

A Sound Proposal on Rhetoric

By

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English 4030/5030 Annotations

A SOUND PROPOSAL ON RHETORIC

Scene: 1

(INTRODUCTIONS OF PLOT)

SOUND: PLAY IN "SYNTHETICA"

MAIN TEXT

There is something to sound. The patchwork cacophony that makes up conversation and chatter is itself made up of the unique and recognizable voices of every single participant, and it's something that's lost in the trip to print; when the fiery phrase is flattened and stamped out in cold ink. It's something so powerful I can't just say it. It's something... that has to be *sung*.

SOUND: PLAY IN "FRIENDS KARAOKE"

MAIN TEXT

I'm just kidding. I've learned my lesson from the previous Micro Response. But in a class that's all about the ways our thoughts are made up of annotations and quotations, print is pretty good at eliding the fact that the words in quotation marks aren't your words. But to get to that, I'd like to first build off of something else I've said in a Micro Response. On reading Frances Willard's line:

WILLARD

Don't take too much for granted. Don't think because these are women of general intelligence and Christian experience they are also clear in their respective minds as to the history, mystery, and methods of the W.C.T.U.

MAIN TEXT

That is to say, the Women's Christian Temperance Union. But I made the observation:

BYRON

It's an alert, the notions that make up the concept of a "suffragette" varies from member to member, and even an enthusiastic, intelligent woman needs to have her ideas disciplined by observation "Of the history, mystery, and methods" of their communities so that they could align into something both impressive and sound.

MAIN TEXT

In order to become proper speakers, they first had to develop as listeners and become part of the community of the WCTU. These are not hypothetical average

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## MAIN TEXT (cont'd)

audience members. They want to be part of the movement, they're enthusiastic enough to come hear a lecture, attend a meeting, and organize for Temperance. They know the concepts, but that doesn't mean they speak the language. It has an interesting parallel as the pragmatic realization of something Friedrich Nietzsche warned about.

## NIETZSCHE

Here, one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius of construction, who succeeds in piling up an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, upon running water. Of course, in order to be supported by such a foundation, his construction must be like one constructed of spiders' webs: delicate enough to be carried along by the waves, strong enough not to be blown apart by every wind.

## MAIN TEXT

A movement has to be disciplined--strong enough to hold together a common language and purpose, yet still flexible enough to keep the members as engaged participants. For a political movement, this is sensible. But for Nietzsche, this goes to the interior of our own self-construction, how we understand and approach the world. It's high-minded philosophy, but serves as an immediately relevant political move for 19th Century female speakers and activists. But I'm getting ahead of myself. To argue about the rhetorically constructed self, I have to start with what Willard and many of her contemporaries were addressing in their goals. They weren't arguing that a movement relies on socially constructed language, they were arguing that women had a right to preach, and that meant they were arguing about how to, and who could, interpret the Bible. And if the Bible represented a Singular Word of God--to question who's voice we read that in is a radical move.

Scene: 2

(FOCUS ON THE BIBLE AND WOMEN PREACHING)

## MAIN TEXT

Lauren approaches this in part of her fourth Micro Response.

## LAUREN

Although Willard does suggest that the truth can be reached (a "full orb'd revelation"), it is not until both halves -- the woman's and the man's -- is taken

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LAUREN (cont'd)

into account. Again, the more a male preacher tries to focus in on "the truth," the more he loses sight of the purpose of the inquiry. Really, all of humanity is a stake for Willard.

MAIN TEXT

The movement for women's suffrage was one interconnected with a multitude of issues: there's the theological rights of women, but there were also intersections with the abolitionists, civil and industrial reformers, and the aforementioned Temperance movement. As Lauren noted, the voices of women were needed in society or society would only become more lost. But as the 19th Century Evangelist Phoebe Palmer noted, they faced fierce opposition.

PALMER

The Christian churches of the present day, with but few exceptions, have imposed silence on Christian woman, so that her voice may but seldom be heard in Christian assemblies. And why do the churches impose it? The answer comes from a thousand lips, and from every point, "The Head of the Church forbids it."

MAIN TEXT

And the Head of the Church relied on certain "hammer verses," a line or two of scripture that supposedly settled the issue. For the advocates of women preaching, they had to contend with 1 Corinthians 11:5

BIBLE

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church

MAIN TEXT

Which seems fairly cut and dry. But, of course, there were rebuttals. The Suffragist Sarah Grimke, for instance:

GRIMKE

The New Testament has been referred to, and I am willing to abide by its decisions, but must enter my protest against the false translation of some passages by the MEN who did that work, and against the perverted interpretation by the MEN who undertook to write commentaries thereon

## MAIN TEXT

Not only, like Willard, that the text is incomplete without the input of female believers, Grimke refuses to entertain the thought that the translations are accurate when only Men have written and interpreted them. Palmer, then, reinforces that argument by arguing that that interpretation of those verses is simply incompatible with the message of the Bible.

## PALMER

We believe that the attitude of the Church in relation to this matter is most grievous in the sight of her Lord, who has purchased the whole human family unto himself, and would fain have every possible agency employed in preaching the gospel to every creature. He whose name is Faithful and True has fulfilled his ancient promise, and poured out his Spirit as truly upon his daughters as upon his sons.

## MAIN TEXT

And on her use of the word "purchased," Kathryn noted,

## KATHRYN

I like the use of this word, here. It implies that those who silence women are STEALING FROM JESUS.

## MAIN TEXT

But among the argument of the injustice, there's one of incompleteness. Reading the Bible in an exclusively male voice, without investigating the assumptions behind it, encourages a way of looking at the Bible only in terms of those hammer verses, to justify a point already reached by the speaker. It's turning out bad results because it's using an incurious method. Frances Willard demonstrates a better method by putting those verses in the context of a liturgical matrix, a grid that compares some of the anti-women preaching verses, such as the earlier verse from Corinthians, against verses from other books that seem in favor of women preaching, such as Joel 2:28

## BIBLE

And afterwards, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy

## MAIN TEXT

Or from Paul himself, such as in Romans 16:7

## BIBLE

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

## MAIN TEXT

Which, as I had previously noted in my fourth Micro Response

## BYRON

shows exegesis as a matter of organizing and guiding information, rather than forcibly asserting which verse overrides the other.

## MAIN TEXT

And as Dr. Rivers noted,

## NATHANIEL

Yes: process. To borrow from Latour, Willard is insisting that everyone shows their work.

## MAIN TEXT

Between all three women, there's a parallel movement to challenge patriarchal assumptions in the political and the religious sphere. But in taking on a text as fundamental, and fundamentalist, as the Bible, they identify that their Rhetoric is not only something entitled to them by right, but something necessary for society. Their voices are part of the construction of society, and even things as presumably stable as the Bible, need their participation. Or, as Nietzsche's dome built on an unstable foundation, it will collapse if it cannot accommodate them. As Grimke argues,

## GRIMKE

No one can desire more earnestly than I do, that woman may move exactly in the sphere which her Creator has assigned her; and I believe her having been displaced from that sphere has introduced confusion into the world.

## MAIN TEXT

The efforts to exclude women are fundamentally dis-orderly and can only lead to ruin. Lauren then elaborated on this quote in an annotation,

## LAUREN

There's a lot of scholarship on the power (and lack thereof) in silence and private discourse. I'm thinking mostly about Cheryl Glenn's Unspoken, but also Glenn and Ratcliffe's Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts. And then, of course, there's the highly contested Belenky et al. Women's Ways of Knowing.

But... Grimké is touching upon a more oppressive tradition of making women feel powerful in the private, domestic sphere in order to keep them from reaching beyond their "natural" boundaries. She's attempting to

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LAUREN (cont'd)

break down the boundaries of the public and private, the domestic and the political, the masculine and the feminine. And doing it in a private letter, which brings up some really interesting questions about genre and private vs. public discourse.

MAIN TEXT

Breaking down these boundaries of masculine and feminine, between private and public goes beyond the theological and political spheres. The voices of these activists points towards a larger question of Rhetoric. If the Bible is constructed by the interpretations and opinions of the community, then why can't that process be turned inwards?

SCENE: 3

(CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF)

MAIN TEXT

Now that we've allowed for matters of interpretation in movements and societies and the Bible, we can move on to discuss the construction of the self. But it doesn't come easily, and it's still closely tied to heated political movements. When Frances Willard says,

WILLARD

"We want the earth" is the world-old motto of men. They have had their desire, and we behold the white male dynasty reigning undisputed until our own day

MAIN TEXT

These 19th Century writers were identifying and rejecting systems of overt oppression, against women, but also against African slaves. There was much exchange between the suffragists and the abolitionists, and both influenced each other in oratory and philosophy. As Frederick Douglass explains in his autobiography,

DOUGLASS

I was a "graduate from the peculiar institution," Mr. Collins used to say, when introducing me, "with my diploma written on my back!" The three years of my freedom had been spent in the hard school of adversity.

MAIN TEXT

To which I annotated,

BYRON

One of the things I note with embodied rhetoric is that Douglass and the abolitionists weren't the first

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BYRON (cont'd)

movement to face physical violence for their beliefs, but they were a movement where physical violence could not be distanced from their advocacy. Douglass not only uses his scars as a rhetorical tool, that scarring is significant to the construction of his own identity

MAIN TEXT

Douglass identifies himself as a text, both in how he served as a demonstration and prop to support Garrisonian speeches, but also in how the experience of receiving his scars developed himself as a person. But it wasn't in a singular direction: Douglass' story testifies to how the acceptance of slavery needed to be trained into the enslaver as much as the enslaved. In his famous encounter with the children who inadvertently taught him to read, Douglass remarks,

DOUGLASS

"You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, but I am a slave for life! Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free

MAIN TEXT

The embrace of slavery is not naturally occurring; these boys must, and would later, be taught to accept the legitimacy of the institution and the processes that scarred Douglass' back also impressed its norms upon them. Until they had forgotten they had to be taught their attitude and presumed it natural. As Dr. Rivers noted,

NATHANIEL

This is why folks like Douglass are so valuable to rhetorical theory: they have had "nature" used against in ways that makes that term and category very suspect.

MAIN TEXT

Douglass had seen it before, when his kinder mistress had to be taught not to teach Douglass to read. Over this moment, Kathryn noted,

KATHRYN

Keeping in mind his audience, Douglass here demonstrates that the evils of slavery are not limited to the harm visited upon slaves (which is the type of harm white abolitionists wanted him to represent by showing the damage his body had sustained as a slave).

## MAIN TEXT

I look to her term "sustained." The body his damage sustained, in turn, sustains the institution of slavery. At all levels of society, from the most privileged to the least, the assumptions that made up the institution of slavery served as an extensive support structure. As Willard, Grimke, and Palmer warned with the Bible, to ignore the way society acts upon you and the way in which you are constructed, to assume it is simply natural or inneringly true because you've already thought the idea, is to leave knowledge half obscured.

SCENE: 4

(MOVE BACK TO WILLARD W/NIETZSCHE FOR CONCLUSION)

## MAIN TEXT

Now, at long last, we can move back to my point with Willard and Nietzsche. As Nietzsche established,

## NIETZSCHE

It is this way with all of us concerning language: we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things

## MAIN TEXT

In our use of language, we have to accept that our assumptions and attitudes come from social agreements and necessities of conveyance. But once again, it is not so simple. As I annotated,

## BYRON

The important thing seems to be the self-consciousness. Nietzsche is trying to avoid the "I identified the problem, and thus, I've solved it." The image of unmasking their pretensions has the dangerous risk of thinking that the mask is something outside the norm, and that there's something stable underneath it that's been revealed

## MAIN TEXT

There's no magic bullet, no simple solution. And yet, there is opportunity in this. As Willard noted,

## WILLARD

Are you the master of the situation? "He that ruleth the spirit is better than he who taketh a city." Now is your chance for mastery!

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## MAIN TEXT

There still is no singular solution, but Willard's promise of mastery is well-founded. It isn't an easy process--her method for Biblical analysis shows that it will have to be thorough, and the efforts of the WCTU shows that it is hard work, but a better process is worthwhile. Without such critical analysis of society and process, the Abolitionists and Suffragists could not have succeeded.

(BEAT)

## MAIN TEXT

The construction of this text was a social one, even before I put out a casting call. But I am particularly indebted to the generous gift of time and effort I received from my cast of voices

(ROLL VOICE CREDITS, ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Without their help, and the contributions and discussion from everyone in Dr. Nathaniel Rivers' History of Rhetoric course, this recording would not have been possible. I'm Byron Gilman-Hernandez, and to all my friends, thank you for listening.

SOUND: "FRIENDS"

NATHANIEL

Boom!