



Early Modern Studies Journal

Volume 6: Women's Writing/Women's Work in Early Modernity/2014
 English Department/University of Texas, Arlington

Book Review

Donawerth, Jane. *Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women's Tradition, 1600-1900*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 205 pp. \$57.00.

Jane Donawerth's book, *Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women's Tradition*, explores the topic of female rhetorical theory from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries in the United States, England, and, to a lesser extent, France. The scope of this book is not meant to be, as Donawerth states, "an exhaustive history" (xi) of four centuries of female-authored rhetorical works; instead, the focus relies on creating interconnections as it relates to female conversation in the realm of rhetoric. Postulating that women's view of oratory excellence occurs mainly in the private sphere, the rhetoric of conversation points to a type of speech that most often occurs through private encounters with other women, or through methods of communication that promote private sphere activities: letter writing, salon discussions, etc. As the book progresses, however, the private sphere of rhetorical conversation

broadens into the public sphere, suggesting that the changing gender experience of women influences their rhetorical efficacy. The biggest question that Donawerth poses to her readers concerns “how women theorize communication, and if they did not do it in rhetoric and composition textbooks, where did they do it?” (2). In this way, the argument of this book does not merely connect to female rhetorical conventions, but rather where conversational rhetoric occurs. Since Donawerth suggests that women did not necessarily follow, or were even influenced by other women authors in this area, she spends a great deal of time setting up the historical background of each individual author as well as their specific contribution to this study. The book, therefore, follows a similar structure throughout, explaining the main topic for each chapter, detailing the contributions of certain women to each topic, and then providing a concluding account of the works in that time period and genre.

Chapter One, “Humanist Dialogues and Defenses of Women’s Education,” highlights the importance of conversation of public oratory, as well as locates the female rhetorical movement to humanism. The chapter also looks at the importance of female speech and education in light of the private sphere; in other words, this type of education will keep women from evil pursuits and make them useful in the public sphere. Chapter Two’s reflection on conduct book rhetoric relies on 19th century transatlantic works of conduct books that were written by women for women. In essence, the sphere ideologies are mostly upheld through conservative female rhetoric, which stressed the use of sympathetic education to better women in the realm of mothers and wives. Nevertheless, Donawerth includes a few female rhetoricians who challenged the status quo, mainly in the arena of the economic class system, as women

sometimes wrote conversational rhetoric to improve working-class conditions for women in the public sphere. In the next chapter titled, "Defense of Women's Preaching," Donawerth explores the rhetoric of female preaching from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. In this chapter, considering the breadth of eras covered, women either advocated for private speech in the form of prayers, confessions, or catechisms to women who advocate for public sphere preaching on the pulpit. The commonality between all of the works relies on countering the teachings of the apostle Paul and emphasizing examples in the Bible of female orators. In Chapter Four, "Elocution: Sentimental Culture and Performing Femininity," there is an examination of sentimental culture, a view of rhetoric aligned to showing emotion through speech and body language. Most of this performative rhetoric is found by female authors in the professional acting realm, which suggests a movement towards more public sphere conversational rhetoric than the previous genres stipulate. In the concluding chapter, Donawerth examines the extinction of female rhetoric of conversation as women begin to write composition handbooks and gain "some equality with men in public forums for speaking and writing" (126). She then questions what would have occurred if "women's tradition of rhetoric" had not gone amiss and had been more fully adapted into "composition studies" (132).

It is in this last chapter that the greatest weakness of Donawerth's book is exposed. As Donawerth suggests, "women's composition textbooks demonstrate the absence of conversational rhetoric as a main component of composition teaching" (129) with the majority of compositional teaching depending on syntactical elements, such as style and the variation of sentence-length. This examination is refuted,

however, through the works of many female authors, like Sara Husted Lockwood who has a section of her work, *Lesson in English*, that encourages students to read aloud since a “student’s sentences should be pleasing to the ear” (139). Donawerth counters her own argument, though, by stating that “when women began to speak in public and write composition handbooks they laid this tradition aside” (144). Therefore, her analysis seems muddled through a hedging-like argument. On the one hand she negates the ideal of conversation in the composition classroom, but then highlights its importance. This thought is most aptly seen with her discussion on David Bartholomae and his view on the discourse of community, i.e. to speak the language of your scholarly community. The link between the arguments here relates to Donawerth’s belief that there is no direct association to the women’s tradition of rhetoric and the female community to the use of conversation in composition theory. A statement such as this needs much more investigation, as the majority of her book points specifically at women who invent this type of rhetoric. Why wouldn’t the conversational rhetoric be applied specifically to composition studies and education, especially since the founding of the educational system in America relied on female instructors?

While the last chapter needs further clarification and a much deeper analysis, the book does offer a nice overview of authors that have been forgotten in the rhetorical tradition. Considering the broad time span, as well as the expansive investigation of different genres, Donawerth does a good job in making connections between authors and themes: even if she states that there are no direct correlations between the authors. The general overview of the public versus private sphere debate

is clearly defined in all of the chapters. Moreover, her inclusion of conservative and radical authors shows a wide-range understanding of female rhetoric spanning four generations of texts. Her examination of individual authors gives each writer her own specific place in the genre, as well, adding a complexity and richness to every text analyzed. The prose style is easy to follow, so that a general audience can follow the discussion, but the material is complex enough to challenge the rhetorical scholar. In the end, Donawerth's work gives an acceptable overview of the theory, even if some arguments still need further clarification.

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