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On Reclaiming Rhetorica

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The story of *Reclaiming Rhetorica* is a long one, full of the gaps and silences and erasures that also characterize its subject, the history of women in rhetoric. I entered this story late in 1990, when I received a cryptic request from a university press to review a manuscript they had received. Its title was *Reclaiming Rhetorica*; I did not receive the names of its authors.

Fresh from directing a dissertation on women in the history of rhetoric from classical times to the Renaissance, I read through the manuscript eagerly and soon after wrote to the press, saying, "This volume proves to be the first of its kind" and thus "extremely important." I urged that the authors revise with an eye to more inclusiveness and that the press publish the result as soon as possible. Consequently, I expected to hear that such a volume was forthcoming sometime fairly soon. How surprised I was, then, to receive a letter many months later, from two contributors to the volume saying they had not found a publisher and asking if I would consider joining the project.

I jumped at the chance to work with this exciting material, and I was delighted to find that, indeed, I already knew some of the contributors to the original collection in manuscript. I thus set about augmenting that collection, soliciting additional contributions (on Aspasia, Diotima, Margery Kempe, Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, Ida B. Wells, and Julia Kristeva) which attempted to reach back to classical and medieval times as well as to add some additional American and contemporary women's voices to the collection. Eventually the new submissions arrived; contributors read one another's essays, the entire volume, and then revised accordingly; and we traded seemingly endless memos and E-mail and

fax messages to compose the afterword to this volume. As a result, some two years later we had a new manuscript ready to submit for publication.

As these remarks suggest, I was a latecomer to *Rhetorica*, for the story of this volume actually began in 1986–1987, when Annette Kolodny, then professor of literature in the Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, was approached by a group of students who wanted to study the history of women as rhetoricians and theorists of rhetoric. Annette writes:

The students' approaches were marked by hesitation and frustration: hesitation because they were uncertain as to whether much material really existed; and frustration because none of their courses in rhetoric had introduced them to women or even hinted at women's contributions. . . . Increasingly, I was coming to share my students' frustration at the absence of women in these materials. And, no less important, I was seeing interesting parallels and coincidences between discussions of contemporary rhetorical theory and the ongoing debates over literary critical theories and methods. (Letter to author)

During the 1987–1988 year, Annette taught a two-semester graduate seminar on "Women Rhetoricians," a seminar whose members included the original contributors to this volume. (Only one of those seminarians, Colleen O'Toole, has been unable to participate in this project.) They spent the year doing difficult archival research, sharing the results of that research, defining and refining their views on the positioning of particular women in rhetoric, and drafting essays. Annette describes it this way:

Perhaps the most exciting outcomes of our year together were these: a powerful bonding based on friendship and mutual respect, which included everyone. And an excited sense that we had uncovered a rich and unexplored field that would sustain us for years to come. I do not recall any one of us ever getting bored with our projects. On the contrary, we felt we were at the beginning of a much larger enterprise. And we knew that the history of women as rhetors and rhetoricians needed to be written.

By the end of their year together, Annette and her students were convinced that they had the core of a potentially important book. When Annette left Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in the summer of 1988 to become dean of the faculty of humanities at the University of Arizona,

however, the process of editing a final manuscript necessarily slowed. Still, the students persisted, Annette remained in contact with them, and gradually the conception of the book outgrew the confines of the original seminar. It was at this point that I was enlisted as a potential editor and contributor. As Annette remembers it, “The students in the seminar knew better than I did how important this book could be. And they were determined to see the project through to completion.”

Why were the contributors to this volume so impassioned, so persistent in their pursuit of publication? Although the reasons vary widely, one stands out as paramount: if ever woman’s place in the rhetorical tradition were to be reconfigured, if ever a new rhetoric full of such influences were to arise, the work of this volume had to be done.

Of course, many have called for or invoked “new” rhetorics before, most notably George Campbell in his 1776 work, *A Philosophy of Rhetoric*, and Daniel Fogarty in his 1959 volume, *Roots for a New Rhetoric*. In that work, Fogarty identifies what he calls the “old model” of “current-traditional rhetoric,” against which he posits his own version of a “new” rhetoric. To illustrate the roots of this new rhetoric, Fogarty turns to the work of I. A. Richards, Kenneth Burke, and Alfred Korzybski, arguing that their views can form the basis of an art and science of communication that provides an “understanding of the basic presuppositions underlying the functions of discourse, makes use of the findings of literature and science, and teaches the individual how to talk, listen and read” (Fogarty 134).

In spite of its contributions, however, Fogarty’s “new rhetoric” is limited—as was Campbell’s—by both training and tradition to an exclusively masculinist reading of rhetoric, one that in many ways continues to echo Locke’s earlier and decidedly not “new” views on the subject:

’Tis evident how much Men love to deceive, and be deceived, since Rhetoric, that powerful instrument of Error and Deceit, has its established Professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great Reputation. And, I doubt not, but it will always be thought great boldness, if not brutality in me, to have said thus much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it, to suffer it self ever to be spoken against. And ’tis in vain to find fault with those Arts of Deceiving, wherein Men find pleasure to be deceived. (Locke 106)

The essays in *Reclaiming Rhetorica* attempt to move beyond such limited—and limiting—understandings. In doing so, however, they do

not attempt to redefine a “new” rhetoric but rather to interrupt the seamless narrative usually told about the rhetorical tradition and to open up possibilities for multiple rhetorics, rhetorics that would not name and valorize one traditional, competitive, agonistic, and linear mode of rhetorical discourse but would rather incorporate other, often dangerous moves: breaking the silence; naming in personal terms; employing dialogics; recognizing and using the power of conversation; moving centripetally towards connections; and valuing—indeed insisting upon—collaboration. The characteristic tropes for a reclaimed Rhetorica include, therefore, not only definition, division, and synecdoche, but also metonymy, metaphor, and consubstantiality; its characteristic and principal aim is not deception or conquest—as Locke and much of the familiar rhetorical tradition would have it—but understanding, exploration, connection, and conversation. Taken together, the essays in *Reclaiming Rhetorica* suggest that the realm of rhetoric has been almost exclusively male not because women were not practicing rhetoric—the arts of language are after all at the source of human communication—but because the tradition has never recognized the forms, strategies, and goals used by many women as “rhetorical.”

The authors of *Reclaiming Rhetorica* hope, then, to add to recent work—particularly in books by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Miriam Brody, and Sonja Foss, and in articles by scholars such as Catherine Peadar, Nan Johnson, Anne Ruggles Gere, Susan Miller, Karyn Hollis, Sue Ellen Holbrook, and others, who are currently carrying on the archaeological investigations necessary to the success of this project. More particularly, the essays in this volume aim to contribute to that work first of all by *listening*—and listening hard—to and for the voices of women in the history of rhetoric; by becoming, as Cheryl Glenn suggests, the audience who can at last give voice to women lost to us; by examining in close detail their speech and writing; and by acknowledging and exploring the ways in which they have been too often dismissed and silenced.

For the women whose voices animate the pages of *Reclaiming Rhetorica* are a widely diverse group. Some deliberately learned and used the conventions of scholarly rhetoric to make a place for women among the voices of men. Others, self-taught and working within the context of strong religious and political communities, spoke and wrote with deep conviction shaped through conscious rhetorical technique. Still others created comprehensive theories or approaches to language in the tradition of academic scholarship. Some were recognized as prominent

rhetoricians in their own time and have since been forgotten, while others made contributions to language that are only now being recognized as vitally rhetorical.

Like the women whose work this volume seeks to reclaim, the contributors to this volume hold widely varying views about their subjects and take widely varying approaches to them. Some, comfortable with more traditional definitions of rhetorical aims and taxonomies, work to illuminate the dark corners of the discipline to which women have often been banished. Others, dismissing not only the traditional male canon but also the rhetorical theorists and practitioners of that tradition, develop new definitions that encompass the set of excellences demonstrated by the women they study. The underlying principle of this volume is not unity, therefore, but diversity and inclusivity; we seek most of all to embody here widely varying and contrasting approaches, methodologies, scholarly styles, and individual voices.

But such diversity should not suggest iconoclasm or disengagement from one another. Rather, a rich and intense collaboration—beginning with the original graduate seminar and expanding to include all contributors—has been indispensable as both the technique and the spirit of the writing of this book. Through group critiques and the reading and rereading of all the essays gathered here, the contributors have developed ideas in a far more communal and supportive environment than is usually possible in the academic setting or in a collection of this kind. While each essay in this book is separate, then, it owes much to the common ground so laboriously marked out in years of conversation and correspondence. If this book holds the echoes of the women it studies, its individual pages also echo the voices of all of its authors who, together, persist in reclaiming Rhetorica—in all her shapes, forms, and voices.

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