

*Imagining Rhetoric: Composing Women of the Early United States* by Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002. 279 + xi.

In *Imagining Rhetoric: Composing Women of the Early United States*, Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen examine the use and development of "liberatory civic rhetoric" by women who were interested in advancing women's education and indebted to neoclassical civic rhetoric in the decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Using a variety of primary sources (essays, novels, letters, anthologies, speeches, and diaries) but focusing on didactic fiction, Eldred and Mortensen establish the location and conventions of the "schooling fictions" that exemplify women's hopes and arguments for the content, national purpose, and future of women's education. By examining the writing of five female rhetors, *Imagining Rhetoric* traces the evolution of women's civic rhetoric against the backdrop of a larger national transition from early republican optimism to more conservative antebellum and Civil War discourse on women's rhetorical education, writing, and civic duties.

Eldred and Mortensen align their definition of "civic rhetoric" with that of Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran: as discourse emerging from an oral, neoclassical tradition that sought to "awaken the collective conscience of a new republic" (2), though they are primarily concerned with women's written composition rather than public oratory. The material they considered for their study was written primarily by middle-class, Protestant women who are, with the exception of African-American Charlotte Forten, white and residents of the mid-coast and northeastern seaboard. *Imagining Rhetoric* includes detailed close readings of primary materials situated within a variety of conceptual frameworks. Indeed, Eldred and Mortensen note in their Introduction that, consistent with recent feminist work in the history of rhetoric, they allowed the "texts themselves" to lead them to the salient issues—such as language politics, belletristic aesthetics, or the rise of female academies—within which to situate their analyses (viii). To contextualize their analysis, they also draw on a variety of secondary criticism: American literary histories by scholars such as Nina Baym and Cathy Davidson, recent disciplinary histories in rhetoric in composition by James Berlin, Sharon Crowley, and Nan Johnson, and a variety of political and intellectual histories.

One especially important characteristic of Eldred and Mortensen's work is their analysis of diverse forms of composition—fiction and instructional materials, teaching narratives and anthologies: an array that reflects the contemporary mix of writing consumed and produced by the rhetors (and their female readers) with which *Imagining Rhetoric* is concerned. That

the civic rhetoric of the instructive fiction considered in each chapter is often more ambitious, and sometimes more liberatory, than nonfiction is a theme throughout the book. Consistently attending to relatively unknown antebellum novels from a rhetorical perspective brings new material to our attention. Eldred and Mortensen's analysis thus also attends to recent calls for consideration of new and under-examined sites of women's rhetorical practice by scholars such as Patricia Bizzell and Jacqueline Jones Royster.

In Chapter 2, "Schooling Fictions," Eldred and Mortensen consider examples of the emerging body of instructional texts for women, broadly conceived as both early writing texts for women and the didactic "novel textbook" genre. Editions of Donald Fraser's textbooks *The Columbian Monitor* (1794) and *The Mental Flower-Garden* (1800/1807) are examined to show that, while furthering education for women beyond basic reading and writing skills, the books ultimately subsume rhetorical education and civic participation to the desire to monitor women's conduct and virtue (29). In contrast, Hannah Webster Foster's novel *The Boarding School* embeds significant discussions of writing instruction, imagines female students reading widely, and views letter writing as a critical way for young women to continue their education after school. Eldred and Mortensen argue that attention to such fictional materials provides insight into women's rhetorical practices and a supplement to more traditional archival material: "the fictive, the imaginary, understood in this light, is as powerful an artifact of history as traditional 'fact'; the imaginary elaborates the bare outlines of truth" (64).

Chapter 3, "A Commonplace Rhetoric: Judith Sargent Murray's Margaretta Narrative," defines a moment between early republican advocacy of classical "commonplace" rhetorical practices and newly emerging belletristic standards. Eldred and Mortensen examine Judith Sargent Murray's collection *The Gleaner* (1798), specifically her "education novella" about Margaretta, the daughter of an imaginary reader of *The Massachusetts Magazine*. Murray's narratives explicitly link classical practice, the importance of education in shaping and safeguarding the republic, and the need to expand the horizons of women's education. Eldred and Mortensen are careful to illustrate that tensions abound despite early republican optimism for advancing women's education: while Murray's anonymous male narrative persona, the "Gleaner," argues against education useful only for "man getting" and provides flexible examples of single, childless, and young Republican Mothers, he also upholds a traditional approval of women's role as an entertaining male companion (71). A particularly interesting feature of this chapter is Eldred and Mortensen's argument that Murray's writing proposes a commonplace rhetoric for women, "a system of selecting, arranging, and delivering commentaries on familiar topics aimed at producing an 'original version' and—crucially—an instructive effect" (77). Constructed against increasingly restrictive, belletristic notions

of plagiarism and copyright that sought to invalidate classical imitation and promote "original," individual composition, Murray's approach privileges self-education and imagines possibilities for women to glean material from their reading to create civic composition.

It is not until the 1840s that another "flurry of schooling fictions" (89) emerges. Eldred and Mortensen establish that by this time there was "a sharp divide between those who spoke out directly for political rights and those who, as educators, wrote and promoted writing as a way to inscribe women's power through domestic influence" (145). Chapters 4 through 6 therefore consider three educators who engaged debates over the appropriate site for women's schooling—in the home or at one of the increasingly visible women's academies—and who embodied what may seem today a paradoxical position: an energetic advocacy of women's advanced education and firm rejection of women's suffrage and public oratory. Eldred and Mortensen document the complexity of each woman's stance and seek to resist the common liberal/conservative binary in describing their writing. The relatively brief Chapter 4, "Sketching Rhetorical Change: Mrs. A. J. Graves on Girlhood and Womanhood," outlines the only figure who is against the public education of women. In her pedagogical novel, *Girlhood and Womanhood, Sketches of My Schoolmates* (1844), Graves' anecdotes position boarding schools as poor substitutes for childhood training in ethics, domestic management, and Christian morality. Eldred and Mortensen argue that, with the rise of belletristic rhetorical training (à la Blair, Newman, and Jamieson) and an increasingly educated middle class, Graves used her writing to argue for home-based education that attended to the soul, remembered the body, and trained the mind for practical domestic pursuits as a counter to education guided by taste and style.

Mrs. A. J. Graves' position was not an uncommon one in the 1840s. Indeed, Eldred and Mortensen document that well-known domestic science writers like Sarah Josepha Hale and Catharine Maria Sedgwick also held similar positions at this time. However, that doesn't mean that all so-called "conservative" middle-class, white women writing in support of women's schooling agreed. Both Louisa Caroline Tuthill and Almira Hart Lincoln Phelps, the rhetors Eldred and Mortensen examine next, supported female seminaries and boarding schools while remaining opposed to women's participation in the "sphere of action" or use of civic rhetoric for agonistic purposes. Tuthill, a prolific writer of juvenile fiction, female instructional texts, and treatises, viewed formal schooling outside the home as desirable but published a rhetorical instruction text *The Young Lady's Home* (1839) and anthology *The Young Lady's Reader; Arranged for Examples in Rhetoric; for the Higher Classes in Seminaries* (1839) to fill what she saw as a need for texts grounded in commonsense philosophy, the rhetoric of Campbell and Blair, and a version of Romanticism balanced by reason. Eldred and Mortensen then examine four

works of female juvenile fiction to demonstrate that "Tuthill's fiction makes concrete many of the abstractions she expresses in her nonfiction prose" (128) such as her concern that female boarding schools could instill prejudice against religion or Protestant ethics and promote the use of agonistic rhetoric. Tuthill, Eldred and Mortensen argue, promoted a "new" school civic rhetoric that featured ethical appeals to "defend and bring people to Christianity" (140) that allowed her to argue women's higher education did not need to conflict with Christian duty or domesticity. Ultimately, Eldred and Mortensen argue that Tuthill's writing best demonstrates "what women lost—the prospect of ungendered, unmonitored rhetorical agency—in the transition from oratorical to belletristic culture" (144).

It is not entirely clear whether Eldred and Mortensen think Phelps's work also exemplifies this loss, though Chapter 6, "Independent Studies: Almira Hart Lincoln Phelps and the Composition of Democratic Teachers," is an admirable study of liberatory civic rhetoric used to promote the cause of women's public schools and the professionalization of female teachers. As a teacher, principal (including a stint supervising her sister Emma Willard's renowned Troy Hill seminary), and novelist, Phelps worked and wrote to promote women's advanced education and imagined teaching as a noble profession for women as an alternative or supplement to marriage. Key to her rhetoric was the belief that women should remain away from public office, courts, voting booths, and public debate. Eldred and Mortensen review Phelps' teaching narratives and novels to argue that this stance came from her conviction that women should lead "private" domestic lives and from the need to differentiate her educational project from that of suffrage and abolitionist activists, many of whom embraced public oratory and argued for direct extension of women's civic participation. Although she wrote from the antebellum period through the Civil War, Phelps did not deal with the violence of her times (at one point she even argued that abolitionists should extend a hand to "ill-treated wives" rather than southern slaves) (166), an important reminder of the limits of liberatory civic rhetoric as selectively deployed by middle-class, white, Christian women who can afford to "bracket" such conflict.

In their conclusion, Eldred and Mortensen focus on the diaries of African-American writer and teacher Charlotte Forten, a young woman from a well-off Philadelphia family who is sent north to Boston to be educated. The chapter explores the conflicts and limits of the clash of civic, abolitionist, and belletristic rhetorical traditions evidenced by her diaries and teaching journals. In charting the discourses that influenced Forten, Eldred and Mortensen discuss oratory by examining Forten's entries on the abolitionist lectures and Salem lyceum performances she regularly attended while in school. The rhetoric of these two sites is often at odds with the idealized scenes of school girl days that Forten describes in early diary entries. Eldred

and Mortensen argue that because Forten sought to align "her interest in things belletristic with her unwavering commitment to the abolitionist cause" (201), she confronts the contradictions and failure of civic rhetoric in a way that a Tuthill or Phelps did not. As an example of Forten's challenge and her work to fashion a new rhetoric, Eldred and Mortensen map her development of a principle "of 'full sympathy' that could sustain both art and action in the pursuit of a beauty and freedom" (211), a sympathy she did not find active among her schoolmates but sought to synthesize from her experience. It is only in teaching freed African-Americans in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, in 1862, that Eldred and Mortensen locate moments of this full sympathy and of Forten's satisfaction with the use of her education.

*Imagining Rhetoric* is an excellent contribution to scholarship in nineteenth-century women's rhetorical practices. It considers rhetors and texts that will merit continued scholarly attention while constructing an engaging cultural and intellectual context for insightful close readings. My only complaint is that at times, the definition and prominence of liberatory civic rhetoric as a concept wavers. However, this may not be all that important: Eldred and Mortensen carefully avoid creating a rigid framework that their texts must fit within in order to extend and imagine the possibilities of a synthetic archive. Overall, this book will be of great interest to historians of rhetoric, composition scholars, and those interested in feminist historiography and nineteenth-century studies.

Stacey E. Sheriff  
The Pennsylvania State University

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