Review Essays

The Feminization of Rhetoric?

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Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy retells the story of the birth of composition instruction in American colleges and universities in the nineteenth century, exploring nuances that scholars and teachers of composition will find invaluable. Robert J. Connors's thesis is that the "current-traditional paradigm"—a label that he himself has used to describe this period—is misleading. He substitutes the label "composition-rhetoric" to describe the turn in late nineteenth-century American colleges and universities from the study of oral persuasion to a pedagogy of written communication. While Connors acknowledges that the excesses associated with the current-traditional paradigm exist—including an almost pathological obsession with mechanics, spelling, and punctuation—he complicates our understanding of this period by uncovering the economic and material conditions in which composition teachers worked. For instance, he suggests that an obsession with grammar and mechanics arose in response to the "crushing" workloads of faculty and instructors, who were obliged to respond to hundreds of themes every week. Marking grammar and punctuation became the fast way to respond to student papers. Offering students feedback on the communicative effectiveness of their writing is not a new practice in the history of composition, Connors discovers, but it has been a rare practice wherever 4/4 loads of first-year composition are the norm.

One of the great contributions of this book is an exploration of the trends in composition textbooks, which, Connors shows, have both responded to and resisted the best thinking of their day. He follows the
development of handbooks and rhetorics, using these books to explore how grammar and style have been taught throughout the last 100 years, and how multimodal approaches to composing (the so-called "modes" of discourse) became so ubiquitous. Connors explores why grammar instruction has been strangely immune to linguistic theory, and he charts the development of the handbook market. Those who love primary historical data (I confess I am one) will be interested to learn the name of the Harcourt Brace Handbook of the early twentieth century (Wooley) and the volume-by-volume developments of the long-lived Writing with a Purpose. One comes away from reading Connors with a feeling that the century has far more texture and familiarity than we have come to imagine, and that the economics of textbook production, market forces, and labor are far more important to our field's history than we care to admit. In this way, Composition-Rhetoric joins three recent books that have contributed greatly to our understanding of the historical and cultural context(s) in which composition instruction has evolved: Thomas P. Miller's The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces, Sharon Crowley's Composition in the University: Historical and Polemic Essays, and Eileen Schell's Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction.

Unfortunately, the empirical drive that leads Connors to uncover forgotten textbooks and complicate our received history seems to fail him when he explores the role gender may have played in the founding of composition studies (Chapter One: "Gender Influences: Composition-Rhetoric as an Irenic Rhetoric"). In this essay, I will focus my comments on this chapter, and invite readers to consult Sharon Crowley's insightful review of the entire book in Rhetoric Review. Connors' basic argument goes like this: when women were finally admitted into public and private colleges and universities in the nineteenth century, the faculty (all male) were embarrassed by the prospect of male students' debating with women in rhetoric classes, where public oratory was still at the center of the curriculum. The reason for this uneasiness, Connors argues, is that rhetoric was essentially an "agonistic" art and "as it had evolved from the classical period through the eighteenth century, was almost absolutely male." In place of rhetorical instruction, which was "oral, argument-based, [and] male-dominated," faculty began to teach a more privatized "interiorized, irenic, negotiative, explanatory" art of composition. Connors writes, "I will not claim that women's entry to college caused the downfall of oral rhetoric or the valorization of written composition"—but he goes on to do so.

In the historical incidents he offers to support his case, oral instruction in rhetoric is ended soon after women are admitted. For instance, there is the case of Oberlin College, which offered separate and unequal
curricula for women and men throughout much of the nineteenth century. Commencement exercises normally involved graduates' giving short speeches; a rhetoric teacher read the themes of women graduates so that they would not be seen onstage. Connors writes, “The private, interior, ‘feminine’ world of essay writing is here clearly juxtaposed with the world of oral display allowed the men.” In 1859 women were allowed to read their themes onstage, but were “expected to read their essays in a monotone, hands at sides, eyes on text.” By 1874, men and women were allowed to make direct appeals to the audience, but by 1885 the graduates were no longer required to give a speech. Connors sums up this situation as follows: “As women stormed and won the gates of rhetoric, rhetoric could only mutate.” So it became “composition-rhetoric”—a feminized version of rhetoric.

Connors’s argument turns on the assumption that rhetoric (“civic oratory”) is a man’s art, and composition is a woman’s art. He sets up the dichotomy early in the chapter by looking at the cases of two medieval rhetorical arts: *ars dictaminis* (the art of letter writing) and *ars praedicandi* (the art of preaching). While letters by women can be found in collections of model letters throughout the history of this rhetorical art, Connors argues, women are absolutely excluded from the art of preaching. Connors is aware that some sects allowed women to preach, and he offers the Quakers as an example. But he points to the violent reactions of Puritan men to Quaker women who dared to preach as evidence that the art of preaching was a carefully guarded male right.

Whither the claims for the complexity of history upon which the rest of Connors’s book depends, and which is its strength? For surely this is not a simple matter. Did rhetoric really mutate because of women, or was there already a shift in the works toward the study and practice of writing? (In fact, Connors shows that writing and oratory were already separate subjects in many colleges early in the nineteenth century.) Did rhetorical instruction really turn to the more private and individualized practice of essay writing because women came along, or was an epistemological change already afoot? (In fact, Connors admits that “the rise of personal subjects [in essay writing] is explicable as just another evidence of romanticism.”)

But furthermore, if rhetoric (qua oratory) were really so agonistic and alienating to women, then why on earth were so many nineteenth-century women in America willing to stand up and speak, preach, and debate each other and men? Why did so many men listen to these women? A quick walk through the speeches collected in the second volume of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s *Man Will Not Speak for Her* or Shirley Logan’s *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women* illustrates that rhetoric certainly did not “mutate” in the hands of abolitionists and suffragists. On the
contrary, in many cases, these speeches illustrate great rhetorical skill of a traditional kind. But furthermore, even in more presumably masculine preserves, women orators made great inroads in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Let’s begin with preaching. It is certainly true that the art of preaching is a rhetorical art that has not developed for women; women are almost completely ignored by preaching manuals. But we cannot assume that women have been absent from the scene. In fact, the presence of a formal prohibition is often a sign that transgressions have occurred. Connors quotes Robert of Basevorn’s prohibition: “No lay person or religious, unless permitted by the Bishop or the Pope, and no woman, no matter how learned or saintly, ought to preach” (emphasis added). Why this qualification, if learned and saintly women preachers had not already appeared? In fact they had (see Glenn).

This decade’s scholarship on women preachers in British, American, and Canadian history has brought to light staggering facts about the numbers of women who preached—successfully—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In her recent book (based on her Yale dissertation) Catherine Brekus documents over 100 women preachers who preached the Gospel in the United States between 1740 and 1845. There was very little evidence that their speech was any less agonistic than men’s; for instance, Mary Dyer, one of the Quakers who was taken before a Puritan court in 1660, said (not very irenically), “God will not be mocked. . . . The Lord will overthrow both your law and you, by his righteous Judgments and Plagues poured justly upon you” (Brekus 30). Methodist women preached to great crowds in England throughout the eighteenth century, often to the entire population of a rural county. The scene in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* in which Methodist evangelist Dinah Morris preaches on a rural town green is based on similar historical events. African-American women preachers such as evangelist Jarena Lee and Rev. Mrs. J. H. Vigal of Buffalo, New York (AME) were successful preachers and leaders in their communities; women of many denominations who could not be accepted as preachers in their home communities became missionaries and preached around the world. Of the American women preachers she studied in the early nineteenth century, Brekus writes, “It is difficult to judge how many people genuinely respected female preachers, but their popularity seems to have been based on more than the novelty of seeing women in the pulpit” (228).

Why should we assume, then, that institutional prohibitions are of relevance to those beyond the professional classes? In fact, the discourses and prohibitions of institutions—which are under criticism in Eliot’s *Adam Bede*—are often resisted by significant pockets of society. For instance, Michel Foucault shows that the nineteenth century rage for disclosure of private sexual transgressions first affected the upper classes, who could afford physicians, but not the lower classes, who
could not. And indeed, despite prohibitions thousands of women and men were converted to Methodism by the rhetorical skill of women in the eighteenth century—but mostly in rural counties of England.

What was different about the men who listened to women preach in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England and America? Why did they not throw tomatoes? Why did they quietly join congregations led by women by the end of the nineteenth century? If Connors’s story is true, how is this possible? In fact, the only thing we can say with certainty about gender issues and rhetoric is that major institutions (mainstream churches and universities included) have often been slower than the culture surrounding them to admit the equal competence of women orators. It is certainly true that the discipline of rhetoric officially ignored women’s contributions and perspectives to the various rhetorical arts, but that does not mean that their contributions as rhetors were unacknowledged in their time. As Paul Wesley Chilcote has shown, when the Methodist Church became a mainstream institution near the beginning of the nineteenth century, church historians worked hard to cover up the contributions of women preachers to the establishment of the denomination. Connors acknowledges individual cases of successful women rhetors, but he draws a line between isolated practices and the rhetorical tradition as a whole.

Connors’s chapter on the feminization of rhetoric has much in common with Ann Douglas’s 1977 book, *The Feminization of American Culture*. As Douglas tells the story, American culture in the nineteenth century began with a robust and intellectual bang, and ended with a sentimental whimper. The women writers who entered public debate in the mid-nineteenth century through what Connors calls the “irenic” and newly privatized polis were challenged by a liberal clergy who felt increasingly in competition for the hearts of their congregations; both groups were led ever downward on a spiral toward banality. The competition between writers like Fanny Fern and liberal clergymen like Henry Ward Beecher, Douglas says, degraded the rigor of public life permanently. Written with the smooth surfaces of a traditional history, *The Feminization of American Culture* suggests that the entrance of women into public life through writing was, finally, damaging to American culture.

When Douglas’s book was first published, feminist historians were busy recuperating suffragists of the nineteenth century and were dismissive of organized religion (but particularly of Christianity). Therefore, Douglas’s ideas were not immediately challenged. But by 1998, when the most recent addition of *Feminization* was published, Douglas herself was apologetic, writing in the preface that she had ignored the fact that her real “love-interest”—the stern Calvinism of theologians like Lyman Beecher of the early nineteenth century—was far from innocent in
American history. The Cult of True Womanhood and the imperialism of Anglo-American culture are logical extensions of Calvinist theology. However, despite this recognition, Douglas mounts a defense of her book from historiographers. She writes,

Though I welcome critical scrutiny of master narratives, I cannot endorse the current disavowal of them. If the “big picture” is now hotly contested by more rival ethnic and gender groups and complicated by more diverse intellectual strategies than most Euro-American scholars like myself could have anticipated even a few decades ago, that only makes attempting an overview more imperative. (xiv)

She goes on to compare the “identity politics” of current feminists with the politics of Victorian women of the nineteenth century, who accepted the essentialist doctrines of their day. However, it is Douglas who, while attempting to give “the big picture,” has forgotten whose “big picture” she offers. And it is the story of those whom she does not discuss in her book—for starters, the many women and men (particularly African American) who made an altogether different and unsentimental call to the nation for reform and experienced an altogether different sense of public—that makes her book problematic.

Connors announces at the beginning of Composition-Rhetoric that his will not be a book of historiography, but rather “a work of scholarship,” by which he means historical research supported by empirical evidence. He writes,

This book seems, then, to be a narrative based on found and on sought archival materials, ordered chronologically on the basis of discrete themes, and interrogated—where they are interrogated—from a limited set of consistent questions based in personal observations of things as they are in the present. I want mostly to tell a story, to identify and pin down as much basic textual evidence as possible, so that further discussion from a theoretical base can then proceed from shareable data. (22)

But, like Douglas, he fails to see that his story of “feminization” ultimately plays upon dangerous stereotypes and is itself an interpretation of history. I am sympathetic to Connors’s wish to immerse himself in data and let that data lead him. However, one cannot draw the line so cleanly between scholarship and theory, as Connors seems to have done. True empiricism, Deleuze has written, is not so different from theory. He writes, “an empiricist” is “a pluralist” who follows the “logic of multiplicities” (Dialogues vii-viii). The researcher analyses “the states of things, in such a way that non-preexistent concepts can be extracted from them.” But, the “[s]tates of things are neither unities nor totalities, but multiplicities” (vii). The job of an empiricist is to search for and validate anomalies, to rejoice in the havoc that anomalies play in the creation of grand narratives. Anomalies in Connors’s grand narrative of rhetoric’s feminization are both in his own chapter (e.g., the role
of romanticism in the rise of composition instruction) and in the literatures on women's contributions to rhetoric. Therefore, Connors' claim that he has not written a work of critical historiography but has instead written a work of scholarship does a disservice both to the historiographers whom he dismisses and to the empiricists whom he embraces. And while I will not go so far as to claim that the work of historiographers and the work of archivists are one and the same, I will say that both are guided by theory and both are ethically bound to seek and expose multiplicities.

The irony here is that Connors works to find anomalies and to deconstruct grand narratives in other places in this book. Why he holds onto a theory of feminization that holds so little scholarly water is a mystery. Sharon Crowley writes (and I concur) that Connors's argument "can be taken to imply . . . that modern composition-rhetoric, with its lowly status in the university and its unfair employment practices, is nonetheless better suited to women than is the study of rhetoric" (342). One might go on to ask, "In what way has composition-rhetoric really become irenic/feminized?" Agonistic trends in oratory live on in academic writing and in academic life. For example, Olivia Frey and Jane Tompkins have argued that there is nothing more agonistic than a book review (hmmmm). And Gesa Kirsch and Theresa Enos have shown that many academic women do not feel particularly empowered in their writing and work, even within our field.

But Bob is probably used to receiving this feedback, especially from feminists. After presenting his theory of feminization in one section of "Teaching and Learning As a Man," Connors received excellent feedback in the Comment/Response sections of two issues of College English from several scholars (McGann; Kirsh; Breidenbach; Fleckenstein). I know this feedback has occurred in person at conferences as well, because I have been present for at least one such conversation. So I am wondering, frankly, why Bob hasn't heeded all this generous feedback, why he has let it disappear down the proverbial rabbit hole.

Dear Bob, What were you thinking? Irenically, Roxanne.

Works Cited


Schell, Eileen E. *Gypsy Academics and Mother Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 1997.