What is it That the Audience Wants?
Or, Notes Toward a Listening with a Transgendered Ear for (Mis)Understanding

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The rhetorical tradition has historically posited a rhetorical situation involving a speaking subject and a receiving audience, just as it more recently theorizes composition as a writer writing to an audience. And, according to many contemporary theorists, it is no coincidence that the speaking subject has been engendered as “male” and the audience as “female,” insofar as it has been presumed that the speaker takes an active role, and the audience assumes a passive one, patiently receiving the logos disseminated by the “good man speaking well.”1 Thus, “persuasion” is something one “does” to someone else, according to the (it is hoped) good and virtuous will of the speaker. The will and desire of the speaker is paramount; in fact, to entertain the desire of the audience is, according to Plato, “flattery” at best, sophistry at worst (Gorgias). Although current composition textbooks and handbooks feature Aristotelian-like methods for audience “analysis,” the purpose of such is to bolster the writer's power and efficacy. The “art” of rhetoric, theorized as the “ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle 1355a), is presumed to be a force and capability emanating from the rhetor, not the audience. Speaking not listening remains the pedagogical focus. Indeed, according to Krista Ratcliffe, “when listening is foregrounded, the focus is usually not on the process of listening itself but rather on what listening enables us to hear; i.e., voices speaking” (“Listening Metonymically” 1). Thus, this essay seeks to pose the question that rhetoric seems hesitant to ask: what is it that the audience wants? By refusing to engage this question, by focusing on the fulfillment of the speaker’s desires (i.e., understanding, recognition, consensus), the speaking act (including “communication”) thus functions as an unjust demand on the audience. In an attempt to remedy this injustice, some feminist scholars have advocated giving women a “voice,” that is, by either (a) appropriating the speaking subject’s position and re-engendering the rhetorical act as female or (b) recasting the audience’s position as a proxy speaker for heretofore silenced
voices. That is, by “listening—and listening hard,” writes Andrea Lunsford, we can belatedly fulfill the desires of lost, forgotten, dismissed speakers (6). Both of these proposed strategies (becoming a speaker or channeling one), however well-intentioned, render the audience (even as it listens hard), once again, passive, ignore the audience’s desire, and re-establish the male/female and speaker/audience binaries. In contradistinction, I would suggest that we attempt to reconceive the rhetorical situation, by re-engendering, or, rather, transgendering the speaker/audience couple as a hermaphrodite, as a con/fusion of Hermes, the god of messages, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in an attempt, thereby, to identify what audiences want, speculate on the ways in which they can resist the speaker’s desire, and suggest we should further investigate how this bizarre, transgendered coupling could invigorate rhetorical theory and current composition pedagogical practices.

The Consummate Rhetorical Act
Plato, of course, characterized audiences as will-less victims of unscrupulous speakers or evil lovers. Aristotle spoke of his audience as cows, as functions of a speaker’s active will. We find this insistent characterization in rhetorical theories today. The rhetorical act is consistently theorized as a coupling of two: one who is master of the discourse, the other who is a (potential) victim of that master. Thomas Cole’s *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, for example, prefaces his study with the following definitive frame. He writes, “The rhetoric of my title and of the investigation that follows is rhetoric in the narrowest and most conventional sense of the term: a speaker’s or writer’s self-conscious manipulation of his medium with a view to ensuring his message as favorable a reception as possible on the part of the particular audience being addressed” (ix).

I want to note several, over-determined elements of this definition: First, his accurate assumption that *this* is “rhetoric” is indicative of how the rhetorical tradition continues to reproduce the inequities of the speaker/audience relation, the presumptions of will and will-less-ness. Second, he emphasizes the “self-consciousness” of the (male) speaker without granting an equal and opposing “self-consciousness” to the audience. Further, the self-consciousness is geared toward “manipulation”—and again, the audience is granted no reciprocal manipulating powers and abilities in this coupling. Third, the goal is to have the message “received” by the audience being “addressed.” The rhetorical act, then, has been traditionally theorized as something that a speaker “does” to an audience via a dissemination; the message is *conveyed* to an audience—it is a post properly addressed to guarantee its arrival, its reception. The success of the rhetorical act, then, is dependent on whether the audience “gets” it and, without much resistance, “buys” the speaker’s argument. The speaker’s discourse as exemplified by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* is an act akin to asexual abduction—thus Socrates’s insistence that only noble lovers (that is philosophers) should inseminate audiences with their words. The sexual economy of the rhetorical act is a phallic one, which demands that an audience respond—passively, preferably—to a speaker’s will.
This sexual economy is reproduced, thousands of years after Plato, in Wayne Brockriede's article entitled "Arguers as Lovers." Brockriede begins, "One introductory premise you must grant me if you are to assent to any of the rest of this essay is that one necessary ingredient for developing a theory or philosophy of argument is the arguer himself" (1). This strikes me as a rather unnecessary beginning caveat, considering that Western theories or philosophies (!) of rhetoric, indeed, begin with the (male) arguer. Brockriede continues, as an arguer, presenting his argument: "I shall look at three stances arguers may take in relation to other arguers.... The metaphor on which my classification is based is a sexual one" (2). These three rhetorical stances are characterized by "rape," "seduction," and "love." He distinguishes between the first two stances by arguing that whereas "the rapist conquers by force of argument, the seducer operates through charm or deceit" (4). And, finally, he distinguishes the first two stances from the third, "love": "Whereas the rapist and seducer see a unilateral relationship toward the victim, the lover sees a bilateral relationship with a lover" (5). Perhaps. But, I would argue, this "bilateral" relationship is certainly not a bisexual relationship, or more to the point, a transsexual relationship. The speaker/audience relationship remains sexualized, indeed, but phallically so, for what determines the various permutations of the rhetorical/sexual scene is the speaker, his intentions toward the audience, and his activity vis a vis the audience's passivity.

This particular sexual/rhetorical economy leaves listening undertheorized. Although some theorists have had an ear for "listening," such as the recent work of Krista Ratcliffe and Victor J. Vitanza, for example, in the main, rhetorical theory neglects the will and function of the audience. This neglect, this undertheorization, is due to the fact that the rhetorical act has been overtheorized as the good man speaking well and because language itself has been overtheorized via, in Michael Reddy's words, "the conduit metaphor"—that is, language has been understood to have largely a transmitting purpose and function. Both of these theorizations bind an audience in a particular communicative situation: to assume a posture of complete receptivity, such as Plutarch demands in his essay entitled "On Listening to Lectures." For the audience, he prescribes the following behavior: "And in this particular matter of listening, not only is there impropriety in a scowling brow, a disagreeable expression, a roving glance, twisting of the body, and a crossing of the legs, but nodding or whispering to a neighbour, smiling, yawning sleepily... and actions of a similar nature are censurable and should be studiously avoided" (172). "Listening" here is, again, theorized as a function and effect of the speaker's desire. Proper "listening" requires an erasure of the audience's will, in fact, a binding of the audience's body. The rhetorical demand for understanding requires the audience to assume a proper position to "hear" the message, to receive the seed, to become a beloved of the Lover's Discourse.

This theorization of rhetoric—as a specifically masculine and/or phallic concern with where and how to plant a speaker's seeds or thoughts—demon-
strates rhetoric's blind spot (or, more aptly, deaf spot). For just as Freud's psychoanalytic thought, based on a phallic standard, is incapable of theorizing the desire of woman, the rhetorical tradition, based on the speaker's primacy, can't truly ask, what is it that the audience wants? For insofar as Freud did consider the desire of woman, he speculated that what she wanted was (surprise, surprise) that which she did not have. Insofar as Plato theorized the desire of the audience, he assumed that what it wanted was gratification. That is, both woman and the audience want only that which the speaker can give to them (or withhold from them): phallic gratification. It is not my purpose here to usurp the mind-reading position of Freud or Plato and to decide, definitively, what it is that the audience wants. In fact, I would resist presuming to know. The answer should, of course, remain open, undecidable; perhaps, I could say that what the audience desires is to remain other, to not be co-opted by phallic desire nor saddled with penis envy.

Theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Jacques Derrida, among others, have convincingly demonstrated that language has been sexed through and through, that it advocates a particular program of/for sexuality—one informed by the ideology of sexual dimorphism. Although, as Thomas Lacquer has carefully established, Platonic and Aristotelian assumptions regarding sexuality were based on a one-sex model, our inevitably anachronistic readings of classical rhetoric, coupled with the classical binary of active/passive (as articulated by the work of Dover, Foucault, Halperin, duBois), have constructed the rhetorical tradition with an active (that is, masculine) speaker and a passive (that is, feminine) audience. The binary active/passive has, according to Lacan, dominated “everything which has ever been thought up on the relationship of form to matter, a relationship which is so fundamental and which Plato, and then Aristotle, refer to at every step they take regarding the nature of things” (153). Furthermore, this fundamental, determining binary has become almost indistinguishable from the male/female binary, since the female has been, since ancient times, associated with “matter” and the male with the will that gives form to matter. Freud warns us, however, that although the confluence of these two polarities “meets us as a biological fact; . . . it is by no means so invariably complete and exclusive as we are inclined to assume” (qtd. in Lacan 107). This warning foregrounds the basic assumption (however mistakenly held) that activity and passivity are biologically determined. Freud's discussion distinguishes the biological from the psychological: masculinity and femininity are end-results of the Oedipal scenario. But just as feminist critics of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytics have pointed out, the Oedipal scenario is dependent on a biological line drawn between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” For my purposes, I am intentionally collapsing the sex and gender distinction, which feminists of an earlier generation so carefully delineated. I do so in order to foreground how—particularly with the medicalization of transsexuality—gender remains tied to an ideological belief in sexual dimorphism, in the biological (and/or psychological) differentiation of male/female. I agree with Biddy Martin who writes that
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the separation of anatomical sex and social gender implied by the sex/gender split has had
the consequence of leaving the assumption of biological sexual difference intact and of
introducing a damaging body/mind split...[and] insofar as feminists have reduced the
possibilities of gender to just two, that is, men and women, gender has come to do the work
of stabilizing and universalizing binary opposition at other levels, including male and female
sexuality, the work that the assumption of biological sex differences once did. (104)

It is my argument that our theorization of the rhetorical situation, however
insightful it may be, sustains these binaries, as does Walter Ong's conception of
agonistics in *Fighting for Life* or the work of sociolinguist scholar Deborah
Tannen. Ong argues that male sexual identity is of a precarious nature and must
be proved again and again through physical and rhetorical agonistic challenges.
“Boys will be boys,” Ong states, as evidenced by their rough play and boister­
ousness (52). Rhetorical agonistics—as a manifestation of rough play and
boisterousness—have at stake the virility of the speaker. Thus to speak *as a man*
is to fight in order to prove that one *is a man*—that is, that one is *not a woman.*
Tannen, analyzing the variances between the way men and women speak and
listen, terms these differences “genderlects” (42), thereby bestowing an almost
“dialect” status to male-speak and female-speak. She further argues that the
“genderlects” effectively reproduce the asymmetrical relation between the
genders. Her genderlects, detailed in her book entitled *You Just Don’t Understand Me*,
depend on the crucial distinction between “rapport-talk” and “report-talk.”
“Rapport-talk” is what women do when they speak; they “use language to create
a community” (210). “Report-talk” is what men do when they speak; they use
language to present information and imperatives. When men talk, they are,
Tannen argues, looking for an answer to their question: Do you respect me?
(129). Behind this question, of course, is a subtle power-struggle; and, in fact,
Tannen suggests, “many men use [language] to manage contest” (210). “Report-
talk” is characterized by a lecturing style, an imparting of information, which
really is the way to assert one’s authority and position. The one who speaks sits
higher on the pecking pole; the one who listens is in a subordinate position (139).
This mirrors the rhetorical act as historically theorized. The speaker is the one
with the power and is engendered as male; the listener is subordinate and
engendered as female. Women listen. Men speak. As a corrective of this
gendered inequity in social exchange, Tannen suggests—in defiance of Plutarch’s
advice—that “Women who find themselves unwillingly cast as the listener
should practice propelling themselves out of that position rather than waiting
patiently for the lecture to end” (148). But this answer, once again, characterizes
the act of listening as an undesirable and subordinate position. Putting *Women
on Top* doesn’t effectively challenge the very speaker/audience binary that
renders the audience as lacking. The “answer” is not to assume the male role and
make the same demands of one’s audience.

The conclusions I am drawing from the work of Ong and Tannen, for
example, could be complicated not only by adding other variables such as the
race, class, and sexual orientation of men and women, but also by interrogating
the ways and means by which individuals are engendered by and through the rhetorical acts of speaking and listening. Further, we could explore the question of whether this engendering process is the same for writers as for speakers and the same for readers as for hearers. I will address these last complications briefly, but leave these speculations and further research to others—not because I don’t think these are intriguing and important questions to address, but because, ultimately, these questions are dependent on the presumption of sexual dimorphism, a presumption that I have as my expressed purpose to overcome.

The marriage between feminist criticism and reader-response theory has produced insight into these issues. If, as reader-response theory argues, the reader constitutes in significant ways the meaning of a text, how does the reader’s gender influence that constitution? And feminist critics answer: a great deal. Research in cognitive processes of men and women supports feminist arguments on this score. Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin’s early work establishes significant links between gender and comprehension as does Elizabeth Flynn’s “Gender and Reading” and “Composing as a Woman.” In what ways this link is related specifically to the cognitive processes of reading as opposed to hearing and to those of writing as opposed to speaking, is not rendered clear in the researchers’ conclusions. In fact, Sara Mill’s edited collection Gendering the Reader, which is expressly intended to cross various disciplines such as linguistics, literary theory, film and media studies, sociology, and art history (3), begins with a conflation of reading, viewing, and listening as “the interpretative process in general” (20). Whereas Barry Kroll and Roberta Vann’s edited work Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships (published for NCTE) does attempt to disentangle speaking and writing, it does not take gender as a specific, stated research variable. Of course, this is not an exhaustive literature review, but it is representative enough to demonstrate that these distinctions have not figured prominently in the research or in the conclusions made. Hence the subtleties of the “technologies” of gender may have escaped us, although researchers are demonstrating that gender does play a significant role in both the reception and the production of texts. And if that gender is female, according to Judith Fetterley’s influential work, The Resisting Reader, then she will receive a text insofar as she is immasculated. She writes, “As readers...women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values” (xx). This process of immasculating women by men, however, does not empower women as men, but rather invites them to “identify as male while being reminded that to be male...is to be not female” (xiii). Patricia Schweickart later challenges Fetterley by asking, “Where does the text get its power to draw us into its designs?” (42). Schweickart argues that the whole process is more complicated than that of a male text doing a number on the hapless female reader. Rather, she insinuates, the text most probably arouses “authentic desires” in the female that render her pliable to the text (42). Of course, we are on dangerous ground here. Schweickart’s comment could be read as arguing that resistance is futile and that woman desires to be
taken by the text (but what is my/our desire to read it as such?). In any event, Schweikart continues by suggesting we should focus our attention away from resisting male texts to embracing female ones, to concern ourselves with questions such as: “What does it mean for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by a woman writing as a woman?” and “What does it mean for a woman to read without condemning herself to the position of Other?” (51).

These questions are legitimate ones, propelling decades of gender research. However, because my interest here is in overcoming sexual dimorphism, I have no interest in addressing Woman as a categorical given, contra Man, that is not somehow through and through a function of and a fantasy of Man. In terms of a Lacanian psychoanalytic model, to which I will shortly turn, “The” Woman does not exist; she does not exist except as other—other than Man (Feminine Sexuality 49). Therefore, my concern is how woman is represented to us as other in order to sustain Male (sexual) identity. Likewise, my interest is how the audience is represented as other than the rhetorical subject in order to sustain the desire of the subject. And, although a reader may be immasculated, she/he is being asked to identify with an emasculated—that is penetrable—object.

In discussing her novel *The Temple of My Familiar*, Alice Walker explained that a woman in the novel falls in love with a man because she sees in him ‘a giant ear.’ Walker went on to remark that although people may think they are falling in love because of sexual attraction or some other force, ‘really what we’re looking for is someone to be able to hear us’ (Tannen, *You Just Don’t* 48).

But again, this is precisely the phallic desire of our rhetorical man, for to speak is to seek out the “ear of the other” (Derrida) as an orifice of penetration. To be “heard,” to be understood, is the speaker’s desire and demand for recognition—it is a demand from the speaker to the audience to identify with him. The speaker’s desire is for mirrors more than ears, just as a child’s desire is who will ceaselessly ask, “mom?” To which the mother responds, “yes, I’m here,” which prompts another round of “mom?”/”yes, I’m here”/”mom? mom?” Yes, I’m here as your ear/your mirror, thus you are here. The hearing demanded is a recognition. Hear me/Understand me/Identify with me so that I can be—all demands that have no interest in the audience’s desire, all demands that require the audience to be for the speaker. This is precisely the demand that I am interested in thwarting, the demand that one become a “giant ear” for the speaker. Perhaps, in response to this demand, the audience should in a Van Goghian move, cut off its ear and return it to the speaker, much like the story Jean Baudrillard tells of the woman who, in response to a suitor’s love letter, praising the beauty of her eyes, sends one of her eyes to him. Lest you have understood me to demand that you take out your pocket knives at this very moment and make the cut, I say “wait!” or, in French, “Attend,” which is spelled, of course, “a-t-t-e-n-d.”

And here I want to attend to another cut, a castrating cut, but—as Victor Vitanza has argued in his recent book on negation—a castration that would
castrate castration (Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric 53). This cut was theorized by Galen in the second century and practiced in medieval medicine. To make a eunuch, Galenism presupposed, one should cut the vein behind the man’s ear, for this was the vein that transported semen. (It was widely believed, as Aristotle reports, that the male seed was stored in the head. Balding men, thus, evidenced a superior virility, because the male seed produces heat, and the excessive heat from so much seed had burned the hair follicles, causing them to fall out.) This cut, to the ear—a much kinder cut than the one typically made—on that we can agree, I am appropriating as an analogy: a cut that effectively un/males one without leaving him lacking. This un/maling is not a emasclation nor an effeminization, rather it is challenging precisely those emasculating threats that support our sexual identification and, as we have seen, our rhetorical being and practice.

Trembling Bodies: Subject (to/of) Symbolic Castration
One’s sexual identification is not a biological given, but rather an ideological assignment, whose purpose is, in the words of Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, to “delimit and contain the threatening absence of boundaries between human bodies and among bodily acts that would otherwise explode the organizational and institutional structures of social ideologies” (“Introduction” 2). This containment and boundary-marking (for example, the incest-taboo) is accomplished, in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, via symbolic castration. This Lacanian concept explains how we are simultaneously sexed and made subject to the Law. The price of both our sexuality and our subjectivity is no less than to live under the fear of castration. In the article “The Phallic Phase and the Subjective Import of the Castration Complex,” we learn that “masculinity and femininity [have no] unmediated relationship to anatomical difference, a relationship of which they have no knowledge” (109). That is, the meaning of our gendered sexuality is not to be found via biology; rather, the meaning is realized within the symbolic register (109). The symbolic register, according to Lacan, is governed by the Law of the Father; its efficacy is sustained through the fear of the effects of that Law, namely castration. Judith Butler in her Bodies That Matter explains: “The symbolic marks the body by sex through threatening that body, through the deployment/production of an imaginary threat, a castration, a privation of some bodily part. . . . There must be a body trembling before the law, a body whose fear can be compelled by the law, a law that produces the trembling body prepared for its inscription, a law that marks the body first with fear only then to mark it again with the symbolic stamp of sex” (100).

I am interested in a theory and praxis of rhetoric that is just insofar as it doesn’t require trembling bodies, which fear the horror of being mutilated or which project this fear onto others. This is the price that sexual difference exacts of us. This is the “pound of flesh” we owe under the symbolic contract (Lacan 120). To mete a justness, I am arguing, we must challenge the sexual difference upon which our current rhetorical theories depend. Julia Kristeva writes,
Sexual difference—which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to reproduction—is translated by and translates a difference in the relation of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language and meaning. The sharpest and most subtle point of feminist subversion brought about by the new generation will henceforth be situated on the terrain of the inseparable conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic, in order to discover, first, the specificity of the female, and then, in the end, that of each individual. ("Women’s Time" 21)

And, indeed, attempting to “discover the specificity of the female” has been an important task for a generation of feminists. So-called “women’s ways” of knowing/thinking/caring/speaking/mothering have been variously theorized and articulated along with more sophisticated theories of identity politics—of what it means to “be” a “woman.” But the challenge for this new generation of feminists will be, in Baudrillard’s idiom, to discover a “dual/duel” form of difference rather than to rediscover again and again the dialectical form of difference (Transparency 126). That is, whereas the specificity of the female has been, heretofore, only understood as the dialectical other of the male—that is within the regulated terms of sexual-dimorphism—and hence subject to the laws of negation and castration, our current agenda must be to discover the radical otherness of the sexes—all of them and there are more than two. So, the work of “feminism(s)” will continue on the terrain “of the inseparable conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic,” while its “sharpest and most subtle point of feminist subversion” will be to transgender (and thus de-oedipalize) both the sexual and the symbolic.

Therefore, I am arguing that it is not our aim to teach men to hear women’s genderlect nor to teach women how to speak men’s genderlect in an effort to make men and women understandable to each other. But, as a challenge to the very speaker/audience, male/female, active/passive binaries, we should speak as listeners, a coupling that prefigures the hermaphrodite, that allows for a dual/duel form of difference, and that takes the risk of (mis)understanding. To speak as a listener is a radically different enterprise than “hearing”—that is, as I have been arguing: hearing is a function of a speaker’s demand. To hear a speaker is to “understand” him, to “identify” and to “recognize” him according to his drive (which is the “subject’s attempt to realise itself in the field of the Other and to find in that field the object which is eternally lacking” (Lacan 112). To speak as a listener is to resist the speaker’s demand—both as a speaker: I will not demand that my audience mirror me; and as an audience: I will not mirror the speaker; I will not hear him. I am, of course, alluding to Jean-François Lyotard here; he writes that listening is “a place of ceaseless negotiations and ruses” (43). Therefore, rather than “hearing,” which is a demand for understanding, and thus is an ending point, listening is a point of departure where the speaker and the audience can escape each other and the demand of the symbolic contract. Lyotard continues:
for us, a language is first and foremost someone talking. But there are language games in which the important thing is to listen, in which the rule deals with audition. Such a game is the game of the just. And in this game, one speaks only inasmuch as one listens, that is, one speaks as a listener and not as an author. It is a game without an author. In the same way as the speculative game of the West is a game without a listener, because the only listener tolerated by the speculative philosopher is the disciple. Well, what is a disciple? Someone who can become an author, who will be able to take the master's place. (71)

Thus, to "listen" rather than to "hear" is to resist the speaker's demand that one identify with him in order to be his place holder—his lieutenant or disciple.

Derrida, in the *Post Card*, differentiates between a "collector's love" and a "sender's love" (110). A collector, unlike a sender, demands a certain kind of return. "Hearing" is a collector, demanding our payment, reminding us that we always already owe a pound of flesh. What I am calling "listening" would be a result of a sending, celebrating that the message may never arrive at its destination and even if it did it would remain ultimately illegible and (mis)understood. "Listening" is acknowledging that there is "an infinite distance that no epistle will ever be able to traverse" (Derrida, *Post Card* 63), and rather than insisting that we collapse the difference (as did Narcissus when he fell into the mirror) and that we become legible, intelligible, understandable—in short "transparent" to each other—we just "send." But we have been preconditioned to "communicate," to answer to the communicative demand that we identify with the speaker's will. This insistence on the transparency of language and of all others finds its logical conclusion, in Baudrillard's estimation, in the act of cloning—like so many sheep—so that one can repeat oneself for ever (*Transparency* 113-23). This is the efficiency of our communicative and reproductive economy.

Thus I am arguing that we thwart our desire to make the other understandable to us, to make the other legible to us. Thus in contradistinction to Deborah Tannen who seeks to make men and women understandable to each other, I would seek to make men and women—as concepts—illegible to us through the castration of castration—through the dismemberment of sexual dimorphism and the social/symbolic contract that it sustains. Again, this is the cut, the castrating cut I am interested in—the one behind the ear that will keep us from "hearing" each other, and therefore from reproducing each other according to the dialectical economy of the selfsame. I offer the hermaphrodite as a figure who escapes this economy, whose illegible body castrates castration.

**But Wait! Caveats Before My "Hearing"**

I offer this transgendered figure as a rhetorical model with the following, important caveats:

(1) I am not suggesting that this figure is inherently or necessarily transgressive. "To (mis)quote Foucault: We must not think that by saying "yes" to the hermaphrodite, we are saying "no" to power (*History* 157). I am not, contra
Teresa Ebert’s criticism of “ludic” postmodernism, constructing a “utopian vision” beyond the forces of power and economics (Ludic Feminism). I realize that the hermaphrodite, as is everything, is more than capable of being easily commodified and fetishized within and by late capitalism (see Deleuze and Guattari). Thus, rather than offering a utopian program, I am attempting to question in what ways present theories of rhetoric reify sexual dimorphism.

(2) In fact, so-called “gender-outlaws” (Bornstein), the transsexual (and the transvestite) run the risk of reifying, once again, gender prescriptions. Kathy Miriam writes, while perhaps “foreground[ing] the reality that femininity is a male construct, [the transgenderist] does so by preserving sex difference, i.e., the heterosexual institution... in contrast to being a strategy of disempowering (politically destroying) the social system which generates the category” (51-52, qtd. in Raymond 217). Likewise, Janice Raymond argues that, “The new gender outlaw is the old gender conformist, only this time we have men conforming to femininity and women conforming to masculinity. Or... men and women mixing and matching but not moving beyond both... What good is a gender outlaw who is still abiding by the law of gender?” (222-23). Admittedly, the so-called “gender outlaw” can reproduce the idea that particular genitalia signifies “maleness” or “femaleness” and once again reify the male/female sexual/gender division.

(3) I am not suggesting that sexual dimorphism and rhetorical practices are ahistorical constructions. I am not attempting to universalize “our present moment into an always/already, seemingly stable construction” (Epstein and Straub 6). Rather, I am trying to articulate how within this historical moment we have anachronistically appropriated classical rhetorical theory and how that theory is “understood” today to have gender/sexual connotations and implications.

(4) I am not denying the specificity and the existence of “real” hermaphroditic bodies. My theorization of such figures in no way functions as a denial but rather foregrounds “biological” explanations of difference (see Fausto-Sterling, Epstein, Spanier).

(5) I am not conflating hermaphroditism with other gender-blending practices such as transvestism and drag. Likewise, I am not conflating a transgendered rhetorical practice of listening with other critical practices such as “queer theory.” These alternate practices operate within their own discursive universes, with specific practices and agendas. I do not intend to displace nor co-opt them, but rather to situate my discussion of a transgendered rhetorical practice alongside these other bodies of knowledge.

(6) And finally, in the words of Donnie Brasco, “Fohgetaboutit,” if you are presuming that the hermaphrodite is about making up for female lack. My use of the figure is not about having the phallus or lacking it, but forgetting about it (but, of course, not repressing it)—so that it doesn’t continue to be the “sign” that transcends, that authorizes the speech act, and that, by extension, renders the audience lacking, mutilated, and envious.
My use of the hermaphrodite is not about sexual reassignment; it is not about sewing on correct equipment or cutting away extraneous flesh. What is interesting to me about the figure of the hermaphrodite, and what is portentous and propitious for future rhetorical and composition theory, is the manner in which it embodies a dual/duel form of difference, rather than replicating an either/or, dialectical form of difference. Whereas, according to Freud, the little girl "knows in a flash" her sexual difference, one is never quite able to figure out the hermaphrodite—and as such—the hermaphrodite remains a site of undecidability and incomprehensibility, exceeding the rigid male/female model of difference. This site of incomprehensibility is much more radical than Freud's use of Aristophanes's hermaphrodite to signify original bisexuality ("Three Essays" 2, 7-10) because the god's separating gesture ultimately made us subject to sexual division and furthermore made us conscious of the division. As you will recall, in Plato's rendition of the myth, the god turned the creatures' heads to face the signs of the division, to cause us to remember our hubris; therefore, we were not only sexually divided, we were made conscious/conscience of that division (Symposium).

Today, Aristophanes's god does its work via ideological state apparatuses that not only assign each of us a particular sexuality, but also make us subject to that assignment. Julia Epstein, in her insightful discourse on the legal, medical, and cultural "treatments" for hermaphroditism, "Either/Or--Neither/Both," reminds us that

the state has several reasons for requiring that newborns be registered with a name and a sex designation at the time of their birth: to establish a means of social organization and to prevent fraud; to regulate the granting of different privileges and responsibilities according to sex; and, most crucially, to regulate morality and family life by prohibiting sex acts and marriages involving persons of the same sex. (101)

This deployment is so effective precisely because it (ironically) leads us to believe that this designation somehow reveals something fundamental about who we are for ourselves/to ourselves.

In contradistinction to the sexually assigned rhetor, the speaker/writer who has answered the hailing call of sexual dimorphism, Vitanza offers us the Hermaphrodite Favorinus as "the most typical Sophist," as the rhetor which is not One, who "was born doubled-sexed," and who lived in/through various paradoxes (53; Philostratus, Lives of the Sophists, 23). A more current model of an illegible body is the character "Pat" from Saturday Night Live; although she/he is called "androgynous," she/he is not one of the non-threatening androgynes from, for example, the Calvin Klein CK ads. Pat remains radically other, and hence would never be a proper model for Calvin Klein underwear. All questions posed to Pat are an attempt by others to "understand" Pat—that is, as an attempt to "hear" Pat as either a man or a woman. The case of Pat pointedly illustrates how foundational the two-sex system is to our conception of identity. We think that the "key" to Pat is his/her "sex." Thus, sex assignment is taken as the primary...
topos across which we come to know others. Tannen makes this point when she argues that although we can imagine a day when an actor would be cast for a role, independent of his/her race, we can't as easily imagine the “time when actors can be cast without reference to their sex” (Talking 14). This demonstrates how gender/sex is taken to be the rock-bottom foundation of identity—that gender/sex is somehow more “real,” more truth-telling, than race, for example. And, indeed, sex is the topos across which the power of the symbolic rests. The Hermaphrodite, by refusing to be interpelated by sexual dimorphism, effectively challenges symbolic castration or its threat over our bodies, a threat that maintains a two-party system that is often only a party for/of One. To “hear” Pat is to assign a sex. To “listen” to Pat allows Pat to remain radically undecidable.

Attending to/for Difference; Listening to the Limits
But, as Epstein's history of hermaphroditism has shown, those of “doubtful sex” (19th-century common usage) “could not choose to be uncategorizable... [It was prescribed that there] be a dominant sex determinable by medical examination” (118-19). Even current medical and cultural practice, through surgical and/or hormonal intervention (see Fausto-Sterling) and ideological interpelation (i.e., “girling” [see Butler]), requires that one be either male or female. That one can be in Epstein’s words “neither/both” is unthinkable by medical and social systems of thought and categorization. Herculine Barbin (a hermaphrodite of the 19th century) writes in his/her memoirs: “I have to speak of things that, for a number of people, will be nothing but incredible nonsense because, in fact, they go beyond the limits of what is possible” (qtd. in Epstein; emphasis added, 123). Why, we must ask, has the limit of what is possible been drawn at this point? Why is sexual ambiguity a categorical/conceptual impossibility? Epstein provides a clear answer: hermaphroditism threatens “the hegemony of heterosexuality” (130)—and that is the real “impossibility”: the loss of power and privilege.

Thus, sexual confusion must be resolved (as in the film The Crying Game, when the audience is presented a moment of full-frontal “Truth”). Sexual clarity must be maintained in order to maintain the institutions that heterosexuality serves—just as rhetorical clarity must be maintained in order to maintain those same institutions. What does clear prose, you may ask, have to do with the “hegemony of heterosexuality” or patriarchy or capitalism or any other system of oppression?22 Let me illustrate with the following example. I had been arguing against clarity, perhaps an unusual thing to do in a class entitled “Advanced Composition.” As serendipity would have it, the day of our discussion, an interesting article appeared in the morning paper. It reported that a sexual offender was to be sentenced (1) to chemical castration; (2) to imprisonment; (3) to learn a vocation while in prison; and (4) to earn a GED. The stunning collusion of these “sentences” foregrounded what was at stake. Why are castration, imprisonment, employment, and education, together, seen as the partners of
civilization, as the tools of rehabilitation? One of my students responded, brilliantly: “to make him a working member of society without a working member.” Education, along with the threats of (symbolic) castration and imprisonment, plays an important role in the normalizing process that renders all citizens commodities of the state. Of course, I am not excusing the offender’s crimes; I am not suggesting that they aren’t reprehensible nor punishable. Rather, I am using the example to argue that just as sex/gender assignment (under the threat of symbolic castration) is the guarantor of a particular sexual and political economy, so too is the insistence on clarity. To teach students that clear sentences are desirable and even possible is the sentence to serve a particular social, political, and rhetorical economy. Once again, it demands that we be transparent to each other (and therefore easily commodified). Thus, just as we have too much faith in our genitalia to “deliver” the “truth” of our being, so, too, do we have too much faith in the Speaker’s will to “deliver” clearly the “truth” to a (passive) audience.

“Audience,” writes Alice Rayner, “is an occasion for asking the ethical question what to do at the boundaries of comprehension? How does the audience/listener operate in order to recognize an implicit context and historical past and to resist simply taking in received meanings that are already formulated?” Likewise, I am asking that we explore the audience-hermaphrodite as an embodied site that marks the boundaries of our (mis)comprehension, the limits of our (mis)understanding, in an effort to construct an ethical theory of rhetoric—a rhetoric characterized by a coupling other than will-full (masculine) speaker and a will-less (feminine) audience. This coupling is figured by the con/fusion of Hermes and Aphrodite. Hermes is simultaneously the divine messenger for the gods (he delivers the goods) and the thief of the gods (he steals the goods). He simultaneously is the marker of boundaries (herma—pile of stones for demarcation) and the transgressor of those boundaries. Hermes—the phallic god—is con/fused with Aphrodite, the goddess born from the castrated genitalia of Ouranus. Aphrodite is simultaneously the goddess of love and sexual union and the goddess who causes grief and instigates war (as in the case of the Trojan War) and crimes of passion. She is simultaneously offered to us as the feminine ideal and yet frequently represented as bearded. Again, what would it mean if we transfigured/transgendered the rhetorical act? We would have a rhetoric with the con/fused elements of sex, transgression, theft, beguilement, and boundary markers: in short, messages that are sent but not collected, messages that “listen,” but do not “understand.” A con/fused listening asks, what are the limits of my understanding of what is other? And, is there a possibility of just listening to those limits, rather than rushing in to hear? Listening with a transgendered or con/fused ear is what allows the other to remain other (which is what it desires). I will conclude with a passage from Baudrillard, which encapsulates just listening to the other with a transgendered ear:
This other is... not, as in love, the locus of our alikeness, nor, as in alienation, the locus of our difference; neither the ideal image of what we are nor the obscure model of what we lack. Rather, this other is the locus of what escapes us, and the way whereby we escape from ourselves... The Other is what allows me not to repeat myself for ever. (Transparency 174)

Notes


2. I credit Victor Vitanza for this spelling. The con/fusion is not a fusion of the two, but rather a challenge to the logic of non-contradiction.

3. This characterization of the seducer, as I have argued elsewhere, is a characterization emanating from a philosophic world view, not a sophistic one. Brockriede is suggesting that the seducer is always already the libertine. This conception of the seducer and of seduction in general is only one possibility. Baudrillard offers another in Seduction. See also my manuscript Seducing Rhetoric.

4. What goes by the name of “love” is often presented unproblematically (as is “Truth” and “Beauty”). I challenge this concept of love as a domination-free emotion/experience in my article “Mothers in the Classroom.”

5. Susan Jarratt’s “In Excess” touches on this issue as she critiques neopragmatism’s model of rhetoric as “conversation.”

6. Gemma Fiumara, in The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening, reminds us that among the widespread meanings of the Greek term logos there do not appear to be recognizable references to the notion and capacity of listening... On the other hand, among the possible meanings of the verb legen (besides the prevalent ones related to saying) there are meanings of a different nature, such as to... “receive” (1). Though Fiumara’s reminds us of this in order to begin her recovery work of this aspect of speaking, this “receiving” as listening, her point still underscores that even if one is listening, one is still receiving: the conduit metaphor manifests itself once again. Fiumara’s work is interesting, nevertheless; however, as her subtitle reveals, she is interested in a philosophy of listening. My aim here is to rethink listening rhetorically.

7. I found Irigaray’s earlier works revolutionary in the examination of sexual difference. Her later works, however, specifically re-establish sexual dimorphism.

8. Cathy Schwichtenberg’s “Reconceptualizing Gender” and Jean Kennard’s “Ourself behind Ourself” are two examples.

9. Of course, all of this begs the question of the orality/literacy debate.

10. “...open not to a culture, but to culture, or in other words as the

11. Anthropologist Thomas Csordas argues that “the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the...
existential ground of culture” (qtd. in Epstein and Straub 2).

12 Cf. Judith Butler, in Subjects of Desire:

This language based on principle of differentiation is understood as the Symbolic and is considered by Lacan to be a language governed by the Phallus or, more appropriately, governed by the fear of the Phallus, the effects of paternal law... the infant’s entrance into language is coincident with the emergence of the Law of the Father, the phallocentric system of meaning. ... the human subject only becomes a discrete “I” within the matrix of gender rules. Hence, to exist as a subject is to exist as a gendered being, “subjected” to the Law of the Father. (202)

13 See Vitanza’s discussion of Lyotard in “Three Counter Theses.

14 As Gordene MacKenzie writes:

Potentially explosive socio-political gender issues are often successfully amputated along with healthy genitals on the operating table. But, in attaining new surgically remodeled genitals, transsexuals fall prey to American consumer ideology. By throwing away old genitals and purchasing newly fashioned genitals, transsexuals become the ultimate American icon, the products of a capitalistic and deeply gender-biased culture. (25)

15 Nor is transsexualism. Bernice L. Hausman, in Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender, convincingly argues that transsexualism is a function of recent developments in medical technology. See also Anne Balsamo’s Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women.

16 Anne Bolin’s “Transcending and Transgendering: Male-to-Female Transsexuals, Dichotomy and Diversity” (a qualitative report of her experiences with transsexuals and transvestites) discusses how transsexuals choose to categorize themselves.

17 Some theorists are challenging queer theory itself to acknowledge some of its own conflations. Sally O’Driscol writes:

To understand the valence of sexual transgression in agiven period, terminology is needed to help tease out the various strands and describe the interconnected yet separate aspects of sex, gender, and sexuality. To do this, those sexual practices that currently constitute an identity category (lesbian, gay, transsexual) need to be separated from those that do not. I am suggesting that a new set of terms be defined to mark differences between theories that have different but interrelated goals: gay theory, lesbian theory, transgender theory (as many categories as necessary) to describe what Charlotte Bunch calls the ‘materially different reality’ and consequences of particular sexual practices or identities and outlaw theory to describe the concept of sexual transgression, without being confined to any particular practice. (35-36)

See also Michael du Plessis.

18 Cf. Diane (Mowery) Davis’s article “‘Breaking Up’ [at] Phallocracy.”

19 Gleason’s Making Men offers us a reading of Favorinus’s rhetorical arts as a means of achieving “manhood.”

20 Village Voice columnist Michael Musto argues, contrariwise, that Pat offers a derogatory representation of transgenderists. See MacKenzie, Transgender Nation (135-37).

21 The concept of “clarity” comes to us with a history and with ideological baggage (see Rorty, Foucault, Vitanza), based on the belief, “common to Democritus and Descartes, that the universe is made up of very simple, clearly and distinctly knowable things” (Rorty 357), that the universe communicates these clear and distinct things, clearly and distinctly, that the sexes are “clear and distinct,” that truth and falsehood are clear and distinct,

22 The comment was made by Alex Wier.

23 Although Rayner and I are asking similar questions, our answers—particularly in defining “ethical”—differ.

24 The logic of identity won’t allow us to truly acknowledge difference—that is difference that is figured not according to the premises of the dialectic or the law of non-contradiction. “All categorization involves treating dissimilar things as similar, to repeat Nietzsche’s words” (Herdt 78). Eve Sedgwick writes, “people are different from each other” (22); “every single theoretically or politically interesting project of postwar thought has finally had the effect of delegitimizing our space for asking or thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be ... different from each other” (23). And Jamake Highwater writes, in The Mythology of
Transgression: "We can't imagine being somebody truly different—racially, culturally, or sexually. Everything in a bounded society conspires to affirm our biased views of identity and normalcy. If we are urged to consider being someone else, we do so with the belief that to give up our social identity would mean relinquishing something of our worth" (112).

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