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Women and Rhetoric - Part II

The coursework of History of Rhetoric II has given students the opportunity to trace the development of rhetoric since the age of the Enlightenment. As was the case in most fields, the study and engagement of rhetoric was reserved for wealthy, white men. As time progressed, however, minorities were able to find and establish their place in rhetoric through arguing why they deserved a voice. Once they were firmly rooted in their rhetorical space, minorities began to explore exactly what that space was and what it meant to their identity. In the Modern and Postmodern era, women took particular interest in reflecting their identity in rhetoric in a way that was authentically and proudly female. Virginia Woolf and Gloria Anzaldua specifically explore what it means to be a woman in the rhetorical sphere, while Barbara Biesecker and Jenny Edbauer offer their female perspective on the debate concerning "rhetorical space."

Woolf places great importance on the discovery and fortification a woman's voice in the rhetorical sphere. Woolf explores the relationship between a woman engaging in rhetoric and ambiguity. She writes: "The ambiguity is intentional, for in dealing with women as writers, as much elasticity as possible is desirable...." (1256). Ambiguity helps women to break out of the established rhetorical norms created by men throughout the history of the written word. She encouraged women to take from male rhetoric what they could use, and as Patelrj states, "Literally and figuratively, take the strength of your opponent and turn it into your own weapon." The ambiguity of language, of rhetoric, allows women the opportunity to employ it in a way that is personal to them and to express what they want to express, independent of the male interpretation of rhetoric.

For Anzaldua, language and identity are very closely intertwined. She has discovered her identity through her discovery of language: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (Anzaldua 1588). According to her, one's language influences one's perception of who they are as individuals (hellemad44). In her text *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldua describes her Chicano Spanish as a “border tongue” (Anzaldua 1586). She engages multiple of her “border tongues” throughout her writing to create a more authentic reflection of who she is as an individual. Andrea Lunsford describes Anzaldua's writing style as a patchwork quilt. Quilts are unique, just as language is unique to each individual who engages it. It brings together different types of fabric that maybe do not seem like they would go together, but once assembled make a beautiful product. While language does provide one with her or his identity, Anzaldua asserts that it also has the power to take one's identity away: “We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (Anzaldua 1586).

Username Kplynch aptly analyzes this excerpt:

“The use of the phrase “female being” here is interesting, since it not only implies a direct and tangible connection between language and identity, but also between language and actual physiology; a physical reality is “robbed” through the system of language. Language, then, is not only a means of constructing identity, but also a means of robbing someone of their identity and physiological reality” (Kplynch).

Anzaldua recognizes the close ties between rhetoric and identity and highlights the importance of genuine self-expression through language. She, like Woolf, points out the barriers that traditional rhetoric places on this genuine self-expression because of its inherent masculine nature.

While it is important for women to have a female rhetorical voice, it is also necessary to engage male rhetoric in certain instances to come to the clearest, strongest conclusion of rhetorical theory. Biesecker shows that it is beneficial to combine both masculine and feminine perspectives of rhetoric through her interpretation of the concept of the rhetorical situation

through the female lens, but uses Derrida's theory of "différance" as a tool to express her to her feminine voice. She combines her feminine voice with Derrida's male gaze to understand rhetoric in a more accurate and productive way, alluding to Francis Willard's idea that both men and women must rhetoricize in order to find the truest rhetoric. Biesecker writes:

"Significantly enough, a reading of the rhetorical situation that presumes a text whose meaning is the effect of différance and a subject whose identity is produced and reproduced in discursive practices, resituates the rhetorical situation on a trajectory of becoming rather than Being. Finally, then, the deconstruction of the rhetorical situation and its constituent elements has taken us to a point where we are able to rethink rhetoric as radical possibility" (Biesecker 127).

Biesecker's deconstruction of the rhetorical situation through Derrida's différance allows rhetoricians to effectively rhetoricize by the ability to influence an audience's identity. Her engagement of différance shows the importance of both female and male perspectives to rhetoric to make it an effective discipline.

Although it is useful to combine both male and female rhetorical views to most accurately describe rhetorical theories, Bauer demonstrates that it is also appropriate at times to apply one's female gaze to a rhetorical theory so as to reach the clearest, strongest conclusion. Edbauer moves away from the rhetorical situation lens altogether; she instead proposes a new way to evaluate rhetoric: rhetorical ecologies. She writes:

"...I want to propose a revised strategy for theorizing public rhetoric (and rhetoric's publicness) as a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events.... This ecological model allows use to more fully theorize rhetoric as a public(s) creation" (Edbauer 9).

Edbauer uses her female rhetorical voice to evaluate a theory and propose her own theory, which she believes will serve as a solution to the debate surrounding the rhetorical situation. Through her interpretation of one theory and suggestion of another, Edbauer demonstrates the power and strength of her female rhetorical voice and the importance of feminine rhetoric.

The feminine identity in relation to rhetoric is an important topic that has been explored by modern and postmodern rhetoricians in order to more clearly define exactly what female rhetoric is. Woolf favored ambiguity, citing that it fully allowed women to determine their own voice because it went against rhetorical practices previously established by men. Anzaldua valued true and genuine self-expression, and claimed that for women to achieve this they must move away from the rhetorical norms implemented by men. Biesecker demonstrates the benefits of combining a distinct and strong female voice with that of the male rhetorical voice; Edbauer shows the importance of a strong, independent female rhetoric when evaluating rhetorical theory. These rhetoricians implement the feminist rhetoric they have established and cultivated for themselves, which is an incredibly powerful concept when reflecting upon women's limited relationship with rhetoric throughout the majority of history.