

## Contradicting and Complicating Feminization of Rhetoric Narratives: Mary Yost and Argument from a Sociological Perspective

**ABSTRACT:** This article adds to the growing body of feminist scholarship critiquing Robert J. Connors' assertion that the entrance of women into higher education in the nineteenth century contributed to the decline of oratory and debate. It contradicts and complicates Connors' claim by highlighting the efforts of Mary Yost, who taught English at Vassar College during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Yost promoted debate both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities, and she crafted a feminist theory of argument quite distinct from the traditional type of argument that Connors argues was displaced after women entered higher education.

In *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Robert J. Connors argues that with the entrance of women into higher education in the nineteenth century, the teaching of rhetoric became feminized. Thus, by 1910, Connors contends that rhetoric became "less contestive and more interiorized, even personalized" (66). To support his claim, Connors quotes Vassar College's original stance on debate that "no encouragement would be given to oratory and debate" (qtd. in Connors 54) (Vassar Prospectus 1865). He later concludes that "[a]rgument and debate could not be major parts of a women's course, and oral thrust and parry was out of the question" (54). Since the publication of *Composition-Rhetoric*, several feminist scholars have critiqued Connors' perspective on the feminization of rhetoric. This article, an extension of that critique, provides a different interpretation of argumentation and debate during this period by examining the work of Mary Yost, who taught English at Vassar College during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Yost developed a feminist theory of argument quite separate from the agonistic, patriarchal approach that Connors contends was displaced after women entered higher education but also different from the "irenic rhetoric" that he claims took its place (24). Yost's theory challenged the traditional basis in logic

and faculty psychology and instead emphasized the social significance of argument in terms of communication and community building.

With the exception of Herman Cohen, scholars have not considered Yost's work in previous histories of the field.<sup>1</sup> Building on Cohen's work, I will focus on Yost's teaching of argumentation and debate at Vassar College; her 1917 dissertation, "The Functional Aspect of Argument as Seen in a Collection of Business Letters"; and her 1917 article, "Argument from the Point-of-View of Sociology," which draws on her dissertation research and was published in *The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*.<sup>2</sup> I also will explore her approach to administration because it was greatly influenced by her research in argumentation. I will demonstrate how Yost emphasized a democratic method of argumentation and debate that included significant elements characteristic of modern feminist approaches to pedagogy and argument. In so doing, she challenged the traditional claims of the domestic sphere by encouraging Vassar women to take a more active and public role in society. Although Yost resisted the persuasive, agonistic tradition discussed by Connors, she did not view argument as interiorized or personalized. She developed a socially focused, ethical approach to argumentation that responded to the Progressive-Era insistence on democratic forms of education.

More generally, I intend to demonstrate that Yost is a rhetorician who deserves to be added to the growing list of women who have made noteworthy contributions to the history of rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Although other rhetoricians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have garnered more attention, Yost is particularly significant because of her fresh, forward-looking perspective, one that may challenge us to rethink the way that we approach argumentation in composition, communication, and rhetoric classrooms.

### **Connors and the Feminization of Rhetoric**

Before analyzing Yost's work in argumentation in debate, I will review Connors' feminization of rhetoric hypothesis. In the first chapter of *Composition-Rhetoric*, Connors examines the influence of gender on nineteenth-century rhetorical instruction in American colleges and universities.<sup>4</sup> However, aspects of his argument fail to address adequately issues related to women and the teaching of argumentation and debate, particularly at Vassar College. Connors characterizes the shift as a "change from an older agonistic rhetoric oriented only toward males to a more modern irenic rhetoric that can include both genders" (24). He connects these changes and others with the development of "composition-rhetoric," a title borrowed from Fred Newton Scott and Joseph V. Denney's 1897 textbook of the same name. In so doing, Connors rejects the term "current-traditional rhetoric," which he views as inaccurate and overused. Instead, he uses "composition-rhetoric" to characterize the change in the late nineteenth century from a focus on oral agonistic rhetoric to written composition (6).

Connors is correct in identifying differences in the teaching of composition based on gender, but he is incorrect in his characterization of these differences. As Elizabeth A. Flynn points out, there are limitations to applying the concept of “feminization” to academic fields. Although Flynn is talking about the broader field of rhetoric and composition and not just the teaching of rhetoric, her criticisms seem appropriate when applied to Connors’ analysis. According to Flynn, one limitation of the feminization metaphor is that it “suggests that the field is a unified one” (119). In other words, it ignores the diversity of teaching practices during this period and the broader cultural changes brought about by the Progressive Era (1890-1920). Another limitation of this metaphor is that “it can tend toward essentialized and oversimplified conceptions of gender” (Flynn 118). In fact, in their reviews of *Composition-Rhetoric*, Sharon Crowley and Roxanne Mountford both emphasize this point, with Crowley asserting that Connors’ argument “dangerously essentializes ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (341-42).<sup>5</sup> In his analysis, Connors asserts that he is not “making any sort of sweeping claim such as ‘personal writing is a women’s genre,’ but it is true that personal writing has traditionally been associated with women more than with men” (66). However, in making the argument that the personal and personal writing is traditionally associated with women, Connors’ claim discounts the fact that some female students and teachers, including women like Mary Yost and Gertrude Buck, were focused on society, social reform issues, and the teaching of argumentation.

An oversimplified view of gender is also evident in Connors’ definition of classical rhetoric and his view of men. To build his argument about an agonistic tradition, Connors traces this tradition to its roots in classical rhetoric, which he contends is “plain and simple, about fighting, ritual fighting with words, and this agonistic tone carried over into all rhetorical study up until the nineteenth century” (27). From this perspective, classical rhetoric seems monolithic in nature and reduced entirely to verbal fighting. Similar reductive moves are evident in his characterization of men. For example, in constructing his argument about the agonistic tradition, Connors attempts to describe what an “all-male agonistic education really was like before 1860 [. . .]” (44-45). To do this, Connors suggests that the reader “try imagining a campus atmosphere entirely controlled by the ethos surrounding fraternity life”; he adds that in such a setting “rhetorical instruction meant contest” (45). After women enter higher education, Connors contends that oral rhetoric, “since it could no longer be the province of men only, ceased to satisfy male psychological needs and was allowed to fall into desuetude—into elocutionary technae and dramatic readings” (54). Here again, Connors seems to reduce the complexity of men, their “psychological needs,” and their ability to control the fate of argument. As Lisa Mastrangelo argues, Connors conflates “agonism with antagonism” and repeatedly characterizes rhetoric “as agonism that is necessary

for men to engage in ‘ritual tests of worthiness’—in other words, ritual tests of manhood and machismo” (51).

More significantly, though, Connors argues that women weren’t involved in theorizing approaches to argument or practicing debate at the college or university level. He also contends that “general interest” in college debate declined after 1870 (50). In her research on Mount Holyoke College, Lisa Mastrangelo counters Connors’ claims by demonstrating student interest and involvement in debate at Mount Holyoke and other Seven Sisters Colleges. Students debated both in their classrooms and in intramural competitions (Mastrangelo 53-54). According to Kathryn M. Conway, as early as the 1880s, Wellesley and Mount Holyoke had active debate clubs, and Vassar and Wellesley held the “first women’s intercollegiate debate in 1902, before a public audience” (215, 217). In fact, Mary Yost asserts that Vassar College “was the pioneer in debating for women” (“The Intercollegiate” 129). Not only were women students debating, but Gertrude Buck also published two textbooks on argumentation and debate. In 1899, Buck wrote *A Course in Argumentative Writing*, and in 1906, she co-authored *A Handbook of Argumentation and Debating* with Kristine Mann, another Vassar colleague. These texts were used by Yost, Buck, and other women at Vassar to teach women argumentation, debate, and public speaking.

### **Background: Mary Yost**

To better understand Yost’s approach to argumentation, it is helpful to know more about her. Yost came from a privileged background. She was born in Staunton, Virginia, and her father, Jacob Yost, served in the House of Representatives from 1887-1889 and from 1899-1901 (Howton 24, 34). Yost left Staunton to study at Vassar, where she served as student body president (Howton 24). Yost received her bachelor’s degree in 1904, was a Graduate Scholar at Vassar from 1904-1905, and then served as an assistant in English at Wellesley for one year (1906-1907). Yost returned to Vassar, where she was an English instructor from 1907-1913 and where she earned her master’s degree in 1912 (Bacon, Farnsworth, and Winbigler 1). She became a fellow in rhetoric at the University of Michigan from 1913-1914, studying with Fred Newton Scott. Yost’s work at Michigan aligned her with a significant group of women who obtained progressive education there. Gertrude Buck was instrumental in forging this link to Michigan by urging Vassar women to pursue graduate study there and by hiring top candidates from Michigan. Buck’s influence is evident in the following letter to Scott, checking the progress of her two former Vassar graduates who went on to complete graduate work at Michigan: “I am delighted that Miss Yost and Miss Hinks have made so favorable an impression upon you and upon others. I think further acquaintance will wholly justify it” (11 Oct. 1913).

After completing her fellowship, Yost returned to Vassar and worked as an assistant professor of English from 1915-1921. In 1917, she received her PhD in Rhetoric from the University of Michigan, becoming, most likely, the first person in the field of Speech Communication to earn her doctorate (H. Cohen 66). She served as a reader for the College Entrance Examination Board from 1912-1918 and was head reader and examiner from 1918-1921 (Bacon, Farnsworth, and Winbigler 1).

Like several English Department faculty at Vassar, Yost supported women's suffrage. In December 1912, Yost and Abby Leach, Vassar professor of Greek, were the speakers at a Poughkeepsie Equal Suffrage meeting at the Elks Club. According to newspaper reports, the meeting was "the first of its kind held in this city," and its purpose was to "awaken interest among [Equal Suffrage] club members in the object of the league" ("Suffrage Meeting at the Elks Club" 5). Yost was not only teaching argument and debate, but was also practicing these skills in her support of suffrage.

In her presentation, Yost emphasized that the suffrage movement was more than the latest trend:

This desire for women's suffrage is bringing great changes in social and political conditions. If we take our ideas of woman's suffrage from the funny papers, of gay remarks, it appears to be a fad: and the woman in the home does not want it.<sup>6</sup> If we look back 70 years we find the same old jokes. The most important fact is state legislatures have embodied it in state constitutions. In England women have municipal suffrage, in New Zealand, and the state of Colorado, full suffrage. ("Suffrage Meeting at the Elks Club" 5)

Yost continued, stressing that full suffrage for women had also been achieved in France and Canton, China, and that it soon would be approved in Peking. In the United States, Yost asserts that significant progress had been achieved in the past seventy years. For instance, she explains that nine states had approved full suffrage for women and that "in all but 16 states women have some form of suffrage" ("Suffrage Meeting at the Elks Club" 5). Yost concluded by highlighting the significance of the issue: "The question is, are we going to recognize the importance of the matter and help it. It needs the help of all to bring it more swiftly and to prepare us for what is coming" ("Suffrage Meeting at Elks Club" 5). Yost embodied the social ideals that she taught in the classroom.

In 1921, Yost left Vassar to become the Dean of Women and Associate Professor of English at Stanford University, a position she held until her retirement in 1946. During her first six years at Stanford, Yost lectured in composition and argumentation and debate; however, she soon had to devote all of her attention to her increasing administrative duties as the Dean of Women ("Eleven Faculty Members Will Become Emeritus" 5). In addition to her administrative duties, Yost was active in regional and national organizations.

In 1917, Yost served as the first vice-president of the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. In 1922, she served as the vice-president of the Western Division of the Department of Deans of Women of the National Education Association. In addition, from 1933-1937, she was the first vice-president of the national board of the American Association of University Women ("Doctor Mary Yost"). When Yost retired, she was awarded an honorary L.L.D. from Mills College "in recognition of her long service to women" ("L.L.D. to Dean Mary"). In 1954, Yost died of a heart attack at age 72 ("Doctor Mary Yost"). Always retaining her connection to Vassar, Yost was serving on a committee planning the 50<sup>th</sup> reunion of her 1904 Vassar class at the time of her death ("Editor at Bat" 4).<sup>7</sup>

### **Yost's Approach to Argumentation, Debate, and Public Speaking**

Building on Lisa Mastrangelo's work, I will demonstrate how Mary Yost's promotion of public speaking and debate at Vassar also provides a clear counter to Connors' claims that women weren't involved in these activities and that interest in debate declined after 1870. In addition to promoting debate, Yost developed a feminist theory of argument that emphasized argument as a community-building endeavor, one that helped to create identification and understanding between the speaker and audience. A key idea underlying Yost's approach to argumentation and public speaking was her social view of language. Like Gertrude Buck, she advocated an organic concept of society, which emphasized a reciprocal relationship between the social and the individual.<sup>8</sup> Her approach contrasted with traditional argument's emphasis on the individual speaker and his abilities to use agonistic rhetoric to persuade others to his perspective. Because she viewed argument as the glue of human relationships, Yost emphasized that it needed to address both logic and emotion to connect individuals. It wasn't simply about logic, persuasion, and winning as more traditional approaches suggest. In addition, Yost stressed the public and rhetorical nature of argumentation. She encouraged Vassar women to become effective speakers on Progressive-Era concerns aimed at fostering social justice.

During her twelve years at Vassar, Yost frequently taught a two-semester elective course on argumentation, which emphasized writing, criticism, and oral debate. According to the 1911 English Department Report, the textbooks used in the course included Buck's *A Course in Argumentative Writing* (1899), Buck and Kristine Mann's *A Handbook of Argumentation and Debating* (1906), William Trufant Foster's *Argumentation and Debating* (1908), George Pierce Baker's *Specimens of Argumentation* (1893), and the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. In addition, students drew on daily newspapers and periodicals for reference and "illustration work."

As part of the course requirements, students wrote ten papers each semester, which included everything from short arguments to lengthier briefs. The course also featured informal and formal debates, with topics drawn from college and broader social issues. Here is a sampling of subjects: “That the membership in debating societies should be voluntary”; “That men and women should have equal suffrage”; “That the election of the Republican ticket will further the best interests of New York State”; and “That the present immigration laws be amended by the addition of an educational test” (1911 Department Report 5). In examining the course requirements and debate topics, we can see that argumentation and debate were, in fact, a significant part of a “women’s course.” In addition, it is evident that Vassar’s approach to argumentation encouraged women to become effective speakers on questions of public concern, more specifically, Progressive-Era issues related to furthering social justice.

This public emphasis, as well as Yost’s focus on the significance of the rhetorical situation, also is evident in her article “Training Four Minute Men at Vassar” (1919), which discusses a public speaking program at Vassar aimed at raising funds and interest in World War One-related activities. Working in cooperation with the National Four Minute Men’s Association, Vassar’s program began with the development of a Speakers’ Bureau to train students in public speaking. Following the national program, Yost explains that Vassar students “worked on the Fourth Liberty Loan, tried to interest the college in the campaign for Red Cross membership both in the college and in the schools of the neighborhood” (248). Vassar women, Yost notes, were asked to give their Fourth Liberty Loan campaign speeches “in the dining halls and also from soap boxes on the campus at the noon recess and as the students were on their way to the evening chapel for service” (251). According to Yost, speaking from a soap box introduced the students to “their first shifting, moving audience” (251):

This experience [. . .] emphasized as no amount of class lecturing could do, the fact that the occasion has much to do with determining the audience’s attitude toward the ideas of the speaker. Also it brought out most clearly that a speech has no one form suitable for all occasions, but that the form is determined by the audience, the occasion and the purpose of the speaker. (251)

From this passage, we sense the importance of the rhetorical situation to Yost’s view of public speaking. After gaining this understanding, the students then took their speeches beyond Vassar’s gates. As noted, speeches were developed for the Red Cross and presented at local schools. In addition, Vassar women gave presentations on health education for the Dutchess County Health Association. Yost emphasizes that this work “has been a good advertisement for us, and now we are called upon for all kinds of services from telling stories to the

school children [. . .] to showing the students of the Montclair High School why a girl should go to college and what Vassar offers her" (251). Because of the positive response to the women speakers, Yost notes that the Speakers' Bureau was permanently incorporated into the debating society and the speaker-training program was continued beyond the war. The Four Minute "Men" program was significant because it provided an acceptable outlet for Vassar women to broaden their sphere of influence and to develop their public speaking skills.

The public and rhetorical nature of Yost's work is particularly evident in her dissertation and her 1917 article, in which she contends that argument should be viewed from a sociological perspective. (Both texts are discussed together since the article is based on her dissertation research.) In a 1924 University of Michigan Alumnae Survey, Yost acknowledges her intellectual debt to Michigan: "The stimulus to independent thinking and to gaining an organic philosophy was given me richly by Professor Scott, Professor Cooley, and Professor Shepard, the three men under whom I did most of my work."<sup>9</sup>

In her project, Yost inductively examined a group of letters selected from more than one hundred complete business letters printed in three volumes of *Business Correspondence* (1911) ("The Functional Aspect" 4). In all, Yost examined fifty separate letters and three sets written on the same subject to the same audience (two sets of four letters and one set of nine) (6). Yost explains that these letters were selected for four reasons: 1. They were not written for academic purposes "but to sell goods, adjust complaints and collect bills. They were simply and directly media of communication in real situations" (4). 2. The letters also represent "arguments," which Yost defines broadly to include both conviction and persuasion, which "is found also in popular usage, and is the way in which *argument* is used in this study" (Yost 145, emphasis original). 3. Their briefness allows Yost to compare many letters, and 4. "The problem of determining the means by which they gained their end was simpler than it is when a speech is examined" (5). In her research, Yost borrowed the term "prospect" from *Business Correspondence* to refer to the audience: "My justification of this borrowing is that *prospect* makes more vivid the relation between the writer and the person to whom the letter is sent than does either of the conventional terms, audience or reader" ("The Functional Aspect" 22, emphasis original).<sup>10</sup> Her discussion of methodology and use of the term "prospect" reveal Yost's emphasis on argument as a communicative process.

Yost undertook her study because although beneficial work in argumentation had been completed to improve its practice and theory, she contends contemporary ideas are still "unsatisfactory whether we ask from them a consistent and inclusive theory of argument or practical guidance to effective writing and speaking" ("The Functional" 136). One pedagogical improvement is an emphasis on "the practical rather than the theoretical side of argumentation" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 109). Yost attributes the initial



movement in this direction to George Pierce Baker's preface to the 1895 edition of his *The Principles of Argumentation*. Baker states that there is an "argumentation of everyday life, the principles of which every intelligent man should understand" (vi). Baker was a key theorist in argumentation during the early part of the twentieth century, and his book was highly influential. Yost contends that since the publication of Baker's book, more textbooks have devoted space to selecting debate subjects of interest to students and less to the study of definitions and principles. Although this approach had made argumentation "more vital than it was before 1895," Yost contends that it still has its problems ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 110).

Improvements also had been made in terms of theory, with some authors questioning the value of the traditional approach to argument. The generally accepted theory was based on faculty psychology, which Yost contends fails to reflect how the mind actually works. One obvious example is the distinction many textbooks typically made between the terms *conviction* and *persuasion*. (Some textbooks today still emphasize this distinction.) Yost explains that "conviction" is typically defined as "an *appeal to the reason*, *persuasion*, an *appeal to the emotions*" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 110, emphasis original). The two terms are defined as if they are completely distinct and separate concepts. Yost emphasizes that these definitions were developed "when the belief held sway that the mind was divided into three compartments, the reason, the emotions, the will—roughly the assumptions of the old faculty psychology" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 111). However, she contends that contemporary developments in psychology have called this model into question and replaced it with a view of the mind "as an organic unit performing a particular function—reasoning, feeling, willing—as may be demanded by the situation the individual is meeting" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 111). For Yost, reason and emotions are not discreet entities, but are inextricably connected in the communicative process.

According to Yost, those authors challenging the traditional approach to argumentation include James Albert Winans and Gertrude Buck. She claims that Winans's *Public Speaking* (1915) questions the faculty psychology on which contemporary theories of persuasion are based and instead approaches persuasion from the perspective of functional psychology and attention. Buck's *A Course in Argumentative Writing* (1899) approaches argumentation inductively from experience and practice rather than deductively from principles of formal logic. Yost asserts that Buck's approach "puts new life into the part logic plays in argument" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 111). Beyond argumentation textbooks, Yost contends that Professor Sidgwick, in the *Process of Argument; a Contribution to Logic* (1893) and the *The Use of Words in Reasoning* (1901), has completed the most significant work. Yost explains that Sidgwick "aims to clarify and reinterpret the old ideas concerning argument

where they are consistent with modern views of logic and psychology, and to discard those which rest on a false or inadequate interpretation of the mental life" (112). However, Yost contends that all three authors still consider only limited aspects of argument and not the entire field itself: "It is the process of reasoning rather than the process of communication which is dwelt upon" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 112).

In her research, Yost moves beyond the scope of these authors to reconsider the whole field of argument. As noted, contemporary textbooks tended to discuss argumentation in terms of logic. According to Yost, this perspective is to be expected "since the principles of argument were first given scientific expression by Aristotle in terms of logic, and the Aristotelian tradition in all rhetorical matters has been little questioned by modern rhetoricians" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 112).<sup>11</sup> In her dissertation, Yost emphasizes the limits of this tradition:

The old formulae based on Aristotelian logic have proved deadening rather than stimulating to the student in his effort to argue effectively, and today in most text books, [sic] it seems that these formulae are retained more for the traditional dignity they lend than for their practical usefulness. ("The Functional Aspect" 1)<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, Yost contends that "[a]rgument as we read and hear and use it every day is directly and fundamentally communication between members of a social group, a *society* in the sociological meaning of the term" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 113, emphasis original). Yost asserts that argument should be viewed from the perspective of "social psychology." In her dissertation, Yost explains that social psychology, as defined by foremost sociologists of the time, considers "[t]he entire psychological aspect of the process of association"; Yost adds that this interpretation includes "reasoned, purposed action as well as imitation and suggestion" ("The Functional Aspect" 146).

Thus, an emphasis of Yost's research is to explore argument as a "social product" ("The Functional Aspect" 136). Such an approach involves "three problems" or questions that need to be considered ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 113). First, Yost explains that argumentation should be studied in terms of the characteristics of the social group from which it emerges. Second, the effects argumentation has on both speaker and audience should be explored. And third, argument needs to be examined in terms of the "characteristic stages" by which the effects are produced ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 113). In viewing argument as a "social product," Yost explains that "the attention [is] focused on the social group, the inter-relation between the writer and audience, rather than on the individual, whether writer or audience. The three questions of the genesis, function and method of argument in the social group were the three points considered" ("The Functional Aspect" 137). Such an approach would not negate a logical analysis. Instead, Yost contends that

it would lead to a “fuller, more organic theory of argument than is current now” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 113). In addition, such an approach would mean that terms such as *conviction* and *persuasion*, which are based on an out-dated psychology, could be avoided.

A key reason Yost advocated a sociological approach to argumentation was to provide a communal justification for ethical behavior. As do Gertrude Buck and Fred Newton Scott, Yost contends that a significant development in rhetorical history in the last twenty years “has been the reappearance of Plato’s idea of discourse and its warm advocacy by the best modern rhetoricians” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 120).<sup>13</sup> Prior to this development, Yost argues that a sophistic approach had dominated and “to it may be traced much of the artificiality and insincerity of ‘oratory’” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 120). In his analysis, Connors asserts that rhetoricians such as George Pierce Baker “set themselves up against the older argumentative tradition, which was often criticized as mere ‘elocution,’ devoted more to feeling than to thinking [ . . . ] This bloodless post-Baker argumentation is, as we can see, a far cry from the argumentative rhetorics of Webster and Douglas only sixty years earlier” (63). Yost’s approach to argumentation seems to fit this description. Connors’ argument works to support his claim that with the entrance of women into higher education in the nineteenth century, the teaching of rhetoric became feminized. However, the reappearance of Platonic discourse that Yost discusses suggests that the changes Connors outlines were actually the result of ethical concerns with the traditional, patriarchal approach. In fact, Yost’s rhetorical method, with its focus on ethical behavior, seemed to be a direct response to agonistic, persuasion-oriented rhetoric.

Yost emphasizes that one problem with the Platonic approach is that it has no grounding, except “what may be called the moral one” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 120). However, she argues that this grounding can be found in a basic assumption underlying social organizations, which she says is “now advanced by many if not all the leading sociologists” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 121).<sup>14</sup> This basis, according to Yost, “is that the organization of the group when it is functioning normally is based on the principle of cooperation between the members for the mutual furthering of individual and therefore group interests” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 120). In her dissertation, Yost quotes Louis D. Brandeis to show how this principle has developed in the business sector: “The old idea of a good bargain was a transaction in which one man got the better of another. The new idea of a good contract is a transaction which is good for both parties in it” (qtd. in Yost, “The Functional Aspect” 32). Yost acknowledges that this development “is not necessarily consciously ethical but the effect is, nevertheless, socially beneficial” (“The Functional Aspect” 34). The business sector follows the principle, whether intentional or not.

Arguments may arise among members of a social group when “the expression of this principle [cooperation] in a given direction may be checked or blocked by lack of harmonious correspondence between the view of the group’s needs and possibilities held respectively by the two members of the group [the speaker and the audience]” (“The Functional Aspect” 137). Argument functions socially to reduce or change the differences between the speaker and the hearer and re-establish the cooperation that exists among group members.

According to Yost, the characteristic feature of such conflicts is not in its reasoning process or structure, but in the offering of a “genuine” option or choice to the audience or prospect. In other words, the audience has the option of choosing between the speaker’s view of the group’s need and the audience’s perspective (“Argument from the Point-of View” 117). Yost explains that the concept of a “genuine option” is borrowed from William James’ *Will to Believe*. James defines the term in the following manner:

Let us give the name of hypothesis,” he says, “to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electrician speaks of a live or dead wires, let us speak of my hypothesis as either *live* or *dead*. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed . . . . Next let us call the decision between two hypotheses an option. Options may be of several kinds. They may be (1) living or dead; (2) forced or avoidable; (3) momentous or trivial; and for our purposes we may call an option a genuine option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind. (qtd. in Yost, “Argument from the Point-of-View” 117)

In presenting an option, the speaker does not primarily focus audience members’ attention on their differences. Instead, the speaker “tries rather to make the audience aware of the connections between them which make possible the normal functioning of the group” (117-118).

According to Yost, argument affects both writer and audience; both “gain a change in experience and a heightened realization of themselves in connection with the other” (“The Functional Aspect” 134). More specifically, the audience’s experience is “enlarged by new ideas, by the recall of old ones in a new light and by some modification of the emotional content of the mind” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 115). However, the key aspect of this change is the re-evaluation of ideas held at the start of the argument and the “disappearance of feelings of distrust and antagonism” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 115). The speaker, in contrast, has gained “a fuller realization of his audience”; however, the most dramatic aspect of the change “is that the ideas and emotions with which he started the communication have been clarified and intensified” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 116). The writer’s beliefs are stronger than they were at the beginning of the argument. Thus,

the re-evaluation that the audience goes through is not part of the speaker's experience. In addition, "there is a change also in the sense-of-self speaker and audience are feeling" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 116).

On the part of the audience there seems to be a more active awareness-of-self than is found as the result of every act of discourse, but the awareness is less tense at the end of the argument than it was at the beginning. On the other hand, the speaker's sense-of-self is not only greater in degree than the audience's, both at the beginning and at the end of an argument, but also the tenseness and aggressiveness have increased, not decreased. The combination of these effects on speaker and audience produces a social situation where the two can think, feel, and act in harmony with one another. ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 116)

As Herman Cohen points out, this "harmony" or identification between the speaker and the audience that Yost describes occurs when the speaker addresses the audience's interests (68). As Yost explains:

The winning side of the contest is determined by which set of associations is the more vividly and closely connected with the interests and experience of the prospect. There is, however, no special nor characteristic way in which the writer translates his topic in terms of the prospect's interests and experiences [. . .] On the whole, moreover, as we have seen, the conclusions at which the writer wishes the prospect to arrive are not presented necessarily, even frequently, as the logical outcome of an explicit line of reasoning. What we may call the formalities of reasoning are very little in evidence. From such a point of view *conviction* and *persuasion* as two means of effecting a change in belief become meaningless. ("The Functional Aspects" 114-15, emphasis original)

This identification process is not typically the result of an isolated logic or reasoning process, as Yost explains. Instead, identification is the result of a communicative process that interconnects reason and emotions.

Yost believed that such an approach had two important implications concerning the teaching of argumentation. First, it emphasized the functional significance of argumentation, which often was ignored in theories of argument based on logic. However, when argumentation is viewed primarily as communication, the formal aspects seem less significant and rigid than the logical approach suggests. Yost's method means that form will follow function. As Yost points out, the student will find out that "he is sometimes using narrative to accomplish his purpose, sometimes description, sometimes explanation" ("Argument from the Point-of-View" 123). Yost's statement is innovative when considered within its context. From 1895 through the mid-1930s, the modes of discourse, which typically classified writing into narration, description,

exposition, and argument, were the dominant pedagogical approach in writing courses (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric* 210, 226). Teachers and students often approached writing in terms of formal requirements instead of communication. In addition, since the form of an argument is not typically an expression of logical principles, “the question of the presence or absence of so-called logical fallacies is not relevant” (“The Functional Aspect” 141). For Yost, an argument was effective when it promoted cooperation and the mutual interests of the group.

However, the most significant implication for teaching was in terms of audience. Yost explains that in contemporary textbooks, audience often is not discussed “until we reach a short chapter near the end with the caption *Persuasion*” (121). Yost’s statement describes, for example, George Pierce Baker’s *The Principles of Argumentation* (1895). Baker’s chapter on “Persuasion” is the penultimate chapter in the book, and it is here where he specifically discusses audience. Yost contends that audience should be introduced from the beginning of a course in argumentation:

The student must be trained to see that every argument arises from the need of some social situation in which there are two active participants, the speaker and the audience. Therefore, instead of studying the phrasing of propositions first, the student should be set to analyzing his everyday experience, then short newspaper controversies, in order to discover under what conditions *argument*, as he had understood the term, arises. The active part the audience plays in this situation is impressed upon him and through experience he learns that the more clearly he can enter into the thought and feeling of his audience, the more clearly defined become the real points at issue. (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 121, emphasis original)

Yost emphasizes that students typically approach argumentation in terms of phrasing propositions and outlining briefs. Consequently, the role of the audience often is pushed to the background. Yost contends, though, that the analysis and study of the topic should be viewed as “a preparation for the argument, not as a step in its process” (“Argument from the Point-of-View” 122). Only by clarifying their ideas and studying the topic will students be able to effectively communicate with the audience. This focus on audience also is important in terms of drafting briefs. Yost views brief drawing as a heuristic process that allows students to test out their ideas, not just to outline their arguments.

More importantly, Yost contends that an emphasis on audience will make students aware of the ethical implications of their arguments. This awareness happens because students see that the “normal action of the social group is cooperation, and that this cannot be furthered when the speaker or writer communicates false ideas either through ignorance or intent to

deceive”(“Argument from the Point-of-View” 123). Yost’s ideas were similar to Gertrude Buck’s, who believed that the interests of both the speaker and hearer were “equally furthered by legitimate discourse”(“The Present Status” 86). The goal of Yost’s theory of argument was ultimately political: it democratized the communicative process, giving not just the speaker but also the audience a legitimate role.

Yost’s approach to argument includes significant elements that parallel contemporary feminists’ revisioning of argumentation. In particular, we can see connections to Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin’s invitational rhetoric. Foss and Griffin, like Sally Miller Gearhart, assert that rhetoric has traditionally been defined as persuasion; thus, they contend that rhetoric is “characterized by efforts to change others and thus to gain control over them, self-worth derived from and measured by the power exerted over others, and a devaluation of the life worlds of others” (3-4).<sup>15</sup> Foss and Griffin provide an alternative to traditional conceptions of argument based on three feminist principles: 1. The development of equality in relationships and “the elimination of the dominance of elitism that characterize most human relationships” (4); 2. The recognition of the “immanent value of all living beings”; and 3. The fostering of “self-determination,” which allows individuals choices in their decisions and lives (4). Foss and Griffin emphasize that their approach “suggests the need for a new schema of ethics to fit interactional goals other than the inducement of others to adherence to the rhetor’s own beliefs” (16). In addition, the authors contend that an invitational rhetoric provides an alternative for women and marginalized groups “to use in their efforts to transform systems of domination and oppression” (16).

These feminist principles also were central to Yost’s conception of argument. As we have seen, Yost believed that the “principle of cooperation” was central to normal group interactions and that arguments occurred when social cooperation was disrupted. Drawing on examples from business to illustrate this principle, Yost emphasized that the goal was no longer to take advantage of another in a transaction, but to benefit both parties. Built into this view was an emphasis on equality in our relationships. Closely connected to this principle was the focus Yost placed on audience. As Foss and Griffin highlight, by emphasizing the power of the speaker to change others, traditional rhetoric “also devalues the lives and perspectives of those others” (3). However, Yost stressed the role of audience because she believed argument was integral in fostering broader social cooperation. In addition, Yost’s approach to argument underscored the importance of freedom of choice. The audience must be presented with a “genuine” option or choice. In so doing, Yost recognized and respected the authority of audience members in making decisions about their own lives. Finally, Yost saw the need for “a new schema of ethics” in argument, one that built social cooperation and provided an alternative for women

and marginalized groups not addressed in traditional approaches to argument (Foss and Griffin 16).

It could be argued that because Yost's theory of argument is as an example of *feminized rhetoric*, it supports Connors' feminization of rhetoric claim. While her approach may not be as agonistic as Connors' depiction of traditional approaches, Yost's work does complicate his argument in several ways. First, although Connors seems to suggest that women weren't involved in theorizing approaches to argumentation on any level, Yost's work demonstrates that women were developing highly sophisticated theories responding to recent socio-cultural trends, whether *feminized* or not. In addition, student letters indicate that the interclass and intercollegiate debates that applied Yost's approach seemed quite competitive and generated excitement and interest in terms of actual practice. For example, in correspondence to her parents, Helen D. Lockwood writes of her intense preparation for an upcoming debate:

Only two more weeks before debate but those two weeks are going to be mighty strenuous. But after that you won't have to read so much about how we had a debate this afternoon and yesterday, etc. But when one is spending all her energy on that there really isn't room for anything else to happen so I guess you will have to put up with it. (5 March 1911, 1)

A student of Yost, Lockwood went on to become "a stunningly innovative" English professor at Vassar (Daniels 175). Illustrations in the student yearbook, the *Vassarion*, also reveal the competitive nature of the debates. For instance, drawings related to debate show fighting cocks, boxing maidens, and jousting female knights. Although Yost's theory of argument emphasized cooperation and identification and was quite separate from agonistic rhetoric, her students still seemed to associate argument and debate with more traditional approaches. We can see this trend being played out in our own classrooms today. While we may view argument as emphasizing community and negotiations, our students still tend to associate it with competition and winning.

Finally, in his argument Connors conflates the "feminized" with the "personal"; thus, he tends to depict argument as male and narrative as female. In her recent comprehensive critique of Connors' position, Lisa Reid Ricker asserts that his claim "suggests that the field's increasing emphasis upon topics based in personal observation and experience is evidence of the 'feminizing' influence women's entrance into coeducation had on rhetoric and composition" (238). Ricker draws on JoAnn Campbell's research to demonstrate that in the late nineteenth century, some women at Radcliffe used their "daily themes" to voice their "resistance to the ways in which both they and their writing were being treated in the classroom" (240). In other words, personal narratives functioned as agonistic rhetoric. In addition, students also drew on their personal interests and experiences in argumentation. As noted, Yost credits



this shift to George Pierce Baker. According to Ricker, this change is probably more related to the difficulty of teaching abstract topics and principles than “as a recognition and validation of women’s traditional sphere” (239).

By emphasizing the public and social nature of Yost’s approach to argument, I have attempted to complicate the binary and essentialist conceptions of gender that are central to Connors’ feminization hypothesis. Instead of viewing this transformation as the loss of argumentation and debate, I have demonstrated how it represents the rise of a more ethical approach to argumentation. Yost’s sociological perspective, with its emphasis on ethical behavior, provided a useful alternative to the more agonistic, persuasion-oriented rhetoric that Connors claims was displaced after women entered higher education. In reflecting male cultural practices, this agonistic approach ignored women’s experiences and was antithetical to the democratic values that Yost and several other Progressive-Era rhetoricians supported.

### **Yost, Student Governance, and “The Need of the Community-Mind”**

Yost’s beliefs in a social perspective and cooperation went beyond her classroom to the administrative realm. In particular, her work in argument was helpful to her as the Dean of Women at Stanford: “while at the University my systematic work on my special problem—the functional aspect of argument, has been of inestimable value in helping me formulate a theory of my work as dean” (1924 Alumnae). The connection between her work in argument and administration is evident in the article “The Need of the Community-Mind,” in which Yost responded to the following questions: “What is the significance of student government and the importance of organized student activities? What are the advantages and dangers of the shift from faculty to student control [. . .] Is the undergraduate learning the lessons to fit him for the place he should take in the larger community?” (131). Yost’s article appeared in the alumni publication, the *Stanford Illustrated Review*, three months after she took over the position of Dean of Women.

In the article, Yost acknowledges that student government and activities provide students with “a civic laboratory where something of the constitution of society, something of the successful and unsuccessful methods of leadership, something of the realization of group responsibility and group loyalty could be developed” (131). However, more significantly, Yost emphasizes that both students and faculty need to recognize that they are part of the same community “and therefore have common problems and the necessity of working together to solve them” (133). Like many contemporary feminists, Yost believed that the process of working through decisions was more important than the decisions themselves. Thus, Yost emphasized process or, more specifically, the type of relationships that needed to be fostered through an ethical process. She believed that human interactions needed to build democratic relationships.

Yost writes that in society, the typical social group is more heterogeneous than in the college setting. Yost's relational ethics is particularly evident in the following passage:

[T]he good citizen is he who sees not only how to advance his own interests and those of his class, but how to see his own interests in the group interests and to advance these even at what may seem at the time to be a sacrifice of his personal ones. This he does by studying the whole situation, seeing the relation of his community to others, getting light on the present problems from past experiences, and taking thought not only for the immediate present but for the future. (132)

However, college groups tend to be more homogeneous and so focused on their own interests that the broader interests of the community often are ignored. Consequently, student governance tends toward a narrow view of the community, and its perspective of the college is often limited to the present. According to Yost, "[w]e have not only a world which is primarily of the present, but one which is very apt to be both local and personal. It is proverbial throughout the country how little even the college senior knows of what is going on beyond the campus" (132).

In reviewing Yost's work, we can see that she rejected the idea that the faculty should re-assert control over student government and reduce student activities. Such a move would eliminate the gains of such organizations and would "create an atmosphere of distrust and antagonism in the universities" (133). Instead, she argues that both students and faculty need to recognize that they belong to the same community, have common problems, and should work together to solve them. The most important issue, though, is not what is decided but "the spirit in which the decisions are made. There must be a thorough working together of all elements in the community, and this cannot be gained without sincere respect of each for the others and a willingness to learn, each from the others" (133). As in her approach to argumentation, Yost's administrative philosophy emphasized an ethical process in which both sides learn from the other.

Throughout this analysis, I have shown how Yost developed a feminist theory of argument that diverged from the agonistic, patriarchal rhetoric that Connors claims was displaced after women entered higher education. Yost's theory provided an ethical element that was missing from the traditional persuasion-oriented method, and it met the Progressive-Era goal of promoting democracy at all levels, even at the level of communication. Her approach to argumentation challenged the traditional emphasis on logic and faculty psychology and instead focused on communication and community building. In so doing, Yost questioned the view of argument as simply persuasion or a reasoning process emphasizing logic and instead saw it as a communicative process

that must involve both emotions and reason in order to build relationships. With her social approach to argumentation, Yost helped to prepare Vassar women for a more public role, one that encouraged them to break away from the traditional family realm and to focus on the larger community and social responsibility.

This description of Yost's achievements is meant only as a beginning; much more could be written about her work, including further analysis of her dissertation, her influence on students at Vassar, and her approach to administration at Stanford. Her legacy in debate and argumentation, though, contradicts and complicates Connors' feminization of rhetoric argument. Yost's reconceptualized view of argument resisted the older agonistic approach while underscoring a social rather than an interiorized, personal perspective. In exploring Yost's work, we can see a vibrant tradition of women theorizing ethical approaches to teaching and argumentation that encouraged women to participate in civic and communal activities.

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## Notes

1. In 1994, Cohen called Yost's 1917 article on argumentation a "disturbingly modern essay," and he emphasized that Yost was one of the first to approach argument from contemporary sociology and psychology, breaking from "the traditional logic-based model of communication" (69). For a perceptive analysis of the significance of Yost's article, see Cohen (66-72). My analysis extends Cohen's work by exploring Yost's dissertation and her teaching of argumentation and debate at Vassar College.
2. For an interesting discussion of the response to Yost's article and the debates it spawned, see Cohen (70-84).
3. As noted, scholarship in this area continues to grow. Recent anthologies have broadened our understanding of women's contributions to the history of rhetoric. See Ritchie and Ronald (2001) and Donawerth (2002).
4. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in the article "Women's Reclamation of Rhetoric in Nineteenth-Century America" in the anthology *Feminine Principles and Women's Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric* (1995).
5. For Connors' response to Mountford's review, see "*Adversus Haereses*: Robert Connors Responds to Roxanne Mountford" (1999). For Mountford's reply, see "Roxanne Mountford's Reply to *Adversus Haereses*" (1999).
6. The first two sentences of the article spell women's suffrage two different ways.

7. While at Stanford, Yost lived in an all-female household in which the women maintained close friendships that were similar in structure to those at Vassar and other Seven Sisters Colleges in the late nineteenth century or to Hull-House and other settlement houses during this period (Howton 10-11). After arriving at Stanford, Yost moved into a house at 534 Lasuen St., which had previously been occupied by the former dean of women. English faculty members Edith Mirrielees, Elizabeth Buckingham, and Terri Russell soon joined Yost as did Nina Almond, “a librarian at the Hoover Library who became Yost’s closest companion for the rest of her life” (Howton 26). From 1921 until 1946 when Yost retired, these five women lived in three adjoining apartments in the house, sharing meals together. Yost and Almond lived in one apartment, Buckingham and Russell shared the second (until Russell’s death in 1936), and Mirrielees occupied the third (Howton 57). After retiring, Yost and Almond lived in another house on campus until Yost’s death in 1954 (Howton 26).

8. A student of John Dewey and Fred Newton Scott at the University of Michigan, Buck viewed education as a way of bringing about her organic theory of society. Thus, a common theme in Buck’s work is a democratic spirit aimed at broader integration of the social classes through breaking down dualisms and traditional hierarchies. This social view of discourse also is central to Yost’s approach to argument.

Although Yost and Buck both advocated a more cooperative and democratic approach to argumentation than the traditional male-biased approach, their methods differed in terms of focus. Buck emphasized the connection between the logical structure of argumentation and its substructure based in psychology. In her pedagogy, Buck encouraged Vassar women to critically evaluate their own thought processes, so that they, in turn, could better understand the thought processes of others. Yost, in contrast, pushed for a more outward analysis than Buck. She argued that argumentation should be studied from the perspective of social groups rather than the traditional emphasis on logic.

9. Yost’s graduate transcript shows that all of her graduate courses were from these three men and that Scott was her thesis adviser (Transcript). A first-generation sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley was a graduate of Michigan and had studied under John Dewey. Similar to Dewey, Buck, and Scott, Cooley viewed society as an organism. Cooley’s focus “on the organic link and the indissoluble connection between self and society is the theme of Cooley’s writings and remains the crucial contribution he made to modern social psychology and sociology” (Ridener 2). According to the *University of Michigan Catalogue of Graduates, Non-Graduates, Officers, and Members of the Faculties, 1837-1921*, John Frederick Shepard was an associate professor in Psychology in 1917 (42). Yost’s emphasis on the rhetorical situation is evident in the connections she made among rhetoric, sociology, and psychology in her dissertation and coursework.

10. The passage is from footnote 2 at the bottom of the page.
11. It is important to note that today composition scholars would probably disagree with Yost's belief that Aristotelian argument over-emphasizes logic. For example, in "On Distinctions between Classical and Modern Rhetoric," Andrea A. Lunsford and Lisa S. Ede specifically challenge this assumption. Drawing upon William M.A. Grimaldi's work on Aristotle, Lunsford and Ede argue that rather than being "manipulative, monologic, and rationalistic," the aim of rhetoric for Aristotle was "an interactive means of discovering meaning through language" (44). Lunsford and Ede emphasize that the enthymeme has traditionally been viewed as "a mere tool of *logos*" (42). However, they argue that in Aristotelian argumentation the enthymeme integrates *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* in a dynamic relationship between the speaker and the audience. See also Jeffrey Walker's "The Body of Persuasion: A Theory of the Enthymeme" (1994) and John T. Gage's "An Adequate Epistemology for Composition: Classical and Modern Perspectives" (1984).
12. The passage is from footnote 2 at the bottom of the page.
13. See Buck's "The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory" (1900) and Scott's "Rhetoric Rediviva," (originally delivered as a presentation at the Modern Language Association meeting in December, 1909). (See Stewart note on page 419 of the article.)
14. In her article, Yost does not refer to specific sociologists. However, as noted, she did work with Charles Horton Cooley, a Sociology professor at Michigan. In addition, her dissertation references several sociologists and psychologists, including J.R. Angell, *The Relation of Structural and Functional Psychology to Philosophy* (1903); J.M. Baldwin, *The Individual and Society* (1911); C.H. Cooley, *Human Nature and Social Order* (1912) and *Social Organization; A Study of the Larger Mind* (1914); M.M. Davis, Jr., *Psychological Interpretations of Society* (1909), J. Dewey, *How We Think* (1910) and *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903); C.A. Ellwood, *Sociology in Its Psychological Aspects* (1915); L. Gumpłowicz, *The Outlines of Sociology* (1899); W. James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1893) and *The Will to Believe* (1897); G.T. Ladd and R.S. Woodworth, *Elements of Physiological Psychology* (1911); W.B. Pillsbury, *Attention* (1908), *Essentials of Psychology* (1911), and *Psychology of Reasoning* (1910); E.A. Ross, *Social Psychology* (1908); and W.I. Thomas, *Source Book for Social Origins* (1909).
15. In a 1979 article, for example, Sally Miller Gearhart connects rhetoric with persuasion and contends that "any attempt to persuade is an act of violence" (195). Gearhart views persuasion as unethical because it is based on a "conquest/conversion model" (195), which is associated with invasion, violence, and "the conquest of the victim" (196).

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