The Changing Tradition: Women in the History of Rhetoric

Edited by
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Contents

Acknowledgements vii
Preface 1

PLenary Address
Women in the History of Rhetoric: The Past and the Future
Christine Mason Sutherland 9

GROUP 1: EXCLUDED FROM THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

Plato’s Women: Alternative Embodiments of Rhetoric
C. Jan Swearingen 55

Cutting Off the Memory of Women
jodi Enders 47

GROUP 2: ALONGSIDE THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

Ethos Over Time: The Ongoing Appeal of St. Catherine of Siena
Margo Husby Scheelar 59

Verbum inuisibile palpabitur: Les Sibylles dans la seconde moitié du XVe siècle: La répétition comme poétique de l’oracle
Hélène Cazes 73

Verbum inuisibile palpabitur: The Sibyls in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century: Repetition as Oracular Poetics
Hélène Cazes, translated by Nicholas Fairbank 85

English Emblem Book Reception Theory and the Meditations of Renaissance Women
Linda Bensel-Meyers 97

Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers:
Rhetorical Functions of a Methodist Mystic’s Journal
Vicki Collins 109
The Changing Tradition

Group 3: Participating in the Rhetorical Tradition

Women and Latin Rhetoric from Hrotsvit to Hildegard
John Ward

Lady Mary Wroth's Urania and the Rhetoric of Female Abuse
Victor Skretkowicz

Mary Astell's Rhetorical Theory: A Woman's Viewpoint
Erin Herberg

Group 4: Emerging into the Rhetorical Tradition

The Public Woman: Women Speakers Around the Turn of the Century in Sweden
Brigitte Mral, translated by Malcolm Forbes

Flora MacDonald Denison and the Rhetoric of the Early Women's Suffrage Movement in Canada
Andrea Williams

Resisting Decline Stories: Gertrude Buck's Democratic Theory of Rhetoric
Suzanne Bordelon

Group 5: Engaging the Rhetorical Tradition

Re-inventing Rhetorical Epistemology: Donna Haraway's and Nicole Brossard's Embodied Visions
Philippa Spool

Feminist Epistemologies, Rhetorical Traditions and the Ad Hominem
Marianne Janack and John Adams

Voice and the Inevitability of Ethos
Robert L. King

Feminist Thoughts on Rhetoric
Lynette Hunter

Afterword
Christine Mason Sutherland

Notes on the Contributors

Acknowledgements

The editors gratefully acknowledge the following: the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada for a grant to make the publication possible; and a grant from the University of Saskatchewan. We thank Judith Rice Henderson of the University of Saskatchewan for initiating the project and giving help and encouragement throughout the editorial process. We also thank the following: Colette Nativel of the University of Paris for help in editing the French paper; Nicholas Fairbank for translating the French essay; Malcolm Forbes for translating the Swedish essay; Robert Schmiel of the University of Calgary for advice on editing; Suzanne Hathaway Rae for her invaluable help in dealing with various word-processing systems; and Sylvia Mills, Marion Hillier and Jo-Anne Kabeary for their secretarial assistance.

Christine Mason Sutherland (Editor)
Rebecca Sutcliffe (Editor)


18 MacKinnon, *Only Words*, 23. Further references are made in the text.

19 MacKinnon, “Feminist Discourse,” 44. Further references are made in the text.


22 Gordimer, “Essential Gesture,” 293. Further references are made in the text.

23 Nadine Gordimer, “That Other World that was the World,” in *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 127.

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**Feminist Thoughts on Rhetoric**

**LYNETTE HUNTER**

Standpoint theory has conducted its critiques largely by way of a repositioning of epistemology, but there has been no similarly intensive critique for aesthetics that might reposition textuality. The result is a gesture toward the arts in general that indicates a hiatus in standpoint approaches. With Alison Jaggar I would suggest that feelings are often unauthorized modes of knowing, that the rational is an authorized feeling; in other words, that aesthetics and epistemology are closely intertwined. However, to arrive at a place that could make sense of this suggestion requires a shift in the conceptualization not only of knowledge but also of beauty; it requires an understanding of the idea of partial and situated textuality to complement that of partial and situated knowledge. Knowledge remains tacit until articulated, so the situatedness of knowledge is bound to the situatedness of the textuality that communicates it.

Standpoint theory argues that knowledge articulated from the standpoint of those excluded from ruling relations of power is particularly important, first because it is usually unheard since it is denied access to dissemination, and second because it is quite different from the standards and discursive systems of a society and its culture precisely due to that denial: hence it can be a place for change, assessment, and renewal. Standpoint is concerned with situated knowledge which is necessarily partial; it is concerned with retaining a concept of the real as a critical realism rather than a naive realism; and with re-defining the individual to account for people who are not subjects — or to account for the not-subjected of people’s lives. One of the primary contributions of standpoint theory is to de-
lineate an area of social, political, economic, and domestic relations that lies at a considerable distance from the ruling relations that govern the relationship between ideology and the subject.

The position of those excluded from ruling power has been derived from contemporary political critiques of western liberal democracies, particularly the work of Carol Pateman and of Dorothy Smith. From these two very different writers one can delineate three areas for the elaboration of power. The first is the predominant field of ruling government relations mediated by ideology via the representations it allows to the subject: the ideology-subject axis. The second is the intensely contradictory discrete systems of discourse where subjects, in other words the five to twenty percent of enfranchised citizens, contest those representations on the edges of government and in civic spaces closely related to capitalism. These discourse systems are often nodes along the ideology-subject axis, and are especially connected to the analyses and criticisms of psychoanalysis. The third area is that of the non-ruling civic and domestic relations of power simultaneously negotiated among and between individuals and groups. This third area of non-ruling civic and domestic relations of power argues that the subject is not only governed by ideology, and inflected by the contradictions of systematization that analyzed by discourse, but also constituted by local daily communications, discussions and negotiations.

The areas of government, capital, and civic and domestic, of ruling relations, discourse and non-ruling relations, establish a pattern that has been taken up by standpoint theorists to focus on the last term in each and produce a series of feminist critiques: a feminist critique of objectivity in science that asks about the exclusion of women's knowledge; a feminist critique of politics that questions the curious simultaneity of the autonomous yet universalist man in which the isolation of the individual obscures their situatedness; a feminist critique of philosophy that notes the denial of history in the value-free assumptions of both empiricism and idealism; and a feminist critique of sociology centered in the debate between quantitative and qualitative methodology, which argues that enumeration, verisimilitude, and repeatability (as distinct from the broader and more various repetition) evades the contextual. In each case the obscured, evaded, denied, excluded situated knowledge is without authority and often, if not usually, without words.

The critiques delineate tacit knowledges of various kinds, and all recognize the need to work on words to bring those tacit knowledges into communication. In nearly every case the pathway out toward agency is through story, or narrative, or poetics. However, there is no analogous critique of aesthetics, of art and/or criticism. Even Lorraine Code takes narrative as a “good thing” in itself and as a result finds the arguments pushed to a defence of relativism because there is no vocabulary for talking about any textuality that works between relativism and the absolute. It is as if, textually, standpoint operates in awareness of this third place, but without any idea of how to discuss it; hence it turns toward the arts, and gestures toward strategies that seem to articulate situatedness. Several years ago, in an unconsciousness rhetorical turn, Rita Felski described the hiatus that this leads to, saying that no technique or strategy or genre is in itself a good thing. Yet in that understanding and with an acute sense of the growing importance of autobiography studies, Felski moves aesthetic value to the recipient. In a contemporaneous move, Janet Wolff moves the aesthetic focus to the institution. Yet without a vocabulary to discuss the situated textuality of the arts that lies analogous to and embedded within situated knowledge, an element central to contemporary western aesthetics, the critical notion of language as (in)adequate to representation, which underwrites the absolute/relativist divide in the arts, goes without critique. I would propose that the history of rhetoric offers an appropriate vocabulary for such a critique.

In the post-Cartesian world of seventeenth-century politics and linguistics one finds a concept of language as inadequate to full communication. Despite indications that what writers and readers actually do may not much change, that many elements of poetics and rhetoric appear to retain their activity in more or less historically appropriate ways from the Renaissance to the modern European worlds, critical language becomes either a second-order code overtly inadequate, or a first-order medium continually to be transgressed or transcended. The canonical writing around which criticism has developed has largely been written by propertied people affluent
enough to find time to write, and by definition citizens and subject to the state. The vocabulary for appreciation is an embodiment of the liberal social contract: the isolated genius speaking nevertheless on behalf of others, conveying absolute truth, through pure beauty. It is a vocabulary for the subject, and not for the individual writer who appears from, say, the diaries and letters of the Romantic poets to have operated on quite different relations in non-ruling areas of civic and domestic life where they impinged on the activity of writing.

There have been attempts to critique the isolated genius, for example Barthes or Foucault on the "author," but these are often treated as an erasure of the "individual." Similarly there have been attempts to critique pure truth, particularly in the work of Derrida, although his critique along with other moral stances, is usually dismissed as caught in an essentialist/relativist dichotomy. Yet there is no recent critique of beauty as something wrested from ideological obscuring into cultural articulation at the moment it loses its power within ruling relations. No analysis of the extraordinary joy it offers at that moment when it still fits so precisely into the structures of social representation, and no critique of the ensuing pleasure and the conditions of its continuance or dissolution. Most of all, there is no critique of why it is so hard to value aesthetic production from those not in the five to twenty percent, from valued domestic and civic places that raise issues of class, gender and age, and those of race and ability imbricated particularly deeply with class. This material tends to be called 'popular' but is not analyzed as a different aesthetic, taking into account different writers, audiences, media. It is often subjected to the same critical analysis as canonical art, and held to fail. This is a tautological move, since non-canonical work is by definition not represented, and hence always appears to be inadequate to representation. The material is dismissed, as is the entire field of craft work: it is skilled, and grounded in tacit knowledge, but since it is not transgressive or transcendent it is not immediately relevant, nor can it be appreciated.

Why is there no critique? Of many reasons, I offer here only three. First, the critics (who make critiques) have conventionally over the past 300 years been part of the represented populace by class or education or gender. Hence they recognize that the key elements of post-Renaissance art—transgression and transcendence—do offer important possibilities for dealing with the inexorably inadequate representations of ideology/subject axis. For them transgression, defamiliarization, alienation, and "art" in general are to be valued for this activity. Second, and more complex, the arts are where men, powerful in terms of ruling relations, go to be female. There is the insistent imagery of the muse as the reproductive body temporarily brought to life by the male poet—recalling Pygmalion and Galatea. The image is the true pair to Nature as woman-to-be-conquered in science, to be brought to death. The arts are where rational isolated people go to be emotive, dialogical, feeling, and feminine. Third, and even more complicated, concerns the art that works with the limitations of a medium, which I understand as the focus of poetics. When that art is studied in detail it often enacts precisely the negotiations and communication within a group that is attempting to arrive at decisions that will articulate value and instigate action and agency. This, after all, is the purpose of poetics. For example, again, the Romantic poets: I have no problem with what they were doing with their poetics. They were addressing profound issues of identity, truth, and perception; they were rewriting the possibilities of representation by going out with the (in)adequate concept of language to an engagement with the limitations of language. They wrote a poetics that took people over a hundred years to understand, significantly becoming popular with the institution of working-class education; it is a poetics from which I have learned much in my own attempts to speak about women's experience. But of course groups such as the Romantic poets are also working within a political system of privilege quite different from our own, and dealing with issues and representations appropriate to their positions of class privilege and with agency for themselves. From a standpoint position, the poetics is engaged, and the moral and ethical interrelation with discourse is ignored. Yet the rhetoric of that poetics, its interrelation with ruling relations of government and other non-ruling relations of power, needs to be understood.

If we take the vocabulary of transgression/transcendence, dialogism, and agency, which is used by feminist standpoint theory
to critique science, politics, philosophy, and so on, we find that it is at the centre of western aesthetics and appears to justify arts’ strategies in general. What is not done is a broader analysis within historical context, that looks across partial knowledge to the relation of partial knowledge to the rest of society. Standpoint theorists would never analyze science without looking at the institutional structure that supports it, partly because it is so difficult to do science without an institution. Yet the arts are not perceived to be institutionally based, and so they escape any of this analysis. There is little analysis of the imbrication of the arts with state, national, and capital interests, and little assessment of the complexity of poetics with regard to the attendant rhetorical context of moral and ethical issues in society. This is another way of saying that beauty is political, that aesthetics is inexorably concerned with morality and ethics, that partial textuality can, like partial knowledge, be dealing with systems or with the messier interactions with reality, with adequacy, or with the necessary limitations of materiality.

The evasion of the ethics of aesthetics is the problem that needs to be addressed. What this paper proposes is that current work in the history of rhetoric is well placed to conduct such a critique. I would like to combine feminist standpoint theory with issues in the history of rhetoric that bring together textualities, society, and politics. Rhetoric offers, among other things, a history of the swing between the autocratic and the communal or social, and while conducting an acute analysis of the pros and cons of each, is also concerned with the complexity of ongoing negotiations in daily life, and articulates at least one vocabulary for the non-ruling relations of power through the elaboration of the consensus and the corporate. Classical rhetoric is concerned with social context, and distinguishes between the situated and the negotiated on the one hand, and the enclosed and systematic on the other, as different kinds of context. In Aristotle, the distinction is between the rhetorics of dialectic and science or philosophy, and in Plato, between the rhetorics of philosophy and success. Classical rhetoric is also concerned with truth, and distinguishes among the certain, the probable, and the plausible: the certain and the plausible are the domain of the autocrat or demagogue, whereas the probable is the domain of the orator who is engaged with the audience in working out probably the best set of grounds for action. This is truth determined through moral responsiveness and employed within social ethics. And classical rhetoric is concerned with notions of the individual and the group as wielders of power, with the difference between negotiated and represented power: the monarch and the tyrant, the aristocrat and the oligarchy, the constitutional democracy and the popular or populist democracy. Rhetoric always included the position of the audience or recipient, technically under the terms ethos, pathos, and stance. It recognizes that if ethos and pathos are separate then an unequal power distribution can occur, and that stance includes the rhetor, audience, and text. Ethos and pathos are the positions of the citizens, perhaps the seeds of representations of the subject; whereas stance is the engaged interactive work of rhetor and audience in the textuality of a particular history.

Classical rhetoric is not set up to deal with any political or social activity as a fixed end. Hence its classical form had little effect on ideology in the post-Renaissance world. Ideology technically has the structure of Aristotle’s science: it is enclosed, systematic, self-evident and self-justifying. If you enter it as a subject, you assent to the rules. Aristotle called such rhetoric inappropriate for social locations and denounced it as demagoguery. In the classical period it would have been difficult to maintain such a structure for very long, but, with the increasingly normalized and extensive media communications of current technology, it became very effective in western liberal democracies. However, if Aristotle’s critique of science is applied to ideology, a highly acute account of political representation can be realized, which is one reason why so many political theorists get excited by the idea of science as “best case” politics. If that critique by rhetoric of ideology is extended to aesthetics, we can derive a workable vocabulary for distinguishing between the subject and the individual in terms of ethos and stance, between objectivity/subjectivity with the logic of rational ordering that it has supported in the post-Renaissance period, and other positions for argumentation with rather different dialectical ordering, and between the essentialist/relativist dichotomy and the negotiated in terms of the certain/plausible dichotomy and the probable. Agency
and dialogism can be understood not only as transgression and transcendence, but as engagements of moral and ethical negotiation.

What feminist historians of rhetoric have done over the last ten to fifteen years is implicitly take a standpoint position and look at those excluded from citizenship in order to test the applicability of rhetoric to relations of non-ruling power. They have looked at rhetorical strategies and stances within specific historical, socio-political contexts from Aspasia in the pre-Platonic period to the many post-Renaissance studies. Accounts have been provided of women such as Mary Astell attempting to work within the rhetorically privileged fields of, for example, rational logic; of women as icons, for example, from Queen Elizabeth I through to Elizabeth II, accessing state power through the representations of ideology; of women like Jane Austen, living lives under ideological constraint; and of those women attempting to live lives in areas of non-ruling relations evidenced in their letter-writing and diaries.

With these studies in mind, it is possible to suggest that a rhetorical analysis from the standpoint of women as effectively disenfranchised and excluded from ruling relations of power would take the ‘death of the author’ argument, made explicitly through rhetoric by Barthes, and insist that it is not the death of the individual, only the subject. This is something auto(bio)graphy studies do. Within those studies, standpoint first insists on personal materiality and the reality of individual experience and existence, and the rhetorical analysis elaborates on the kinds of ethos and pathos, and on the effects of stance. In effect, a combination of these approaches is occurring, yet an overt recognition of the rhetorical dimension could extend it out beyond the individual into the socio-political. There could be analyses of non-ruling relations not only within a position, but also across positions, and, with regard to ruling relations, an understanding that the negotiations of the individual are messy and broadly involved, rather than simply caught into discourse systems.

A rhetorical analysis from the standpoint of women can take the arguments of Derrida about the insistence of presence and the absolute alongside pluralist relativism, and base the images of fold, pli, seme, and so on within a situated knowledge. Derrida tried to do this through the 1980s, especially in his book on Mandela, yet every position he put himself into was still ideologically privileged. He has never, for example, discussed his own racial and cultural background. A feminist standpoint critique would first position itself in an historical immediacy, in order to look at the messy relations between people within non-ruling power, even and especially people without representation, and to look at what so many are now discussing as ethics. A rhetorical analysis adds to this an understanding of morality and ethics as engaged and negotiated best-probable-grounds-for-action, rather than as cases of relativism, where anything goes, or the absolute, in which certainty rules. Best-probable-grounds-for-action do not have to stay in a fixed position, but have strategies that can cross specific groups and address and change ruling relations.

Furthermore, there are parallel advantages of bringing together standpoint and rhetoric in both epistemology and aesthetics. Critiques of epistemology within standpoint argue for a critical reality, a critical rationality, a critical objectivity, as they uneasily defend the real while in constant tension with the absolute/relativist divide because there is no way of speaking about the probable. The rhetorical analysis of epistemology provides a vocabulary for talking about the negotiated reality, negotiated not on plausible but on probable grounds, ground worked on by people within a community and across communities through rational, analytical, syllogistic, topical, analogical, symbolic, and other logics. The approach is valuable in that it underlines the potential helpfulness in the otherwise excoriated “rational logic,” and undermines attempts to define rational women as “masculine” and emotive men as “feminine.” Working on probable grounds necessitates an understanding of the complexity of knowledge and identity in public as neither wholly citizen (represented by state ideology), subject (represented inadequately and therefore partially repressed by ideology), or private (not represented by ideology), but is formed in terms of ethos, pathos, and stance; in other words, identity is not isolated but in relation to other human beings. Probable grounds necessitate an understanding of knowledge about reality as a matter of engagement and negotiation between ethics, or social agreement, and morality, or individual and group agency.
Just so, a critique of aesthetics within a feminist standpoint theory would argue first for the need to value the eighty percent of excluded art. Yet it would be helpful to do so not through a “critical” poetics or aesthetics that leads to a philosophical hiatus, but through a rhetorical analysis of aesthetics that offers a vocabulary for talking about the articulation of tacit knowledge with a textuality that understands limitations, a situated textuality. The work on words would not be a second-order textuality satisfied with inadequate language and reduced to encoding, nor a first-order textuality continually transgressing inadequate language toward the more nearly adequate by way of transcendent beauty, but a textuality where people work on words together to build common ground. In this attention to common ground, epistemology and aesthetics overlap, as a situated tacit knowledge becomes articulated and therefore textual.

Bringing a rhetorical dimension to standpoint theory in order to make a critique of aesthetics allows one to focus on those people who have been excluded from representation, not only as attempting to push embodiments of their lives into ideological representation, which is attempted and which discourse studies describes, but also as attempting the articulation of the not-yet represented. This is vulnerable work, but the participants know that there is only a restricted amount that can be gained by worrying about transgression and transcendence if one is not represented at all. Rhetoric can help us to explore the different aesthetics at work, understand their situated textualities, and value what is articulated.

NOTES


3 See Sandra Harding’s The Science Question in Feminism (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986) and Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from


8 It is becoming more and more apparent that criticism drawing from psychoanalysis splits between the enclosing structures that take, for example, the symbolic and the imaginary as systematic, and those analyses, like Jane Flax’s, that attempt to empower. Both deal with nodes of discourse.


11 Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology (London: Routledge, 1994), offer several contributions to this particular critique; see also Genevieve Lloyd, The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy (London: Methuen, 1984).

12 Hilary Rose, Love, Power and Knowledge, 208ff, Sandra Harding, The Science Question in Feminism, 245; Harding also takes up the importance of metaphor (233), and expands on this in Who’s Science? to look at literary context and the non-linearity of textual devices as democratic and womanly (301); Donna
18 For further detail, see L. Hunter, *Critiques of Knowing* (London: Routledge, 1999), chapter 6.
20 See, for example, the work of Christine Mason Sutherland including "Outside the Rhetorical Tradition: Mary Astell's Advice to Women in Seventeenth-Century England," *Rhetorica* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 147–63.
24 For work on auto(bio)graphy, see Jeanne M. Perreault, *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

**Afterword**

**CHRISTINE MASON SUTHERLAND**

A collection of such diversity surely needs some concluding to draw together what has been attempted and perhaps achieved. In this final word I shall try to locate the collection within current work in rhetoric, and metarhetoric, and give some indication of what it contributes to ongoing scholarship in the study of women's roles in rhetorical tradition.

It might appear to a traditionalist that what has characterised rhetorical theorizing for most of the twentieth century has been the quest for a definition of rhetoric; but that would be to misunderstand what has been going on. Many of those who write about rhetoric do not believe in definitions except as temporary perches from which to rest before continuing a journey which has no destination. The very idea of destination has been called into question from a traditional perspective, then, the quest may seem bleak to those who undertake it.

This collection demonstrates that the journey is neither: it is an adventure. We should think of ourselves as the hero of fairy tales who set out into the world to seek their fortune. It is best to think of this as the hero of many of the stories that we have come to know; he or she is the only one of the family, or, like Cinderella, a victim of exploitation. Cinderella, of course, does not go out into the world to seek her fortune; she has to be rescued by the fairy godmother. She is the handsome prince. The point of this collection is that Cinderella has grown up a bit; has decided not to sit in the ashes any more; has taken hold of her own life.