FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY: RESEARCH METHODS IN RHETORIC

Christine Mason Sutherland

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When it was suggested to me that I might write about my own methods of pursuing feminist research in the history of rhetoric, I felt much as I did many years ago when I started teaching writing. Writing was something I had done since early childhood— it was part of my way of life. I do not remember ever having been given explicit instructions about how to do it: no theory of the paragraph, for example, no explanation of the difference between exposition and argumentation. I simply wrote, and those for whom I wrote constantly critiqued what I had written and corrected it. The process went on for years -- indeed, it has not ended yet, though my severest critic, my father, died some time ago. (Nevertheless, I still often hear his voice quite clearly when I commit some infelicity of style.) When it came to teaching writing, however, I was at a loss. Most of what I knew I had internalized almost to the point of irretrievability. I did not consciously know how I did what I did.

In much the same way, the processes whereby I conduct my research have become almost second nature to me. So this exercise in explaining, perhaps even defending what I do, is a quest, with all its attendant excitements and dangers:
excitements because learning something new, even about oneself, is always exhilarating; dangers, because it is always possible in any activity, particularly a skill, to become too conscious of what one does, too critical, and thus to lose the flow. What I propose to do here is to examine, so far as I can identify them, salient characteristics of my own research practices, and evaluate how far they derive from, or at least are consistent with, typically feminist approaches. In doing so, I shall necessarily take something of an autobiographical approach; but this, though inappropriate in traditional scholarship, is quite consistent with feminist practice, so no apologies are necessary.

The principles and practices of my scholarship were formed during my early years by the educational institutions I was fortunate enough to attend; and I acquired them, as I acquired writing skills, by osmosis, rather than rules. At school, we learned the basic principles of scholarship, those traditional humanistic scholarly methods, which, as Patricia Bizzell asserts, are still needed today. (“Feminist Methods” 8.) A word about this school: it was the Norwich High School for Girls, part of a prestigious group of schools, the Girls’ Day School Trust, originally the Girls’ Public Day School Trust. There are twenty-three such schools in England, most of them founded in the latter part of the nineteenth century by parents who wished their daughters to have an education comparable to that received by their sons at the great English Public Schools, such as Winchester. However, they did not wish to send the girls away to school, but to keep them at home while pursuing an education similar to
the one their brothers were getting. The schools can be seen as an early example of feminist principles: the domestic arts were excluded from the curriculum as a matter of policy: girls must be educated as citizens, as potentially professional women, not simply as future wives and mothers.

From this school, which I attended from Kindergarten through to Upper Sixth, I went on to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. What the two institutions had in common was that both the school and the college (though not of course the University) were female institutions. From my earliest days, therefore, I saw women as scholars and teachers and in positions of administrative authority. I now see this experience as providing a valuable model for me. I have never felt “silenced” in a committee meeting where men are in the majority; it has never occurred to me that I should. (However, I must also thank my male colleagues, who have always treated me and other women faculty members with courtesy and respect.) For the benefit of readers not familiar with the system, I should explain that in Oxford in my day, everyone belonged to a college, and normally tutorials, the basis of the teaching system, were given by academics belonging to one’s own college, though there was a certain amount of cross-college fertilization. Lectures, on the other hand, were the responsibility of the University, though normally a college tutor was also a University lecturer. In this way, we associated with our own sex for one part of our instruction, but with a mixed group for another. This has now changed, in many ways for the better. Hardly any single-sex colleges remain, and in consequence far more women have the privilege of an
Oxford education than was possible in my day. This is all to the good. But I think that something has been lost too: it was a privilege and a pleasure to live in a community of women dedicated to scholarship, and I am glad that I did not miss it.

One feature of the Oxford educational system which has had important consequences for me is the practice of reading one’s weekly essay aloud to one’s tutor. This, I should make clear, was a typically Oxford practice, not one confined to the women’s colleges; it continued when for a term I was fortunate enough to study Middle English at Christ Church College with Robert Burchfield (later Editor of the Oxford Dictionary). Interestingly, unlike my women tutors, Burchfield did not even want to see the texts of my essays: the focus for him was entirely oral. I therefore never developed the “grapholect” referred to by Patricia Bizzell, so typical of the traditional masculine approach in North America. ( “Hybrid Academic Discourses” 10). The custom of oral delivery encouraged a voiced style of prose, consistent, I believe, with feminist practices which are thought to privilege the ear, rather than the eye. Musicologist Marcia Epstein, drawing upon the work of John Shepherd, explains it thus: “The mind, reason, and the eye (which has the capacity to measure the external world) were associated with the male gender. The body, emotion, (with its attendant risk of dangerous irrationality) and the ear (which cannot measure, but can evoke perilous emotion) were the domain of the female.” (164). Furthermore, this practice of oral delivery encouraged something like the “second person” discourse
referred to by Lorraine Code, which, as she says, “opens up freer discursive spaces than those constructed and constrained by the objective, impersonal forms of address.” (Ryan and Natalle, 84).

What then are some of the characteristics of the research I do, and can they be seen as feminist? In his article, “Recovering the Lost Art of Researching the History of Rhetoric,” Richard Enos laments that so few of us are doing primary research; but it is precisely this that has most engaged me. The excitement of bringing some forgotten text to the attention of my colleagues in rhetoric has been one of my greatest pleasures: it makes me feel like a benefactor. My preference for primary research is to be explained, I think, by that attention to original texts which was the focus of my education. The aim of those who taught us was to get us to engage with the primary text: reading secondary material could, and should come later. Only after we had made our own response, however naive or mistaken it might be, should we proceed to expand and adjust our ideas by reading scholarly discussion. Until now, I believed that it was exclusively my love for primary research, derived from my education, that drove me to study women, rather than the other way around. However, in the course of writing this essay it has occurred to me that my very fondness for this kind of study is consistent with, if not driven by, my feminist approach: for I do not enjoy taking the adversarial stance typical of so much secondary research. I would so much rather offer my colleagues enlightenment than criticism. Patricia Bizzell, in “Hybrid Academic Discourses,” describes the typical traditional scholar thus: “the persona is
argumentative, favoring debate, believing that if we are going to find out whether anything is true or good or beautiful, the only way we will do that is by arguing for opposing views of it to see who wins.” (10.) Of course I learned to argue in this way as an undergraduate and graduate student. I still think it is necessary-- on occasion, vitally necessary. But I strongly object to it as a normal practice, as what has been referred to as a master narrative (Lisa Ede et al., 415). Arguing to win, arguing for fun, used to be a standard practice in my family (all male). I still remember the moment at the family dinner table when I said to myself: “I don’t want to do this anymore.” Argument had nothing to do with discovering truth, but only with winning-- a kind of verbal fencing much enjoyed by males (or so Father Walter Ong argues in Fighting for Life) but not by females. As Belenky and others show in their important book Women’s Ways of Knowing, women see the contestants as persons, not positions, and are afraid that “someone will get hurt.” (105). That this is not just a twentieth-century perspective I discovered when I read Mary Astell’s rhetorical theory: she too advocates being compassionate to the audience, refraining from humiliating them. Perhaps, then, my fondness for primary research has more connection with my gender than I thought.

One of the especial delights of doing this kind of research has been that, far from setting out to refute my colleagues, I can build on their work. As Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede have shown in Singular Texts/Plural Authors, women delight in collaboration, in cooperation rather than competition. This certainly has been my
experience. For example, drawing on the work of Lynnette Hunter and Marijke Spies for my research has given me a rewarding sense of connection with scholars whose work I admire. I am also happy to share any of my own findings which can be of value to other scholars (including my own students, of course). One of the dangers of traditional scholarship is the false notion that what is your idea cannot be my idea too; it leads to the ridiculous assumption that ideas spring from a single mind, as if the mind existed in a vacuum, and was not necessarily affected by the insights of others. Much feminist research, on the contrary, is typically not competitive, but cooperative, in a number of different ways. It often involves partnerships with other women, as noted above; but it also frequently uses a holistic approach which restores cooperation among ethos, logos and pathos, thus making it fully rhetorical. (The coincidence of feminist with rhetorical principles is discussed by Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn and Andrea Lunsford in “Border Crossings.”)

That this erasure of boundaries, the refusal to think in compartments and in isolation, is typical of feminist methods in other ways too is confirmed by Women’s Studies theorists Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein: they believe that feminists are concerned to establish “a link between researcher and researched.” (17). One should if possible begin with one’s own experience. Evelyn Fox Keller has demonstrated the importance of this link to feminist researchers in her account of the career of the Nobel laureate, Barbara McClintock, a scientist. McClintock described to Keller how she proceeded in the research which led to the scientific breakthrough
known as genetic transposition. It is vitally important, says McClintock to “listen to the material . . . let the experiment tell you what to do.” (Keller, 162). What this involves is a personal relationship with the object of research which is heresy in traditional science:

In the relationship she describes with plants, as in human relations, respect for difference constitutes a claim not only on our interest but on our capacity for empathy -- in short on the highest form of love: love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference. I use the word love neither loosely nor sentimentally, but out of fidelity to the language McClintock herself uses to describe a form of attention, indeed a form of thought. . . . “The thing was dear to you for a period of time, you really had an affection for it.” . . . The crucial point for us is that McClintock can risk suspension of boundaries between subject and object without jeopardy to science precisely because, to her, science is not premised on that division. (164).

With this approach, McClintock was able to enter into the life of the chromosomes. “I actually felt as if I was right down there and these were my friends . . . As you look at these things, they become part of you. And you forget yourself.” (165).

This kind of connection with the object of one’s research is, I believe, just as important for those of us using feminist methods to study the history of rhetoric. As it happens, I can give an example of it from my own experience. In 1999, I was on a year’s sabbatical leave, much of which I spent travelling in Europe. One of the objects
of my travel was to study the work of the early Quaker, Margaret Fell, and I was fortunate to be able to pursue this research in the delightful setting of the University of Durham, in the old library in the cathedral close, between the castle, where I lived, and the cathedral, which I visited daily. Here I found the importance of lived context. Margaret Fell was a religious writer, in both senses of the word: she was herself deeply religious; and she wrote about her religion. The religious context of the cathedral close was an ideal place in which to study her: the values which were important to her, most of which have become irrelevant to the post modern world were here still honoured and followed. Simply being there put me in touch with the object of my research in a new way: I began to share her context. My contact with her, then, was not purely intellectual, but spiritual and emotional as well.

Yet hers was a conflicted piety, for she was in opposition to much that Durham cathedral stood for, the institutional Church of England, against which she and other Quakers rebelled. The very splendour, the sheer richness and beauty of the building and the liturgy, seemed to the Quakers inconsistent with the simplicity of the Gospel. And for Margaret Fell herself, the conflict extended even further: for the Anglican church denied the rights of women to engage in public discourse, a position which Fell refutes in her best known writing, *Women’s Speaking Justified*. This prejudice against women is embedded in the very stones of Durham cathedral: just east of the south door, there is set into the floor a stone, which in early medieval times marked the point beyond which no woman was allowed to go, lest she defile the holy
bones of St. Cuthbert, who is entombed behind the high altar. I do not know whether this prohibition was still enforced in the time of Margaret Fell, and I have no evidence that she ever visited Durham. Nevertheless, the historical context in which she worked and wrote was made physically explicit for me, and strengthened that bond with the object of one’s research that I find of the greatest importance.

This “living the research” extended, serendipitously, after I left. I went on from Durham to visit friends in Lancashire, who -- not even aware that I had been researching Fell -- thought I might be interested in visiting one of the oldest Quaker Meeting Houses. Built in 1673, it was actually visited in 1675 by Margaret Fell herself. It stands today much as it did then, in utter contrast to the beauty and glory of the great cathedrals, exemplified by Durham. It is place of great simplicity and peace, entirely unpretentious. A notice on the door invites visitors to make themselves a cup of tea in the kitchen (materials provided) and to read books in the little library. There is no custodian on duty: visitors are trusted to respect the place, and it seems that they do. The values of the Quakers -- meditation, the inner light, pacifism -- are literally enshrined here, and are still practised. Furthermore, other friends in Lancashire took me to see, high up on the fells, “Fox’s pulpit,” the rock from which George Fox, (later married to Margaret Fell) preached in secret to his first audiences. And finally, I saw Lancaster castle, where Margaret Fell was for four years imprisoned for her faith, and where she wrote Women’s Speaking Justified.

If the link between the researcher and researched is important to me as a
feminist scholar, so too is the connection between fact and feeling. Again, the importance of this connection for feminist research is confirmed by Bowles and Klein: “Our theories must incorporate both fact and feelings in order to reveal the totality of women’s experiences.”

The emotionless model derived from the imitation of pure science is usually not appropriate when the subject is the lives of human beings, and as we have seen, Barbara McClintock questions it even in science. Here, though, as elsewhere (the importance of context, for example) rhetorical theory has anticipated feminist theory. In “The Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric,” Richard Weaver offers an interpretation of Plato’s ideas about rhetoric which insists that in some contexts the exclusion of emotion is immoral: he believes that the first two speeches on love in Phaedrus represent passionate love as necessarily manipulative and driven by selfishness; only the unimpassioned lover is reliable. This is the position that Socrates recants before making the third speech, which celebrates love as divine as long as it is dedicated to the good of the beloved. Seeing these speeches as metaphors for attitudes to language, Weaver asserts that unemotional language is in certain contexts unethical. In Language is Sermonic, he quotes Richard Whately: “When feelings are excited, they are not necessarily over-excited; it may be that they are only brought to a state which the occasion fully justifies . . .” (219). George Orwell, we may remember, made the same point in “Politics and the English Language”: “People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps; this is called elimination of unreliable elements.”
Feminists who insist upon the propriety of the emotions are in good company. Yet the emotional language many feminists use is still seen by some scholars as a problem, as Patricia Bizzell has shown. She believes that “we perhaps need more discussion of the part played in the setting of scholarly agendas and the constructing of scholarly arguments by our emotions about our research topics.” (“Feminist Methods” 12).

And just as pathos can be defended in rhetorical research, so too can ethos, in its aspect of moral integrity. Here again, Richard Weaver led the way: language, he believes, is essentially axiological. We cannot avoid ethical issues in our use of language, for there is a moral dimension to all utterance. As demonstrated above, our ethical responsibility sometimes means that we must use impassioned language, even in academic writing. I would not claim, however, that the use of impassioned language is appropriate in every rhetorical situation, or that any position, sincerely taken, should be passionately upheld. This brings me to some of the reservations I have about postmodern theories and methods in general, and feminist theories and methods in particular. First, there is the question of the other sex: both the system, patriarchy, and the individual men (typically, white Anglo-Saxon males) who are supposed to be its beneficiaries. Some criticism of male systems is inevitable, of course, but there are feminists who betray a naive understanding of history, judging the past by the standards of the present, as I argued in “Women in the History of Rhetoric: The Past and the Future.” What we modern women see as ethically correct is not necessarily
consistent with the values of women belonging to other cultures and other times, a point Ede, Glenn and Lunsford have made in “Border Crossings” (406). But further than this, some feminist scholars make a gratuitous assumption of deliberate ill-will on the part of men for which we do not always have enough evidence. I am sometimes uneasy with the use of the word “erasure” in this context: it suggests a deliberate policy on the part of men which was probably not, or not always, the case. True, perhaps, the patriarchs involved ought to have been more sensitive, to have valued the ideas of their women more than they did. Nonetheless, there is an important difference between injustice deliberately done and that which is perpetrated inadvertently. One of the important characteristics of some feminist scholarship has been identified as the ethics of care. It seems inconsistent with such an attitude to demonize the opposition.

Indeed, it is the inconsistencies in feminist positions that disturb me most -- not that I am free of them myself. On the one hand, many of us believe that inclusivity is a virtue in scholarship: no group should feel itself excluded from the debate. Yet the strident tone adopted by some feminist scholars, the anger, the triumph at the downfall of the enemy -- how can this be inclusive? Or are we selective in our inclusivity? Is this just? Does it promote peace and goodwill? Having criticized the white male academic for his typically adversarial position, we must surely try to avoid taking that tone ourselves. For example, Ryan and Natalle describe some of the criticism of traditional persuasive rhetoric made by those identifying themselves in as feminist reconstructionists: “This position, taken up in resistance to the Aristotelean,
agonistic model of rhetoric, claims that persuasion is a deliberate, patriarchal attempt on the part of the rhetor to change the listener’s mind, and is, therefore, a form of social and intellectual violence.” (70). Now it seems to me naive to suppose that we can live in this world without ever using any adversarial form of discourse; nor is force always to be identified with violence. Are we obliged, in asserting the value of invitational rhetoric (which I fully support), to deny the value of the traditional form, and to dismiss it as violent? It seems to me that we are falling into the (typically masculine?) trap of the false dichotomy. Why either/or? Why not both/and? So --I am disturbed by the passionate nature of some feminist discourse, particularly when it adopts (ironically) an adversarial position.

In this it may seem that I am contradicting myself: have I not just said that I believe emotion should not be excluded from scholarly discourse? True. Yet I think it depends on what the emotion is and what cause it is used to support. I am, I admit, uncomfortable with the polemical position adopted by many feminists for whom feminist is not just a question of theories and methods but an ideology. Feminism, Marxism, post-colonialism and all postmodern theories which are often also ideologies have valuable critiques to offer: but I see them as correctional, as restoring a necessary balance. Taken too far they do not promote peace and understanding—— quite the reverse.

And closely associated with this discomfort with ideology trespassing into scholarship is another issue: namely relativism, and the whole question of the relation
between fact and fiction. First relativism: of course it is true, as Michael Polyani saw decades ago, that objectivity is an impossible ideal: we all stand at a particular time and place; and hence we all stand, to some extent, in our own light. This is a postmodern truism: and yet the anger with which some feminists attack “the patriarchy” suggests that somehow feminist knowledge is privileged --closer to the truth than other positions. Pamela McCallum puts the problem very clearly: “feminism as an oppositional politics and as a radical critique of existing norms has continued to rely on the categories truth, value, and ethics which postmodernist thinkers have rejected.” (109). Rather than adopt the cynical position of those who see visions of truth as deriving only from considerations of power, or the indignant position of those who insist that feminist principles are morally superior to those of “the patriarchy,” I favour a view based on Burke’s theory of terministic screens: each viewer has his or her own particular perspective; only by adding one perspective to another can we build anything like a complete vision of the truth. Some positions, of course, are mutually incompatible: in this circumstance, if we do not have enough evidence, we simply have to withhold judgement. The passion for certainty, inherited perhaps from Descartes, is one which we must resist.

If too passionate a commitment to the insights of later twentieth-century feminism can thus be a difficulty, so can the opposite extreme: the denial of any kind of certainty at all, the resistance even to provisional closure. Too extreme a commitment to postmodernist relativism can leave us wandering unprofitably in the
dark, with no sense of direction, and no idea of even temporary arrival. This also is unsatisfactory. The rigorous, focussed approach typical of the traditional masculine scholarly discourse can certainly be too narrow. Some alternative discourse, however, leaves one wondering if there is any message at all. But as Cheryl Glenn points out in “Truth, Lies and Method” we do not have to opt for either extreme. Postmodernists do well to remind us that whereas fact can often be discovered with at least some degree of reliability, it is otherwise with meaning. The same event is capable of many different interpretations; this is inevitable, and the best scholars in the humanities have, I think, usually recognized it. But it is one thing to resist definitive interpretations, and quite another to deny that there is any such phenomenon as ultimate truth or reality. My own position—the position from which I conduct my research—is fundamentally traditional. I believe that there is such a thing as ultimate truth; I also believe that it is impossible for a single person or party to reach it. We must all strive to find it, but must be modest in our claims to have done so. Above all, we must co-operate: only so can we hope even to approach it. And we must search for it honestly. We must not exploit the postmodernist perception of the fuzzy boundaries between fact and fiction to invent the truth. This is not to say that the reality most of us live is not largely constructed by our communities: but constructed according to what principles? Some Platonic idea of an absolute truth (however unfashionable such an idea appears to be at the moment) might prevent us from constructing evil realities: surely the experience of the twentieth century has
taught us that much.

One of the principles of the kind of reality I hope I am helping to construct is honesty: to resist saying something simply because it suits me and the political interests of my group. It also includes justice to the authors I research. Again, I know that some theories hold that the author has no more rights in the text than any of the readers. I cannot agree. The author, after all, has responsibilities -- will be condemned, and rightly so, for encouraging evil; but this implies that the author also has special rights. This is not to say that readers cannot come up with interpretations that have not occurred to the author, as most (modern) authors will admit. Yet I think that the author’s interpretation is, and should be, privileged. What this means in practice is that I believe I have a moral duty as a scholar not to misrepresent what the text says: I try very hard, though I am sure not always successfully, to avoid attributing to Mary Astell, for example, ideas for which I can find no support in the text. I am sorry to say that not every feminist scholar follows this practice: I have read essays which attribute to the authors arguments which they did not make, even topics which they did not address--all in the cause of promoting modern feminism, it is true. But for me, this is not good enough.

Trying to use the texts of the past to promote a political or ideological agenda seems to me bad scholarship. I was distressed to read recently in the highly respected *Times Literary Supplement* the following criticism: “. . . she is too deferential to her sources, rather than making them do her bidding . . .” (Geneva 10). This recommended
manipulation of the text to support whatever we have already decided to promote seems to me to defeat scholarship. It is the abuse, the exploitation of texts, and betrays both the original writer and the readers. Those who adopt such practices run the risk of reducing scholarship to the mere playing of power games which are either trivial or dangerous.

To sum up: a helpful discussion of practices of feminist rhetorical history, to which I have referred in an earlier article, is Amanda Goldrick-Jones’ s “Feminist (Re)Views and Re-Visions of Classical Rhetoric.” Goldrick-Jones distinguishes three main streams of feminist rhetorical-historiographical practice. The first is the traditional, which is feminist only in as much as it looks at works by women which are not included in the established canon. The second is informed by the ethics of care. The third is the most typically postmodern and addresses issues of power. Where do I position myself in terms of these streams? I think my scholarship is a blend of the first and the second. As I have already explained, I do not adopt the totally objective, emotionless, quasi-scientific approach described as neo-Aristotelean. Nevertheless, I do address particular writers and particular texts. I believe in the authority of the writer, and the importance of seeing the text in its historical context. These are qualities typical of traditional scholarship in which I was trained, and they remain important to me still. However, I am also inspired and illuminated by the work of scholars in the second stream: Gilligan, Belenky, Lunsford - these have been my guides and models. “Gilligan and her colleagues have defined two ‘moral voices’: one
of care and responsibility to others, and one of individual rights. Gilligan’s concept of
care centralizes connections between the self and others, recognizes a universal need
for compassion, and encourages a sense of responsibility to others.” (Goldrick-Jones
30). Without claiming that only women exercise this care, I think that they have a
particular role in offsetting the self-seeking quest for “rights” so typical of modern
society. Here I find Walter Ong’s Fighting for Life particularly enlightening: the male
is so physically and socially situated that fighting comes naturally to him. He tends to
perceive his experience agonistically: causes to be fought, problems to be solved. We
cannot do without this masculine approach, but it has been too powerful altogether
during the scientific era: the feminine side of the personality, which exists also in men,
at least in Jungian theory, needs to be recuperated and validated. I value this “ethics of
care” feminism for its dedication to peace and cooperation. At its best, it does not
discount the contribution of the masculine, but recognizes it as insufficient in itself.
The stream I am least comfortable with is the postmodern, though I recognize that in
many of its forms, postmodernism has done us all a great service: it has questioned the
domination of the scientific mode of enquiry, which I think is fundamentally
inappropriate to humanistic scholarship; and it has allowed us to take seriously again
questions of rhetorical ethos and pathos which the scientific approach attempted to
exclude. In some ways, I think postmodernism has returned us to some of the
perceptions and values of the pre-modern era: the necessity of using different methods
and authorities for different subjects, as practised by Pascal and recommended by
Mary Astell, for example. This postmodern stream has a value for me, then, but I do not consider myself as belonging to it in any significant way.

Finally, I want to speak briefly to two important issues: why we should do this kind of research, and what issues we should address next. First, why should we do this kind of research? For two very good reasons. One, of course, is that it is valuable as pure research: I research the writings of early modern women because they are relatively unknown, and because, by any standards, their work is good. I do not believe that research can be justified only in terms of its practical value today. That said, however, I believe nonetheless that we can learn from the wisdom of these early women writers. This is particularly true of Mary Astell’s advice to the women of her time, for like those of us who teach composition in contemporary educational institutions, she was often dealing with an audience of the marginalised. Those who do not belong, or do not think they belong, to the mainstream of the culture share certain inhibitions and fears in spite of belonging to different ages and cultures. One of the difficulties of the women Mary Astell addresses is lack of confidence: they do not believe that they are capable of writing and thinking, and this fear inhibits them and prevents them even from getting started. The tone Astell takes in counselling her women readers is gentle and encouraging, and builds on the knowledge they have, rather than on abstruse theories which are unfamiliar to them:

And as to spelling which they’re [women] said to be defective in, if they don’t believe as they’re usually told that its (sic) fit for’em to be so, and that
to write exactly is too Pedantic, they may soon correct that fault, by
Pronouncing their words aright and Spelling ‘em accordingly. I know this Rule
won’ t always hold because of an Imperfection in our Language which has been
oft complain’d of but is not yet amended; But in this case a little Observation
or recourse to Books will assist us; and if at any time we happen to mistake
by Spelling as we Pronounce, the fault will be very Venial, and Custom rather
to blame than we. (192).

Much of the advice Astell offers her Ladies is just as appropriate today as when it
was written, and is typical of the “ethics of care” of the Gilligan school.

Secondly: where do we go from here? There is much to be done: very little has
been written about the rhetorical theories and practices of early modern women,
though a good start has been made. We need to read and re-read these women’ s works
with a “rhetorical” eye -- that is, on the look out for their own ideas about their
practices. Not all of them reflected on what they were doing, but some of them did. It
is time we paid more attention to what they believed about rhetoric; how they defined
it, what contribution they made to its theory and practice. However, we also need to
contribute to discussions of theory. In particular it seems to me important that we
should make some contribution to theorizing sermo, as distinct from contentio. The
lack of theories of sermo was identified by Cicero: it is high time we became engaged
in such theorizing, for this is the form of rhetoric typical of the private and semi-
public discourse which has been the particular province of women.
In the last ten years, great progress has been made in the study of women in the rhetorical tradition. A number of important books have been published, and as a result the women in our rhetorical history are much better known than they used to be. Women rhetoricians are discussed not only in learned journals but also in textbooks: Bizzell and Herzberg’s *The Rhetorical Tradition* includes a number of women in its first edition of 1990: more are included in the second. This is particularly significant because it means that our students, both women and men, are becoming aware of the importance of women who until recently were ignored. I therefore want to thank Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg for rendering us all a great service. I want also to acknowledge some of the scholars in rhetoric who have helped and sustained me, and others who are working on the women rhetoricians of history, for their example and their support: Jan Swearingen, Lynnette Hunter, Marijke Spies, Judith Rice Henderson; Andrea Lunsford, Cheryl Glenn and Lisa Ede, whom I have already mentioned: also J.J. Murphy and Michael Leff, whose help and encouragement have meant so much to me. I see the enterprise of bringing women into the history of rhetoric as one in which women and men scholars can unite and cooperate. I am grateful to those who have contributed to it so far, and I look forward to working with them in the future.

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