoric has already been the focus of considerable scholarly work, but hitherto, no one has recognized the fact that Douglass makes a self-conscious break with the then-dominant classical tradition of rhetorical theory, with which Douglass was very familiar.

To recognize value of this alternative model of hortatory rhetoric is by no means to discard or eliminate the persuasive mode. Indeed, it is clear that many speeches (including many of Douglass' own) partake of both sorts of rhetoric. Instances of political speech thus exist

[3] As explained further below, I do not mean by this the faculty of foretelling the future, but rather the genre of speech adopted by the Old Testament prophets.

on a spectrum ranging from pure persuasion to pure exhortation, usually including elements of both. But the functions of the two are different, and often one is seeking to persuade on one question while exhorting on another. Douglass himself acknowledges that his hortatory alternative is only called for in certain situations and on certain topics. But he demonstrates that this is also true of persuasion. Both modes of communication present trade-offs, and the right choice depends on the rhetorician's judgment of a number of factors: the aim being pursued, the nature of the audience, and their current emotional state. At times an attempt at persuasion may be impotent, or redundant, or even counterproductive. At other times, to speak in the hortatory mode threatens to close off the possibility for the genuine changing of minds, which is still a necessary element of healthy democratic politics. Appeals to emotion that assume audience agreement will likely further alienate those disagreeing or undecided. Douglass attends to this problem. When persuasion is called for, Douglass shows himself more than capable of speaking in the appropriate mode.

But for this reason, Douglass can help us better grasp the fact that rhetoricians often face a morally laden choice (whether recognized or not) when addressing any audience: am I seeking to change minds, or am I seeking to rouse spirits (or am I trying to do both)? This article thus uses Douglass to help make the case for distinguishing the different functions of persuasive and hortatory rhetoric and to explore the normative problems that this choice gives rise to.

Douglass and the Classical Rhetorical Tradition

It might seem strange to suggest that we have not yet fully appreciated the radical way in which Douglass can help us understand the possibilities of rhetoric. His own rhetoric has been the subject of a great deal of careful and thoughtful scholarship. But virtually all of this scholarship focuses on the *content* of Douglass' rhetoric—the political vision or normative ideas it expresses. Thus, McInerny sees in Douglass' rhetoric evidence of the power of classical republican ideals to provide intellectual support for abolition (McInerney 1994, 57). Many see a rhetoric of natural rights liberalism in Douglass' works (among others, McKeen 2002; Schrader 1999; Shklar 1989). Others see instead a rhetoric of fraternity (McWilliams 1974). But this scholarship does not generally approach Douglass as a theorist of rhetoric *qua* rhetoric, making claims about what rhetoric is for and how it works.[4]

To a certain extent, this neglect is understandable. In his fight for Black freedom and equality, Douglass had far more urgent political tasks than to advance rhetorical theory. Nor do I intend to claim that making such theoretical advancements was Douglass' aim, only that Douglass did indeed do so, as a means to his larger political ends.

Douglass himself also did little to encourage the idea that he had engaged classical theories of rhetoric. Instead he tacitly cultivated the impression that his first foray into public speaking was an instance of spontaneous discovery of a previously hidden talent. So, when his initial success led to an offer to become a professional speaker for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass describes himself as embarking on a career "for which I had had no preparation" (Douglass 2000, 165). Emphasizing his lack of formal schooling, he approvingly recounts being introduced to crowds: "I was 'a graduate from the peculiar institution' Mr. Collins used to say… 'with my diploma written on my back'" (165).

But in fact, even when still an enslaved child, Douglass had acquired for himself a textbook on rhetoric, *The Columbian Orator*. The work, published in 1797, was popular in first decades of the nineteenth century. It contained a collection of exemplary political speeches, ancient and modern. It also contained an introductory essay by the editor, Caleb Bingham, on the purpose and methods of rhetoric. This essay expresses the logic of the classical view of rhetoric, from Aristotle filtered through Cicero, who emphasized the importance the speaker's dignity and simplicity of language (which Douglass took very seriously).

The appeal of the Aristotelian/Ciceronian/persuasive model is quite intuitive. It is based on the assumption of human practical rationality. This does not mean humans are always perfectly rational in *how* they reason or make judgments—if they were, rhetoric would be unnecessary; all that would be needed is logic and evidence. But Aristotle and his heirs do assert that *once* we reach a conclusion or make a judgment about what we ought to do (however we arrived at that judgment), we reliably follow it up with the appropriate action. In other words: once I am persuaded that I ought to eat an apple rather than a bag of chips (for whatever reason: that the apple would be good for my health, that the chips are stale and tasteless,

[4]A significant exception is Bromell, who discusses the role of "romantic irony" (2021, 71). In part, Bromell shows that this use of irony allows Douglass to navigate the problem of perspective: his audience is often so ignorant of the reality of slavery that they cannot appreciate the depth of its evils.

etc.), I can be counted on to eat the apple rather than the chips. As Aristotle puts it: "the use of persuasive speech is to lead to decisions. When we know [*ismen*] a thing, and have distinguished it [*kekrikamen*], there is no further use in speaking about it" (*Rhetoric* 1391b). Thus for Aristotle, it is simply impossible for us to decide we ought to do something (all things considered, including opportunity costs) and then not do it. As a result, changing people's minds should indeed be sufficient to produce a change in their behavior.

Overall, Bingham's essay reflects this belief that political action is the result of changing minds: "like a restless current, [rhetoric] bears down every obstacle and turns even the current of opposing ignorance and prejudice…It is indisputably the most potent art within the compass of human acquirement. An Alexander and a Caesar could conquer the world, but…to command at pleasure the inclinations of men can be effected only by the all-powerful charm" of rhetoric (Bingham 1839, 31–32). Bingham expresses the hope that American rhetoric will continue in the tradition of the free republics of antiquity where decisions were made when citizens changed one another's minds.

Thus, we know that education in the classical theory and style of rhetoric is one of the very first elements of book learning that Douglass acquired, and the *Columbian Orator* had a profound influence on him. Douglass even credits it with opening him up to the ideas of abolitionism. In his autobiography, Douglass tells us that "every opportunity I got, used to read this book…over and over again with unabated interest" (Douglass 2000, 35).

Most importantly for our purposes, Douglass tells us that what he learned about rhetoric from the *Columbian Orator* is the main thesis of the classical model of rhetoric: that rhetoric is powerful because it enables you to persuade people, to change their minds on the most important questions. Douglass recalls that one of the most significant examples of rhetoric in the book for him is a dialogue between a master and a slave: "in this dialogue, the whole argument on behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart things as well in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect" (Douglass 2000, 35). As a result of his defeat in the argument, the slave-owner voluntarily emancipates his slave.[5]

In many of his early speeches, Douglass follows the instructions and examples of the *Columbian Orator*, attempting to persuade people of the wrongness of slavery. He takes slaveholding arguments seriously and rebuts them with equal seriousness. Against the idea that slaves' hard hands are evidence that God intends for them to do manual labor, Douglass points out that "some of us know very well that [if we could stop working] ours would get soft too" (Blassingame and Douglass 1992, 3–4). More frequently, he engages in persuasion to debate those sympathetic with the antislavery cause, but who disagree about means or urgency. So, he rebuts proposals for forced colonization as self-contradictory to the principle of liberty (Blassingame and Douglass 1992, 319). Later, after his break with the Garrisonians, he sought to refute the idea that the Constitution was a proslavery document, while acknowledging that he had once held such a view himself (Blassingame and Douglass 1992, 349).

Douglass' effectiveness at persuasion is demonstrated by the reception he receives. Even after his first address on Nantucket, we see an audience member recall it this way: "flinty hearts were pierced, and cold ones were melted by his eloquence" (Lampe 2012, 61). When debating resolutions among fellow members of antislavery societies, Douglass' position frequently wins out.

"They Assent…But Are Not Moved": The Limits of Persuasion

But over time, Douglass grows frustrated with the limitations of persuasion in producing action. In an 1860 essay titled "The Prospect in the Future," Douglass laments that all the argument in the world seems insufficient to motivate the American people to action against the evil of slavery. But he notes, this is not because of a lack of effective persuasion: "The great work of enlightening the people as to the wicked enormities of slavery, is well-nigh accomplished, but the practical results of this work have disappointed our hopes." Americans, especially in the North, have indeed come to recognize the evil and the danger that slavery poses. Yet, this judgment does not produce the corresponding action: "They assent to all the horrid truths which reveal the inhuman secrets of the gloomy prison house, but are not moved to action." There are no new arguments to be made, since the argument has been won: "you cannot relate a new fact, or frame an unfamiliar argument on this subject"

[5]See the *Columbian Orator*, 240–42. For instance, one of the slave-owner's arguments rests on the benevolence of the owner and his intent to care for the slave. The slave replies: "you have done nothing more for me than for your working cattle… do you work them harder than your slaves? is [sic] not the rule of treating both designed only for your own advantage?" (241). To this the master has no response.

(Blassingame and Douglass 1992, 449).[6] From the Aristotelian perspective, this should signal the end of the utility of rhetoric. If the possibilities of argument and persuasion have been exhausted, what else is left for a speaker to do?

More saliently, someone accepting the classical persuasive framework would not be able to comprehend such a situation. They would expect that if people really do accept an argument that they ought to act in a certain way, they will.[7] The mature Douglass, however, is not baffled. His rhetorical education had expanded since his days as a slave covertly reading the *Columbian Orator*. After escaping slavery and settling in Massachusetts, Douglass quickly became a member of the New Bedford African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The strain of Christianity which Douglass found at AME by no means assumed humans are practical-rational creatures. Indeed, the very notion of sin implies a rejection of this idea. For most grave sins, people must know what they are doing is wrong, yet do it anyway. This is to say, they must believe—all things considered, including divine retribution in the afterlife—that they ought to act one way, and *at that very moment*, act in another way.

As Hawley (2021, 942–43) illustrates, Christian preachers as far back as Augustine have recognized that this fact of human psychology has consequences for rhetoric. As a bishop in North Africa, Augustine argued "if there are certain doubts of fact, the listeners require information…but if listeners have to be moved rather than instructed, so that they are not numb, so that they will act on the knowledge they already have, one needs entreaties, rebukes, and harangues" (*De Doctrina Christiana* 4.15). Although Augustine did not discuss the *political* ramifications of such rhetoric, he gives a psychological account to explain what takes place in its ecclesiastical manifestation that can apply generally. Unlike Aristotle and Cicero, Augustine held a developed theory of the will—a faculty that operates independently of our reasoned judgment. According to Augustine, human desires and passions were often sufficiently great as to prompt a break between judgment and action (a phenomenon the Greeks called *akrasia*—lack of self-rule). Positing the will as a separate human faculty enables Augustine to explain such a gap—that we act in ways we believe we should not, or fail to act when we believe we should, is because our will does not support our judgment. In such cases, the problem lies not with our reason, but with the misalignment of our passions and desires with it. Hortatory rhetoric could speak directly to those passions and desires, inflaming them to provide psychological force to support the course of action our reason urges us to. In the same way, for instance, listening to energetic music might make us more willing to exercise vigorously, even though it provides no new rational arguments for doing so. Hortatory rhetoric can function in a similar way to such "pump-up music."[8]

Preachers at Douglass' church took this recognition into account. Amid the great religious diversity of America during this period (at least among Protestant sects), the discourse at AME stood firmly in prophetic strain of Christianity. Prophetic in this sense has little to do with telling the future, but rather with holding an office as a messenger from God (Shulman 2008, 3). This message was often (though not always) an unwelcome one. Prophets called attention to sin and injustice, warning of God's growing anger and the consequences of falling away from righteousness.

The prophet frequently confronts his listeners with the exact contradiction that the psychological assumption of practical rationality denies: they believe one thing, but do another (or nothing at all). The aim of such a tactic is to compel the audience to heed the belief they already hold about right action and actually *act* rightly. The Biblical prophets are usually unconcerned with making arguments, offering logical proofs, or presenting new evidence to change the minds of people about how they ought to behave. Instead, they take for granted that both the just and unjust alike know what injustice is and that they ought not to commit it. Whether this moral sense is natural or taught, its significance for our purposes is that it rejects the Aristotelian premise of practical rationality. Such prophets speak in what I term the hortatory register—instead of presenting arguments to change minds, they assume the right judgment is already present in their listeners and instead encourage them to act on that judgment.

Scholars often conflate the influence on Douglass of the prophetic and the classical modes of rhetoric. For instance, Lampe suggests that Bingham's *Columbian Orator* taught Douglass a "standard structure for organizing

[6]This must be something of an exaggeration: Douglass does attempt new arguments. But the point remains that Douglass felt that argument in general is not sufficient for the task at hand.

[7]It goes beyond the scope of this article to evaluate Douglass' empirical claim that the arguments for abolition had been broadly accepted in the North. It is again certainly fair to say some exaggeration is at work. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily undermine Douglass' claim that there is a large Northern constituency that accepts the wrongness of slavery, agrees that it should be abolished, and yet does little or nothing to bring such abolition about.

[8]See Hawley (2021) for further exploration of Augustine's role in distinguishing this sort of religious rhetoric and for a summary of the contemporary research into the psychology of *akrasia*.

speeches" that he could use in preaching as well (2012, 13). But the approaches differ significantly and are at least sometimes mutually exclusive.

At AME, the methods of hortatory rhetoric were developed to an impressive height by the Black preachers Douglass encountered. These speakers recognized that features of music—like rhythm, tone, and cadence—have a profound effect on the affective state of listeners: "most sermons began with normal conversational speech, slowly built to a rhythmic cadence, and climaxed in a tonal chant with the congregation shouting, singing, dancing" (Lampe 2012, 4). Douglass explains that musical laments likewise palliated sorrow merely by expressing it: "the songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears" (Blassingam et al. 2012, 31).

Preachers often employed a call-and-response approach with their audiences, where members of the congregation offer back both ritualistic replies as well as spontaneous affirmations of "yes," "amen," and more. This kind of interaction would make no sense in an Aristotelian rhetorical context—it would obviously prove unworkable with a disagreeing audience. But with an audience that already accepts the speaker's message and moral view, such engagement forges a bond between the speaker and the audience, and among audience members with each other, which serves to reinforce, inspire, and motivate all involved to act with renewed vigor on their shared convictions. Thus we see: not only the goals but also the techniques of persuasive and hortatory rhetoric cannot be easily combined in the same speech act.[9]

Douglass' church was not alone in cultivating this sort of speech. Indeed, other Black preachers achieved considerable renown in their own day practicing it—Rev. Alexander Crummell and Bishop Daniel Payne, for instance, both adopted the prophetic religious language. The latter claimed prophetically that God himself had commanded him to declare that "slavery brutalizes man" (Payne 1839, 2). In his New Bedford, Douglass encountered a community centered on this tradition of preaching. He took to it immediately. It was not long before he assumed his first preaching role, as an "exhorter"—an extremely apt title. In this capacity, he was mentored by some of the congregation's pastors, and he learned from other preachers who passed through the church. Douglass describes this experience as that which prepared him for his work as an antislavery speaker:

> It is impossible for me to tell how far my connection with these devoted men influenced my career… No doubt that the exercise of my gifts in this vocation, and my association with the excellent men to whom I have referred, helped to prepare me for the wider sphere of usefulness which I have since occupied. It was from this Zion church that I went forth to the work of delivering my brethren from bondage. (Letter to James Hood, in Andrews 1982, 596)

This discourse was not limited to the inside of churches. Payne and Crummell were just a few of the preachers who took the antislavery message to the broader public. In contrast to the dominant White public square, as Habermas might construe it, Brooks, Spires, and Bromell have shed light on the growing Black counterpublic, developed by Black thinkers and writers as a site of critique (Bromell 2021; Brooks 2005; Spires 2019). As early as 1841, James McCune Smith elaborated the rhetorical challenges facing these Black critics and their hopes: "no holiday speeches in which shall be uttered eloquent falsehoods… but on the contrary, we shall utter the earnest pleading of downtrodden humanity, seeking security from wrongs too long inflicted, no longer to be endured" (2006, 59).

Douglass' Hortatory Rhetoric

Now, to say that Douglass himself goes on to be a major figure in the American prophetic moral tradition is hardly controversial (Blight 2018; Lampe 2012; Shulman 2008). Nor was Douglass the first to turn such speech to political ends; Kimberly Smith persuasively argues that reasoned, persuasive rhetoric was in fact on the wane in the practice of American politics throughout the prewar period (Smith 1999, 85). Indeed the evidence above suggests this mode of speaking is at least as old as the Old Testament prophets. Douglass gets his start as a political orator through William Lloyd Garrison, whose speeches often harangued and castigated the audience.[10] Bercovitch has ably demonstrated that there is a long tradition of "American jeremiads" that stretches back to the Puritans of New England (2012, 4). Such jeremiads often denounce Americans for failing to live up to their moral commitments or to their founding ideals.

[9]Of course, there is no reason the same speaker might not employ each in different speeches, or in the same speech on different topics.

[10]In some sense, Garrisonians were even more harsh in their castigations than Douglass, especially after Douglass' break with Garrison. Garrison and his followers did not even allow their audience to draw comfort and inspiration from the American founding, as Garrison characterized the Constitution as an "agreement with hell" and a "covenant with death."

But, when the scholars above speak of Douglass using the rhetoric of prophecy, they refer to the *content* of Douglass' speeches and writings. So, one can identify in Douglass' corpus attention to the common features of that moral outlook: an attention to sin and injustice, a demand for righteousness, a warning if that demand is not heeded, etc. As the evidence above suggests, such themes are certainly present and feature prominently in Douglass' corpus. In this sense, the rhetoric of prophecy may be an alternative or a complement to the rhetoric of republicanism (McInerney 1994), the rhetoric of fraternity (McWilliams 1974), or the rhetoric of natural rights (Schrader 1999) that can also be found in Douglass' speeches. Even Bercovitch, who recognizes that this way of speaking is distinct from other forms of rhetoric, frames its distinction around a certain content—specifically the idea of a covenant to which the audience must rededicate themselves (2012, xix).[11]

The characterization of jeremiad seems especially apt in light of the effects of some of Douglass' speeches. For instance, after an address in Massachusetts, an abolitionist newspaper described Douglass' approach in the following way:

> He spoke with an indignation approaching to anger, which it was most satisfying to hear. He denounced the North, as well as the South, as the chief sustainers of the slave system. He charged upon the whole country the infliction of slavery on himself and his brethren. He spoke of the southern clergy in the most withering sarcasm and with admirable mimickry took off their slaveholding gospel as they preach it… and the north preached the same thing. (Lampe 2012, 104)[12]

The speech itself was not recorded, but we can tell from reaction above that Douglass seemed uninterested in offering arguments that might sway an undecided (much less an opposed) mind. He appears to have made no concessions to opposing prejudices or emotional states of mind, as the rules of persuasion would demand. Indeed, even potential supporters might find such a speech alienating, as Douglass condemns not only the hated South, but also Northerners in Massachusetts for their complicity in slavery. Douglass thus breaks all the cardinal rules of classical rhetoric—yet his speech is a success.[13]

Buccola recognizes that present in Douglass' rhetoric is a near-constant concern for the problem of motivation. As Buccola puts it, Douglass sought to resolve a problem that perennially confronts liberal communities: "how do we get freedom-loving individuals to feel a strong sense of responsibility for others" (2008, 401). Buccola illustrates how Douglass recognizes that the individualist principles of American liberalism showed themselves insufficient for mobilizing the White population to defend the same freedoms for Blacks: arguments drawn from philanthropy, religion, and political life had "all failed to motivate action" (414). Buccola then turns to Douglass' thought to uncover new lines of argument that Douglass deploys to overcome this inaction: arguments based in human fraternity, universal human rights, and self-interest. Buccola is persuasive, and Douglass does indeed offer these new arguments. But Buccola's analysis of Douglass' rhetoric remains within the framework of persuasion—he considers Douglass' rhetorical contribution solely from the perspective of these new arguments which might convince listeners to change their minds.

It is undeniable that there are such features to Douglass' rhetoric, but I argue that Douglass' growing maturity brings him to a far more capacious realization about rhetoric *qua* rhetoric. As a mature thinker and rhetorician, Douglass recognizes that the hortatory register of speaking creates and depends upon a radically different relationship between speaker and audience than that envisioned by the classical model. On the basis of this recognition, Douglass begins to think about the strategic and ethical considerations that should determine when and how much an orator should deploy it.

In perhaps his most famous speech—itself an example of hortatory rhetoric—Douglass offers precisely such an account of when it is appropriate to engage in hortatory rhetoric. In "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," Douglass addresses an antislavery society in Rochester. His audience, therefore, can well be expected to agree with him about the issue of slavery. Douglass' address begins with what at first appears a long encomium of the United States. He praises the American Founders, lauds those who died in the American Revolution, and

[11]For Bercovitch, the failure to imagine ideals or standards *outside* the American tradition is precisely what is so limiting about this mode of speech—it does not leave room for radically new ideas or challenges to the tradition itself. However, as should become clear, Douglass recognizes that the audience's prior agreement on the fundamental issue can also offer new weapons to the speaker to achieve political action.

[12]Here we hear also proof of the power of Douglass' skill as a mimic and his sense of humor. Ganter illustrates how Douglass was able to use these to devastating rhetorical effect, often forcing the audience to undergo a crucial perspective shift that undermines racist assumptions (2003, 536–37).

[13]Such speech would also violate the principles laid out in Hugh Blair's enormously influential handbook on rhetoric, which argued that the orator should never abandon his natural speaking voice and style for effect (1784, 312–14).

extolls the principles of freedom and equality embodied in the Declaration of Independence. The effect of this first part of the speech seems designed to lull the audience into a sense of complacent self-congratulation. But then Douglass abruptly shifts—and calls attention to the hollow and hypocritical nature of any such pride in light of the institution of slavery: "from the slave's point of view…the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July" (Douglass 2016, 57).[14]

As if to explicitly note that this turn marks a choice in favor of the hortatory approach, Douglass transitions from encomium to condemnation with a quotation from Isaiah. But rather than theological prophecy, Douglass' focus is on American's betrayal of its civic—rather than Christian—catechism: "the rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me… to drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery" (Douglass 2016, 57).[15] The whole speech contrasts the assumed acceptance of his audience of the truth of the American civic principles of liberty, justice, and equality, reminding them of the obvious fact that those principles are systematically denied through the institution of slavery.[16]

Douglass then explains in explicit language that he intends to abandon the classical persuasive model: "But I fancy I hear some one of my audience say, it is just in this circumstance that you and your brother abolitionists fail to make a favorable impression on the public mind. Would you argue more, and denounce less, would you persuade more, and rebuke less, your cause would be much more likely to succeed" (Douglass 2016, 58). This, in a nutshell, is precisely the classical view: how can you expect to persuade anyone while you denounce them? But Douglass responds to this objection: "But, I submit, *where all is plain there is nothing to be argued.* What point in the anti-slavery creed would you have me argue? On what branch of the subject do the people of this country need light? Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it" (58, emphasis added). Douglass goes on to show that the very legal system of the slaveholding South implicitly acknowledges the humanity of slaves—laws are passed prohibiting anyone from teaching slaves to read, and other laws enumerate legal penalties for slaves who commit crimes. "When you can point to any such laws, in reference to the beasts of the field… *then* will I argue with you that the slave is a man" (58). On the issue of slavery, Douglass no longer accepts that there is any point in arguing with proslavery advocates, or even in trying to lure in those still on the fence.

If there is no longer any rational ground for doubting the wrongfulness of slavery, therefore, then further words to such doubters are powerless. Thus, Douglass summarily dismisses arguments that man is not entitled to liberty and that slavery is divinely ordained. Douglass merely points out again that the patriotic principles of liberty so celebrated by his audience already contradict any such claims. For those reasons: "the time for such argument has passed" (Douglass 2016, 59).[17]

In place of argument, Douglass commences a civic jeremiad:

> At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, today, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled. (Douglass 2016, 59–60)

We can see in even from these excerpted passages that Douglass' method takes its cues from the techniques of the hortatory register and the Black prophetic preachers of his youth. But while there are certainly appeals to literal Christian themes of sin and pharisaical hypocrisy, the main thrust is secular and civic—Americans have

[14]Bromell rightly notes that this marks a common tactic of Douglass—perspective shifting—which also does not constitute forming a new argument, per se (2021, 57). Instead it simply forces the audience to consider a situation from a radically different point of view and to realize that they, too, have a particular point of view that blinds them to certain truths.

[15]As John Burt puts: "Douglass makes natural law antislavery arguments, but he does not make them in religious ways…Rather than relying upon a prophetic sense of the absolute command of the divine, he relies upon a secular, cosmopolitan sense of what common decency requires, even as he describes that sense (as Jefferson did) in utterly conventional religious language" (2021, 119). Burt, too, argues Douglass is forced to abandon "moral suasion" in the fight against slavery (126). But for Burt, the alternative to this suasion is violence of some kind.

[16]This is the logic of American jeremiads that Bercovitch identifies.

[17]This is not to say that there is no attempt at persuasion and argument anywhere in this speech. For instance, Douglass here engages in his long-running argument over the Constitution, making the case that it is an antislavery document. But on the main subject of the speech, the morality of slavery itself, Douglass foreswears argument.

failed to live their own national values. One can see in this a secularization of the themes of the prophetic jeremiad: where the principles of the Declaration of Independence substitute for holy scripture as the morality all accept, but hypocritically violate.

But more important still for our purposes, the classical/persuasive approach to the issue found in the *Columbian Orator,* where the arguments for slavery are taken seriously and rebutted at length, is explicitly rejected.[18] There is little point to persuasion here. After all, the audience is an antislavery society, the members of which are presumably among the last people who need further convincing of the wrongfulness of slavery.[19] Thus, Douglass is innovating far beyond secularizing prophetic themes in an American context. The tone, the aims, the style, and the relationship Douglass forges with his audience all depart from what a speaker aiming for persuasion would attempt. Like those AME sermons, the speech begins in an accessible, conversational style, drawing the audience in. But it builds a rhythm as it approaches the moral point, and it ultimately reaches a crescendo of emotional power. Douglass does not hesitate to make his (already sympathetic) audience feel shame, guilt, and remorse, in part through his use of irony. These are hardly the kinds of emotions Aristotle would encourage a speaker to adopt to get the audience on his side.

Douglass wastes no time bringing people to his side: he takes for granted that they are already there. But like sinners who already *know* their sin, but must be made to *feel* it, so that they might repent and sin no more, Douglass' audience must experience a similar confrontation with their failure to act vigorously according to their own convictions. The purpose of calling those unpleasant emotions up is not to shame for shame's sake, but rather to spark real resolve to act.[20] Shame confronts us with a failure to live according to our own standards, making action feel like an urgently needed way to atone or rectify. Like the Hebrew prophets, Douglass sees the value exhorting, chastising, even haranguing an audience, in the hopes of awaking them to act on the truth they already accept.

In other speeches, Douglass is less explicit about his reasons for deviating from the classical mode of persuasion and adopting the register of exhortation. But examples of him doing so abound. In many of these, we can see the work of this new hortatory rhetoric without any clear connection to even secularized prophetic themes (sin, repentance, consolation, etc.). At a joint event with Garrison, Douglass led the audience in a series of deliberately ironic calls-and-responses "'I stand here a slave'… 'no!'…'A slave at least in the eye of the Constitution'… 'no!'" (Blassingame and Douglass 1992, 16).[21] Later in the same speech, Douglass engages in hortatory repetition, once again taking for granted his audience agreement with his stance and calling on them to act on behalf of slaves: "Do it! and they who are ready to perish shall bless you! Do it! And all good men will cheer you onward! Do it!" (16).

In the above example, Douglass not only denounces hypocrisy, he encourages those already exerting themselves to persevere. In such cases, one's audience may even be already acting rightly, but be in danger of losing heart. Douglass' approach to such an audience is not unlike the way a sports coach might try to motivate tired players at halftime. What is needed is not new facts or arguments, but consolation and encouragement—a pep talk. Douglass deploys such rhetoric outside the direct issue of slavery as well. After the Civil War, he encourages continued commitment to patriotic duty. Speaking of the purpose of Decoration Day, Douglass likens the speeches and celebrations in which he is participating to national vows, public commitment to which might fade if not periodically renewed: "the nation can meet one day each year and renew its national vows [so that]… the broad manly sentiment of which it is born, and by which it is sustained, will live, flourish and bear similar fruit forever" (2016, 277—78).

Douglass adopts this hortatory register from Christian preaching. But it no longer is necessarily tied to the themes and aims of prophecy. Instead, it provides a far more general insight into human psychology, the possible aims of a speaker, and the range of relationships a speaker may establish with an audience—all of which

[18]Arguments for slavery resting on the right of the stronger, the authority of conventional law, and benevolent masters—all offered in the Columbian Orator's dialogue—are not addressed at all. Cf. *Columbian Orator*, 240–42.

[19]This by no means should suggest that Douglass' rhetorical task in front of such audiences was easy. As Bromell illustrates, Douglass is a Black speaker who often placed himself in the position of moral superior and moral instructor to White audiences (2021, 7–8). Even among sympathetic northern Whites, this is a pose that was often uncomfortable for Whites to bear at best, and unthinkable and intolerable at worst. To go so far as to chastise and castigate them would appear profoundly risky. Yet, Douglass judges the risk worth the potential reward: vigorous action against slavery.

[20]Nolan Bennet argues that "whereas to narrate wrongs is to try them against popular law or morality, to denounce wrongs implicates readers in the practice and product of self-examination" (2019, 245).

[21]Fanuzzi points out that Douglass' very body serves a rhetorical function: "the black orator composed a physical force" making abolition principles a "corporeal reality" (2003, 85).

apply to a far broader set of political circumstances than Douglass' own specific fight against White supremacy. They are tools almost any political actor might find use for.

The Orator's Choice: Normative and Practical Stakes

Thus, in helping us see this alternative mode of speaking, Douglass reveals himself not only a master practitioner of rhetoric but also a profound and original *theorist* of rhetoric itself, one who challenges substantially the classical persuasive framework. The background of the Black experience in America is clearly not incidental to Douglass' contribution. Whereas Aristotle's vision of political rhetoric comes from the relatively equal exchanges between free citizens of the Athenian polis, Douglass' arises from a situation of oppression and hypocrisy. His hortatory rhetoric naturally focuses on those elements of psychology and speech that can aid a cause even when the there is little need for further argument to show the existence of injustice. It is thus probably not a coincidence that social reformers especially have often adopted a similar rhetorical approach to encouraging supporters in struggles over civil rights, suffrage, and the like.

The first radical implication of Douglass' contribution is that the classical mode of seeking to change judgments is *not* the only possible function of rhetoric—there is a hortatory alternative. The field of rhetorical criticism has already moved well past the Aristotelian schema (e.g., Black 1978; Scott 1967). But these insights have not yet been incorporated into the mainstream of political scholarship. Empirically, speeches that might seem to be failures of persuasion might be successful instances of exhortation. Moreover, even nonpolitical scholars in the field of rhetorical theory have not attended to the mode of hortatory rhetoric considered in this article.[22]

Recognizing the distinctive nature of the prophetic register not only contributes to our theoretical understanding of rhetoric and opens up new possibilities for empirically studying it, it also raises new normative questions. Douglass shows that political speakers—whether they recognize it or not—confront a choice at the outset: persuasion or exhortation—do I seek to change minds, or rouse spirits? It is entirely possible for the same speaker to use both registers in different speeches—or even in the same speech on different topics. But they may work at cross-purposes: the material that will energize supporters can often alienate persuadable opponents. Conciliating opponents or the undecided, in turn, may dispirit supporters by making concessions to the prejudices or interests of those targeted for persuasion. For instance, Douglass himself reports being disappointed and frustrated by the rhetorical concessions Lincoln makes toward racists in the effort to get those racists to nevertheless support emancipation.[23] The two approaches grasp at different features of human psychology, use different techniques, and produce a different relationship between speaker and audience.

Douglass' example helps to illustrate such practical trade-offs. Not everyone's moral sense can be reached by a speaker: "I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just" (Douglass 2016, 58). He knows that some of his listeners have become so corrupted by injustice that they do not respond to even the most powerful hortatory appeal. To be more precise, they may respond—but in the very opposite way the rhetor might hope. A sympathetic correspondent from Garrison's *Liberator* recounts a speech in which slavery-tolerating ministers, Whigs, and Democrats were all "faithfully scourged for their recreancy" by Douglass. Unsurprisingly, the offended parties in the audience frequently interrupted Douglass, and he and his supporters were "disturbed and often times insulted" (Lampe 2012, 221).[24]

It is hard to judge whether the gains made by fiery rhetoric of the sort Douglass deployed were outweighed by the countervailing effect of intensifying Southern resolve.[25] Certainly, some more moderate figures in the Republican Party saw just such a danger.[26] For our purposes, it is only once we recognize the distinction between persuasive and hortatory rhetorical registers that we can begin to study the extent to which the two modes of speech might have divergent impacts on audiences.

[22]Black challenges Aristotle in part by proposing a model of rhetoric he terms "exhortation" that nearly inverts the hortatory one discussed here, in which "emotion is used to produce belief" thus bringing about a kind of "radical conversion" (1978, 141–42).

[23]Compare Douglass' "Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln" with Lincoln's own justifications for the Emancipation Proclamation.

[24]Bromell notes that this tactic might also have allowed Douglass to spur a concern with human dignity by first inciting indignation (2021, 72).

[25]See for instance Wyly Jones (2001) for an exploration of this possibility.

[26]Lincoln himself seemed to strongly prefer the persuasive approach.

The fact that some audiences may require hortatory rhetoric, while others would be alienated by the same kind of speech yields another interesting implication. For a political actor to speak one way to one audience and an opposite way to another is often considered the definition of pandering (Chambers 2009; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). But if Douglass' view is right, then such adjustments are not only justifiable, but perhaps often morally necessary. In service to a (good) cause, one may rightfully speak persuasively to some, and hortatorily to others. In the former, a speaker might rhetorically entertain all manner of prejudices, interests, and opinions contrary to her own, in an effort to move those who hold them to join her cause. But in a speech to comrades, she might forcefully dismiss all such considerations to inspirit her fellows.

Considering Douglass' use of hortatory rhetoric also helps to illustrate that the moral stakes for the rhetorician's choice are as high as the practical ones in other ways. There is no particular reason to believe that the techniques of rousing an otherwise listless audience to vigorous action must always be politically salutary. We need only consider the rhetoric of demagogues to see that one can appeal to other passions in the audience rather than to their moral sense: fear, anger, hatred, and prejudice can all also be summoned by such exhortation.

Less dramatically, a civic discourse characterized primarily by people speaking in the hortatory register may indeed find partisan divisions ever more entrenched and persuasion more difficult and rarer.[27] The hortatory speaker often assumes or asserts that there is nothing serious on the other side of the argument, thus encouraging an audience to feel that way as well. In such cases the audience is likely to feel that opposition to the speaker's message cannot be in good faith and must be the product of nefarious motives. Douglass certainly cultivates that feeling about the defenders of slavery in his Fourth of July speech. Few now would object to such an assessment of the defenders of slavery. But many political issues do have important moral claims on both sides; healthy political life may depend on keeping alive that recognition.

This produces yet another moral concern that does not arise in persuasive speech, where one must attend to one's opponents' points—there is no such thing as "overpersuasion." But there is such a thing as overmotivation. An audience successfully affected by a hortatory speaker may carry their reinforced motivation beyond the intent of the speaker—as when supporters of a candidate refuse to accept election results of a loss. Ethically, it seems speakers must seek an appropriate fit between the end they aim at and the motivation they inspire in their listeners—*even if* they are on the side of justice.

Douglass acknowledges that the persuasive approach is often appropriate and uses it himself. He shows that to speak politically thus is to make a choice about how one will affect the broader sea of public discourse. In fact, Douglass' criterion for when to speak hortatorily is far more restrictive than the one that seems implicitly to guide many other political actors (who may not even reflect on the mode they are employing). For Douglass, *only* when "all is plain" is there "nothing to be argued" (Douglass 2016, 58). Where people of good will might differ (on the relationship between the Constitution and slavery, on whether to remain or flee American racism), Douglass opts for persuasion.

But there is no strict rule that can tell us when there is nothing serious left to say on the other side of an argument. The effort to discern rightly in any particular moment thus leads us back, ironically, to another Aristotelian concept: *phronesis*. Although he does not use the term, Douglass' own use of rhetoric reflects just such a model of civic prudence. In doing so, he offers us a powerful example not only of how and why, but *when* one ought to employ the language of exhortation.

[27] For instance, the desire to speak to those who already agree with us works not only in the direction from political elites to ordinary citizens, but also in reverse: citizens prefer to contact copartisan political elites to express their views (Broockman and Ryan 2016).

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