we both frame our attempts autobiographically. But we share other things, too: a skepticism—in her case, despite an impressive depth and breadth of reading—concerning any composition "canon" ("In a postmodern culture," she writes bravely, "the writer reads what she needs in order to think, to make sense, not in order to know what is fashionable"); a consistent methodological role model (Paul Diesing for me, Paul Ricoeur for her); a preoccupation with what she calls the field's "incessant clash of methodologies"; a concern for the relationship between theory and practice.

But I wouldn't want to push this kindred spirit business too far. Whatever our commonalities, in this book Phelps leads us—leads me, anyway—to places where I can only, and sometimes just barely, follow. She is, for one thing, much better than I have been at articulating her own method—a "metamethod," she wants to call it—"as a systematic practice for rigorously characterizing, debating, coordinating, and judging the nature and value of particular working methods for composition studies." Her approach to relating theory and practice (a chapter entitled "Toward a Human Science Disciplined by Practical Wisdom") is, if often difficult reading, decidedly worth the work, terrifically provocative. More than anything, though—driving everything, you might say—she offers a compelling vision of how things might be. I'm not entirely sure about the political status of utopian visions these days, but there is at least nothing shy about this one. Most specifically in her first two chapters, but as a recurrent theme throughout the book, Phelps repeats the challenge implicit in her title: to think about composition as a "discipline among disciplines," "a human science within a philosophical anthropology" able, "by virtue of its new autonomy, to reconstruct its relationship with literature, reinterpret its sometimes parasitical relationships with other disciplines, and participate in complex networks of inquiry."

As I said at the beginning of this review, I'm not sure how I'll answer that challenge, and even less sure how the field/discipline as a whole will respond. But if you want to be in on the decision, you'll have to read this book. I did. It was worth it.


Reviewed by Alleen Pace Nilsen, Arizona State University

As I read chapter after chapter of Frank and Treichler's Language, Gender, and Professional Writing, I kept asking myself, "If people are commit-
ted enough to make their way through this book—no easy task—then shouldn’t that be enough? In 341 pages, couldn’t these talented and committed writers solve every conceivable problem so that whoever reads the book could come away with an easy, natural, beautiful, graceful, and at the same time, sex-fair language?” Wrong, say the authors, and they go on to prove the point by showing how many issues “intersect, illuminating once again the social and cultural complexity of language and its defiance of the quick fix.” Their acknowledgment and explanation of the “defiance of the quick fix” is one of the main values of this book. And those who will get the most out of it are probably people already committed to the idea because strangers to the issue aren’t likely to pick it up for leisure-time browsing.

I was on page twenty-one of the thirty-two-page Introduction before I made a note of something I could relate to. The problem with the Introduction is that because the authors are setting out to prove that the issue is more substantive than pop-writers and cocktail party goers usually think, they cite research studies to a fault. I grew tired of counting, but in the first eight pages, 116 individuals are cited. As a reader racing through an introduction to get to the “real” book, I resented having to jump over all the hurdles of titles, parentheses, dates, and names. And the information given about many of the studies was so minimal that without already knowing the study it was sometimes hard to relate to the points being made.


This book is a major contribution to both linguistic and feminist scholarship. The text is divided into three parts: “Language and Sexual Equality,” “Guidelines for Nonsexist Usage,” and “Bibliography.” The extensive Works Cited and the annotated Suggestions for Further Reading are essential references for anyone working with the issue of sexism and language.

However, I would have been happier if the authors had shown a little more sensitivity to the struggles of their male colleagues, many of whom they describe as having lapsed into “a determined self-consciousness.” Male colleagues who profess to be feminists are criticized for being reactive rather than active and for reading male critics who have read feminist writing instead of educating themselves about women writers and feminist scholarship. As feminists, we need to realize that it’s partly our fault that many of our male colleagues feel more comfortable being feminists at a distance. We contribute to our own brand of a chilly academic climate when in our defensiveness we look at all communication first for tell-tale signs of sexism and only
secondarily for the speakers' intentions and meanings. In a section on “sexualized discourse,” the authors flatly state that “there are still no good jokes, and inappropriateness remains common.” I hope this is an over generalization. Surely sometime, somewhere, someone will come up with a good gender-related joke that both men and women can enjoy.

Treichler and Frank are responsible for Part Two, “Guidelines for Nonsexist Usage.” They don’t provide quick and easy solutions, nor do they shy away from complexities, which is why their guidelines and the accompanying discussions take 137 pages. They provide thoughtful comments followed by one- or two-page summaries for such important topics as “false generics”—both with pronouns and nouns—sexist and racist usages, newly devised and conventional nonsexist alternatives, and the effects of asymmetrical usages in naming practices as well as with feminine suffixes. Their summary statements are printed on dark gray pages, which makes photocopying difficult. This was probably intended to keep people from oversimplifying the matter by turning a 137-page treatise into a ten-page recipe book.

One of the authors’ best sections is on false universals, which teaches as much about clear thinking and communication as it does about sexism. Another original discussion that tackles problems too complex for most guidelines to consider is “Quotations: Preserving the Integrity of the Original.” The authors don’t solve all the problems, but they make some important and helpful points. Other areas where these guidelines make original contributions include discussions of traditional assumptions of universal heterosexuality, problems with indexing women’s scholarship and why it doesn’t get cited as often as men’s, sex-fair acknowledgments and prefaces in scholarly writing, and the male domination of computer communication.

Because the authors’ training and interests are in matters of language, it is from linguistics and language textbooks that they have gleaned examples of sexist writing. In “Special Concerns in Scholarly Writing,” they observe, “In linguistics, the creation of clever, racy, or topical examples became popular in the 1960s.” However, they need not have limited themselves to linguistic textbooks or to the 1960s. Textbook authors in all subject areas are constantly looking for ways to add interest to tedious subjects, and they often bring in sexual (and sexist) allusions, as when John A. Garraty writes in his The American Nation: A History of the United States to 1877 (Harper and Row), “Virgin America—like all virgins—inspired conflicting feelings in men’s hearts. They worshipped it for its purity and promise, yet could not resist the opportunity to take advantage of its innocence.” Another example comes from Ivan Roitt’s Essential Immunology (Blackwell) when he discusses “virgin lymphocytes” and by extension “virgin rats,” those which have had no previous contact with a specific antigen. Extending the metaphor, he writes, “We may recognize at least three cell types representing different phases in the differentiation of the immunocompetent cell: (x) virgin lymphocytes which have not yet experienced the ecstasy of contact with antigen. . . .”
The point of quoting these two examples is to show how widespread sexism is in our culture and to show that sexist writing flows from deeply ingrained attitudes. Although Frank and Treichler did not treat these particular examples, they do something better: they give readers a background of ideas and concepts from which to examine and explicate such usages. Their decision to be less prescriptive than other guidelines and to provide alternatives rather than imperatives was based on a desire to "open up discourse...not close it off." As illustrated by the complexities of the two examples above, they made the right decision. Prescriptive guidelines could never cover the myriad of sexist statements that human minds are capable of creating. Nor is it as important to strike from the language particular words, phrases, or even metaphors as it is to have people realize what these words, phrases, and metaphors are communicating about the individual who uses them as well as about the cultural attitudes from which they developed.

In conclusion, the authors argue against the charge that expectations for the use of nonsexist language infringe on academic freedom. They claim instead that sex-fair language "exemplifies rather than threatens academic freedom," and they explain that "symbolic behavior has significant practical and theoretical consequences in the real world and that these are often negative for women. The use of nonsexist language is, therefore, at this point in history, the only linguistic choice that enables us, individually and collectively, to be responsible members of our profession."


Reviewed by Richard Leo Enos, Carnegie-Mellon University

I thought I had been made a fervent disciple of the liberal arts by the eloquent John Henry Newman, but when I discovered rhetoric, I learned that the true progenitors of the liberal arts were rhetoricians like Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian. Rhetoric promised to reunite me with my kinfolk.

Edward P.J. Corbett

Edward P.J. Corbett's indebtedness to earlier rhetoricians reveals not only an insight into his disposition but also a striking harmony of character. The similarities are most apparent in the case of Quintilian because Corbett is the Quintilian of our era, and Selected Essays is the testimony to that kinship. Although Corbett himself would shrink from any comparison with his hero, it is the unique combination of the humanistic and the humane, so apparent in the Institutio oratoria and the personal life of Quintilian, that