

The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment, and Abolition by Jacqueline. Bacon. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. 291 + xiv pp.

Although Jacqueline Bacon does not directly quote Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools" until the final pages of *The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment, and Abolition*, her famous challenge to rhetoricians is a presence from page one. In 1979, at a talk at New York University, the African American feminist poet and activist declared: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (235). If Lorde is correct, then this poses a crucial problem for one of rhetoric's most fundamental assumptions: that language can be an agent of democratic social change. If marginalized rhetors cannot assume the language of power, or must accommodate themselves to it, then how can they advance their cause and maintain their integrity? In the case of marginalized antebellum abolitionist activists, the answer, Bacon, argues, is surprisingly well.

The Humblest May Stand Forth is significant for at least two reasons. First, Bacon surveys the rhetoric of historically marginalized figures in the abolitionist movement. The history of antebellum abolitionist rhetoric has been distorted, she argues, because historians have traditionally relied on the self-reportage of the leaders of largely white- and male-dominated antislavery societies and publications. Yet within and outside of these organizations, African Americans and white women had a rich history of activism, often influencing the direction of white male activism. By devoting separate chapters to the rhetoric of African American men, white women, and African American women, Bacon not only recovers their history, but demonstrates how each group faced distinct challenges and developed specific strategies for making their voices heard. Perhaps even more importantly, through an exhaustive examination of primary source material including letters, diaries, speeches, and contemporary periodicals, Bacon argues that, despite their marginalized status, these rhetors were not only able to assume agency and rhetorical authority in a society that denied them voice and power, they used societal limitations on their rhetorical authority to distinct advantage. The marginalized, she asserts "have a *particular* authority in American society . . . the 'humblest' emerge as uniquely powerful rhetors precisely because of their position in society. . . . [T]he oppressed often assume agency by taking the master's language, texts, and premises and using them against the master" (235).

As early as 1827, almost four years before William Lloyd Garrison's

founding of the *Liberator*, the leading white abolitionist newspaper, African American men publicly sought to seize ownership of their struggle. "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us," said editors Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm in the inaugural issue of *Freedom's Journal*, the nation's first black newspaper (26). Unfortunately, because African American men's abolitionist activities were inexorably bound up with other issues affecting the African American community, they have not always been recognized as abolitionist. Furthermore, argues Bacon, their rhetoric has often been misunderstood. While scholars have argued that self-help rhetoric both reified white assumptions about African Americans and put the burden for change on the African American community, Bacon shows that African American activists visibly critiqued the necessity for engaging in such activity even as they engaged in it. "African Americans have to 'disprove' white America's beliefs not because these assumptions hold any validity, [these rhetors] assert, but because this strategy is necessary to end slavery" (56). Seen in this light, David Walker's famous *Appeal*, with its exhortation to "Go to work and enlighten your brethren," is not just an iconoclastic, atypical piece of militant activism, but one of many documents which "explicitly [link] the elevation of the African American community to antislavery agitation" (58). Frederick Douglass, while publicly seeming to accommodate the expectations of white audiences (and the demands of abolitionist leaders) that he merely narrate the "facts" of slavery, not argue against it, turned this rhetorical limitation to his advantage. Using what Kenneth Burke has termed "tonalities," Douglass represents controversial statements as if they were self-evident:

Where all is plain there is nothing to be argued. . . . Must I undertake to prove the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slaveholders acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. . . . What is this but the acknowledgement that the slave is a moral, intellectual and responsible being? (64)

Douglass' self-deprecating remarks, Bacon argues, are not just an adopted figure of nineteenth-century rhetoric or an accommodation to a white audience; they "ironically call attention to his unique oratorical skill" (66), just as his frequent self-styled "digressions" point to his ability to make persuasive claims.

While black men could use biblical and constitutional authority to justify their participation in public discourse as *men*, the fixed gender roles of the early nineteenth century made it more difficult for women, who were expected to refrain from public speaking. White women thus used the moral authority granted to them by tropes of domesticity and true womanhood to

both justify and expand their participation in public discourse. “Can the nation bleed, and we be free from pain?” asked the 1834 *Address of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Chatham-Street Chapel* (38). In employing the rhetoric of courtship and deference before male audiences, activists such as Lucretia Mott and Angelina Grimké, while “appear[ing] to accept the dominance of male leaders . . . also activate in their listeners a desire to identify with them, to temporarily transcend their differences in status Even though they do not question the hierarchy of gender as their African American male colleagues challenge the hierarchy of race, they nonetheless take authority by evoking its influence” (137).

Despite their marginalization, white women did occupy a privileged space in society relative to African Americans, especially African American women. Their cross-racial appeals to feminine solidarity, while genuine and effective, thus did not always take into account crucial racial differences. Black women, whose interests and identities were neither included with black men or white women nor treated independently by either group, had to create their own path for getting their voices heard. While they were never considered “True Women” and therefore could not use the cult of domesticity to their advantage, neither were they constrained by notions of feminine purity and passivity. Indeed, black women “[found] avenues for activism that were unavailable to their white counterparts” (48). By working and taking public roles outside the home, “African American women challenged the strict gender conventions of white society, breaking down the barrier between the domestic and public realms” (48). Although their rhetoric appeared more “adaptable” (Bacon uses Gary Woodward’s term) and less radical than their black male counterparts it was no less effective—or potentially militant. In identifying with her audience—“I am a true born American; your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit flows in my breast” (210)—Stewart Franklin Hall invites her audience to identify with her, a disenfranchised black woman. More subtly, by invoking the spirit of the American Revolution, she lends authority to the black struggle for freedom, while also suggesting the latent revolutionary potential if justice continues to be denied. As Bacon notes, “Discourse does not necessarily fit completely into one or the other category. . . . The adaptable rhetoric of African American women . . . reveals that rhetoric can overtly conform to an ostensibly conciliatory model while implicitly or indirectly incorporating confrontational strategies” (210).

Bacon employs a diverse array of rhetorical theories and strategies to frame her textual discussion, including muted group theory; Burke’s theories of identity, courtship, mystery and hierarchy; trickster imagery and signification; domesticity and true womanhood; self-help discourse; and jeremiadic and revolutionary language. Rather than taking a biographical or chronological approach, Bacon organizes her chapters by rhetorical trope. This makes it

easy for anyone for anyone interested in say, how African American male rhetors used signification or how white women used the discourse of true womanhood in their speech and writing to quickly find relevant examples. It also serves her larger purpose of exploring both the usefulness and limitations of rhetorical theory in illuminating texts. For example, she finds that while muted group theory provides a context for understanding the strictures imposed on marginalized groups when speaking to the powerful, it does not explain how marginalized groups communicate amongst themselves or how they critique rhetorical paradigms even as they make use of them. While Burke's theory of hierarchy predicts that rhetors may use the language of hierarchy to upset it, "his description implies that this reversal is inherent in hierarchical structures themselves and not in a rhetor's exploitation of hierarchical language" (66).

Despite a masterful command of rhetorical theory, Bacon is a historian first, and her focus on the individual rhetor is one of the strengths of this work. As she notes early on, her analytical approach is "guided by a focus on the texts themselves. . . . [T]he voices of these marginalized rhetors must not be silenced by an analytical framework that threatens to replace, reduce, alter, or control the primary texts themselves" (7). Some of her most compelling and exciting arguments emerge from close textual readings; for example, her detailed analysis of how Frederick Douglass and David Walker "parody, revise, and reinterpret" (105) the apologist language of Henry Clay and Thomas Jefferson calls attention not only to the way rhetoric can be used to reverse and upset hierarchies but to the rhetorical power, deep knowledge, and razor wit of both of these men.

Yet Bacon's approach also sets up certain unresolved—and perhaps irresolvable—tensions in the text. Like many works of rhetorical historiography, *The Humblest May Stand Forth* is caught between two audiences, demanding both a solid grounding in abolitionist historiography and rhetorical theory (and faith in its application) on the part of reader. Historians of abolition may be wishing for a glossary of rhetorical terms. Rhetoricians not specializing in the period might wish for a more extended background discussion of the traditionally studied literature of the abolition movement, to provide context and a better understanding of what is at stake. Her exhaustive survey of rhetorical tropes can be at times exhausting. While she applies rhetorical theory to the language use of marginalized groups, she does not always explain how such theory has been employed in history of abolitionist rhetoric. Of course, her task has been made more difficult because historians have not always substantially employed theory. Likewise, theoreticians have often left the dirty work of application to others. I suspect that what at times feels awkward here may simply be new. If this book has any weakness, it is due to its ambitious desire to bridge the gaps between theory building and

close reading. If we wish to write more masterful rhetorical scholarship, *The Humblest May Stand Forth* is precisely the kind of tool we need.

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