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The Ambiguous Woman:
Embodied Rhetorics of Woolf, Cixous, and Anzaldúa

Key:

Elaboration 1

MicroResponse 3/9

MicroResponse 3/29

Annotation (me)

Annotation (with citation)

New text

In “Norm, Measure of All Things,” Sofia Lemos uncovers the process of bodily normalization as it determines architectural dimensions. The standards by which the human body has been conceptualized are always working toward the average – the normal. So, throughout history, the “anomaly is thus a mere difference in degree for which the norm will serve as metric” (Lemos). This centering of “normal” calls upon the statement that “man is the measure of all things”: “Throughout history man used *his* own body as metric for the instruments of service to him and his built forms” (Lemos). But, even though “man used *his* own body as the metric,” that body is defined by metric standards. Bodies thus fit in or out of the metrics of normality, creating a normal against which an abnormal can be judged.

This discernment applies to how we conceptualize something like rhetoric, too. From the Enlightenment to the nineteenth century, thoughts on rhetoric seem to revolve around the concept of an objective “norm.” For some, such as Locke and Hume, deviations in language and knowledge can either be corrected or disregarded. For others, particularly

Nietzsche and Willard in the nineteenth century, the objective norm or natural never existed to begin with. At the end of Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, he breaks down two options, the rational man and the intuitive man: "...the one in fear of intuition, the other with scorn for abstraction..." (1178). However, this classification, and the dichotomous nature of it, is critically unreliable. One cannot choose between being rational or intuitive; to believe there is a choice is to choose rationality. Instead, there is only ambiguous maneuvering.

The rational man, then, does not have a norm to measure deviations against. At the same time, the intuitive man cannot arrive at a norm out of pure invention. This ambiguity follows through into the twentieth century, too. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke argues that "We take it for granted that, insofar as men cannot themselves create the universe, there must remain something essentially enigmatic about the problem of motives...what we want is *not terms that avoid ambiguity*, but *terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise*" (1300). This positions ambiguity as a multivalent resource rather than an obstruction of truth, which is in stark contrast to previous rhetorical treatises that have attempted to eradicate ambiguity for the sake of clarity, such as Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke was concerned with how language corresponded with an objective reality – how words describe the world. In contrast, twentieth century thinkers, like Burke, were more concerned with how language works to create dangerous notions of an objective reality – how our interactions with the world are filtered through words.

The “choice” between rationality and intuition had more obvious consequences in the twentieth century. Or, the consequences were written about more explicitly. Moving on from Burke, other writers also make it clear that “ambiguity as resource” is *the key claim for some 20th century rhetorical theorists (sophist_monster)*. Virginia Woolf, Hélène Cixous, and Gloria Anzaldúa were critically aware of how norms and standards create tools for subordination and even eradication. They were also aware of how language plays a vital role in such acts. Although these three writers’ came from different places – England, France, and the American Southwest, respectively – and worked in (mostly) varied times throughout the twentieth century, all three share one thing: they create new embodied rhetorics of divergence and multiplicity.

Women, and the female body, inhabit a particularly ambiguous space, historically set up against the male as “norm.” Thus, Woolf describes women as both exploited in fiction *and* belittled as writers of fiction; Cixous challenges historical notions of the female body as the deformed male; and Anzaldúa takes on a socially marginalized culture as a place of power. Thus, all three share Burke’s emphasis on “ambiguity as a resource” adding sex and gender as components that bear upon conceptions of rhetoric.

In the twentieth century, as in the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century, rhetorics of normalcy are manifesting as the body in chaos. Historically, women and the female body are the supposed deviation from the norm; however, that deviation becomes a positive for rhetoric. Ambiguity, then, becomes the source of rhetorical power. In other words – in the cases of Woolf, Cixous, and Anzaldúa – rhetorical power comes from the chaotic ambiguous body.

In Virginia Woolf's *Women and Fiction*, ambiguity is deliberately front and center in the title: "The title of this article may be read in two ways: it may allude to women and the fiction that they write, or to women and the fiction that is written about them. The ambiguity is intentional, for in dealing with women as writers, as much elasticity as possible is desirable..." (1256). The title, then, allows Woolf room not only to think through the power of women authors, but also the condemning myths of women in literature.

Ambiguity is likewise explored in *Professions for Women*, perhaps less explicitly: "Ah, but what is 'herself'? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill" (1255). In some ways, Woolf is equating her writing with her body (ahagedo2) since it might suggest that one cannot know what a woman is before they have done the rhetorical, discursive work (sophist_monster). But that "rhetorical, discursive work" is left unfinished. No one could do all of the work in "all the arts and professions open to human skill." This then leaves the definition of "woman" unfinished.

"Unfinished" is not merely "incomplete," though. It is not, as one might assume, a lacking. Instead, "unfinished" means something more closely resembling a transcendence of definition. Or maybe it means *ambiguity* – positive ambiguity. In Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives*, "ambiguity as a resource" comes through as a volcanic metaphor:

Distinctions, we might say, arise out of a great central moltenness, where all is merged. They have been thrown from a liquid center to the surface, where they have

congealed. Let one of these crusted distinctions return to its source, and in this alchemic center it may be remade, again becoming molten liquid, and may enter into new combinations, whereat it may be again thrown forth as a new crust, a different distinction. So that *A* may become non-*A*. But not merely by a leap from one state to the other. Rather, we must take *A* back into the ground of its existence, the logical substance that is its causal ancestor, and on to a point where it is consubstantial with non-*A*; then we may return, this time emerging with non-*A* instead. (1300)

I like the metaphor here, as it lays out Burke's notion of consubstantiality pertaining to ambiguity; the phrase "alchemic opportunity" hints at both the promising possibilities that can come from such ambiguity, and also the danger of the process (kpolizzi). For Cixous, that danger is embodied and gendered. She is anxious of rhetoric's *consubstantial* powers (sophist_monster), so she strains Burke's volcanic metaphor in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, touching upon the implications of distinguishing between *A* and non-*A*:

If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it... A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way... This doesn't mean that she's undifferentiated magma, but that she doesn't lord it over her body or her desire. (1532-3)

She uses "volcanic" in a way I think resonates with Burke. The feminine texts breaks up the crust, renders is ambiguous (bi-sexual) to subvert it (sophist_monster). In historical terms of sex, male is *A*, female is non-*A*. One is whole; the other, without the phallus, is incomplete. But throughout *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous argues that the female is not simply non-*A* marked by a lacking or absence. Even though Burke says that non-*A* can be molten back down to re-emerge as *A* and vice versa, Cixous suggests that continues to empower the concept of *A* still outside the realm of womanhood. She challenges ambiguity as a resource, insofar as Burke's notions of ambiguity still potentially measures an ambiguous female against an unambiguous male. At the same time, though, she presents an embodied ambiguity for a (perhaps more productive) gendered rhetoric.

For Cixous, the body is spontaneous. In addition, she seems to expand what logic is. Logic is traditionally an intellectual capacity, one which has been considered men's strong point and women's weakness. She flips this conception by challenging the mind/body binary of traditional rhetoric and claiming that the body is a site of logic (ahagedo2). We've talked a lot about embodied rhetoric for women, and the importance of acknowledging a rhetor's body, actions, and delivery as much as their words. Cixous says that women, then, speak differently than men because their bodies are biologically and socially differentiated. Her argument is positive for theories of rhetoric because it gives some room to think about how the body is spontaneous and rhetoric's (rhetorics') fraught relationship with logical conceptions and modes of discourse.

The paralogical body is considered even further in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She takes on the objective rationality of language, adding a more explicit

embodied component as it pertains to ethnicity. She starts “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” with a scene at the dentist: “We're going to have to control your tongue,” the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth. Silver bits plop and tinkle into the basin. My mouth is a motherlode” (1585). In this scene, her tongue is both physical (in her mouth) and cultural (her language). At the beginning, then, Anzaldúa articulates both the physical control over one’s body and the cultural control of one’s identity.

She challenges that subordination, though, by intermingling Chicano Spanish with English throughout all of her writing: “Attacks on one's form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua*. Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out” (1585). *Of course, it's significant that she refuses to directly translate her words, here. Although Anzaldúa is speaking to a predominantly white audience, she refuses to relieve the burden of language that is not for the audience (kpolizzi).*

Alternating between languages and dialects provides Anzaldúa another way of exploring the dangers and benefits of ambiguity. When describing Chicano identity, she writes, “We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Anglo-ness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one” (1590). At this moment, ambiguity can fall into the dangerous process implied in Burke’s metaphor. If one is constantly wavering between two languages and two cultures, there’s a possibility of becoming what Cixous calls “an undifferentiated magma” – a “zero, nothing, no one” waiting to be molded or formed into Burke's *A* or *non-A*. Here, Anzaldúa pushes against that metaphor a bit

more, challenging the process of assimilation as it pertains to the US “melting pot” mentality. We can't just “melt down” our identities to be reformed as part of the dominating culture.

Ultimately, though, Anzaldúa takes on that dangerous ambiguity in *LA CONCIENCIA DE LA MESTIZA TOWARDS A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS*: “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity...Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (1598). Is that “something else” a resource? And can that newly created “ambiguity as a resource” be mapped onto Anzaldúa’s gender as well? She challenges the traditional notions of “woman” meaning “lacking” as she later writes, “ ‘You’re nothing but a woman’ means you are defective” (1600). Like Cixous, Anzaldúa considers language as not simply a series of consubstantial ambiguities between *A* and non-*A* – male and female – but rather an embodied rhetoric that is multiple and chaotic. And, like Woolf *and* Cixous, Anzaldúa equates writing with the female body that is not lacking, but productively divergent.

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