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Review of "Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women's Tradition, 1600-1900" by Jane Donawerth

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Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women's Tradition, 1600–1900. By Jane Donawerth. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012; pp xi + 205. \$60.00 cloth.

As a scholarly community, it is not only important that we theorize, analyze, and interpret communicative acts but also that we educate. In her new book, *Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women's Tradition, 1600–1900*, Jane Donawerth manages successfully to fulfill both obligations. She adds several women to the history of rhetorical theory, analyzes their texts with sophistication and detail, and interprets for her reading audience the significance of their contributions. She does this all while suggesting ways in which we might improve our own pedagogy. The book is the most recent edition to the series *Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms*, an interdisciplinary project seeking to “connect rhetorical inquiry with contemporary academic and social concerns.” While her study is an important contribution to our understanding of modern rhetorical theory, perhaps her most unique contribution is the assertion that theories of the past can be lessons in pedagogical technique today. Donawerth writes, “While there is not a direct link from the women’s tradition of rhetoric to these examples of contemporary composition pedagogy, nevertheless, we can yet learn something about our own teaching practices from a tradition that taught women how to enter the conversation” (145). Donawerth carefully argues that the women she writes about are influential in the history of rhetoric and that their theories might inform our own scholarly activities today.

The study of women and their rhetorical contributions can provide insight into communication theory and social contexts. Donawerth’s analysis accomplishes both of these tasks in several ways. Donawerth writes her self-described “revisionist, feminist, critical or ‘constructionist’ history of women’s rhetorical theory” (9) by analyzing dialogues, conduct books, pamphlets, speeches, elocution handbooks, and other forms of communication written by women *for* women from 1600 to 1900. In her study, Donawerth describes the rise and fall of a “counterdiscourse of women’s

rhetorical theory” (10). She finds a link among a diverse group of female theorists in their common assertion that “conversational rhetoric” should be a “model of discourse” (3). Although each woman highlighted has a different historical context, all seem to advocate for the same sort of rhetorical education. Donawerth’s study is an example of recent scholarship that has enhanced our understanding of theory to provide a more nuanced approach to studying female communication texts.

While every theorist analyzed contributes to the theory of conversational rhetoric, Donawerth explicates its significant contribution to modern rhetorical theory perhaps most clearly in chapters 1 and 3. Chapter 1 highlights women writing “humanist dialogues and defenses” in England and France during the seventeenth century. Through an analysis of the writings of Madeleine de Scudéry, Margaret Cavendish, Bathsua Makin, and Mary Astell, Donawerth expertly traces the evolution of this alternative strain of theory. These women showcased knowledge of humanist philosophy and classical rhetorical theory, using them to challenge socially gendered spheres of communication. Chapter 3 analyzes texts defending a woman’s right to preach, including the writings of Margaret Fell, Lucretia Coffin Mott, Ellen Stewart, Jarena Lee, Catherine Booth, and Frances Willard. Donawerth finds that these women were participating in the debate about “who is the ideal orator?” (74), arguing that through the use of conversation as a model and discourse about women’s rights, these women continued to establish a rhetorical theory based on “collaborative authorship and dialogic authority” (103).

An important contribution that this book makes is its connection between theory and context. Through a deep understanding of each woman’s biography, background, and context, Donawerth is able to analyze and interpret their rhetorical activities to understand how they questioned the “masculine” rhetorical culture in which they lived. Donawerth identifies the texts that she studies as places of resistance. Throughout her study, she finds communicative moments that debate the importance of education for women, women’s right to speak publicly, and the gendered nature of physical behavior. Throughout the book, one can read about the rhetorical theories of women from three different centuries and countries, and from a variety of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Each woman is analyzed within her own context and as part of a “discourse community,” as Donawerth builds a history of women’s rhetorical theory. Studying historical

women can provide us with a narrative of experience and help us see rhetorical patterns. Through her use of diverse perspectives, Donawerth is able to begin to construct this narrative.

In particular, Donawerth reads the texts of certain theorists as creating communication patterns that are “inherently feminine” (48). The significance of this activity is best described in chapters 2 and 4 of the book. Chapter 2 focuses on conduct book rhetoric from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In her analysis of the conduct books written by More, Lydia Sigourney, Eliza Farrar, Florence Hartley, and Jennie Willing, Donawerth finds a “feminine” strain of rhetorical theory in which women from a variety of backgrounds and beliefs established what “feminine” communication in culture might look like. As she eloquently writes, “In the 18th and 19th centuries, women adapted the limits of women’s gendered sphere to construct a women’s theory of rhetoric. . . . At the same time, they forged a women’s tradition of rhetoric, citing each other’s works and centering their theory on conversation as a model for all discourse” (44). She illustrates this by highlighting the writings of women who were interested in teaching women how to perform within their prescribed social roles, and a few women whose interests were focused on reforming those roles.

Chapter 4 continues this exploration of “feminine” performance by linking the nineteenth-century culture of sentimentalism to elocution instruction by women for women, analyzing how “elocution became the means, especially for women, of managing the self and the body” to perform social values (108). She uses the writings of an actress/director (Anna Morgan), an actress/forerunner of modern dance (Genevieve Stebbins), a developer of physical education and therapy (Emily Bishop), and an African American professor/activist (Hallie Quinn Brown) to show how elocutionary training for women evolved from instruction in accepted gender behavior to a “site of resistance to gender ideology” (124).

Conversational Rhetoric truly explicates a rise of theory and, subsequently, its disappearance. In her conclusion, Donawerth proves that the assertion of conversational rhetoric as an ideal model of discourse was no longer a part of communication theory written by women in composition textbooks toward the end of the nineteenth century. She postulates that because it was common for women to be educated, speak publicly, and teach in the late nineteenth century, the necessity for a “domestic conception of

rhetoric decreased” (128). Donawerth proves, however, that the conversational model became a model for good teaching.

Donawerth uniquely bridges theoretical history to pedagogy. The book would be of interest to any scholar studying women’s history and communication across disciplines, as it takes a newer approach in studying women’s rhetorical theory instead of practices (2). An excellent example of close textual analysis, use of diverse sources, theoretical interpretation, and bridging theory and context, this book would appeal to a variety of audiences ranging from undergraduate student to scholar. Most significantly, this history is a story about the power of rhetorical theory. Its interdisciplinary appeal and thorough analysis makes it an informative and enjoyable read, and a foundational contribution to the field of rhetorical theory and history.

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The Genuine Teachers of This Art: Rhetorical Education in Antiquity. By Jeffrey Walker. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011; pp. 356. \$49.95 cloth.

In *The Genuine Teachers of This Art: Rhetorical Education in Antiquity*, Jeffrey Walker builds a persuasive case for rhetoric as a pedagogically centered discipline, that is, rhetoric as “the art of producing a rhetor” (2). Walker seeks to make “a contribution to the study of rhetoric as a pedagogical tradition” (3). While this is not a surprising orientation, given the history of the discipline, the manner in which Walker also argues for making this a present-day understanding of rhetoric deserves attention from contemporary scholars. The evidence and argument he brings to support this project is impressive and compelling. It includes an impressive and interesting mix of textual analysis, historical contextualization, and creative inference. The text develops by focusing on a selected list of rhetoricians and rhetorical pedagogies stretching from the fourth century BCE until the twelfth-century CE: Isocrates, Cicero, Dionysius of Halicarnassus,

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