

REVIEWS

***Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910* by Nan Johnson
Carbondale: SIU Press, 2002. 220 pp.**

In *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910*, Nan Johnson offers a carefully documented argument that nineteenth-century cultural codes, inscribed in both academic and parlor traditions, at once denied women access to public rhetorical space and confined their literacy activities to the domestic sphere. She argues further that women who stepped outside the boundaries and were successful, women like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Livermore, and Emma Willard, succeeded not because they resisted the cultural norms but because they capitalized on them, transporting the tropes, as Johnson writes, of "noble maid and eloquent mother" into the public sphere and, in the public's eye, speaking as "women who mothered the nation toward a new day" (144).

To begin her project and to support her argument that authors of academic rhetorics assumed eloquence was a masculine virtue, Johnson draws on well-known early and late nineteenth-century works by Samuel Newman, George P. Quackenbos, John Franklin Genung, and Adams Sherman Hill, showing how they constructed the public speaker as male, used exclusively male speakers as their exemplars, and, by implication, denied women access to rhetorical platforms. In some ways this move is predictable in that these men were affiliated with institutions of higher education where the student body was primarily male. But parlor rhetorics, as well, Johnson argues, those that promised something for everyone and thus might appear to be more inclusive than academic texts, restricted the speaking roles for women to domestic topics and domestic spheres.

With these rhetorics as backdrop, Johnson devotes the heft of her argument (four of five chapters) to demonstrating how nineteenth-century conduct manuals and letter-writing guides conspicuously reinforced and reproduced gendered public space. A major contribution of her project, however, is that she foregrounds texts with much smaller circulation, texts such as small-town newspapers and local advertisements that would have easily made their way into a middle-class family home. Johnson does a particularly wonderful reading of an 1883 issue of the *Shelby Dry Goods Herald*, a sales catalogue published for readers living near the small town of Shelby, Ohio. On the cover of the fall/winter issue, "Millie" holds up a letter she has received from a friend heralding the newly arrived merchandise at the dry goods store and encouraging Millie to visit the store. Three women are thus engaged in a transaction: the writer of the letter, Millie, and the reader of the ad,

and together, they conspire, Johnson argues, to use letter-writing to write women into a domestic space. While men might have used the letter for business matters, women wrote and read letters that were social and/or personal.

When women did enter public rhetorical space, women like Anthony, Cady Stanton, and Livermore (just to name a few), their biographers (in books such as Kate Sanborn's 1884 *Our Famous Women* or the 1868 edited collection titled *Eminent Women*) read their calls for social change as extensions of their domestic roles; Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, for example, described Mary A. Livermore as a woman "who mothered half the land" (qtd. in Johnson 113) and approached the lectern out of sympathy for the poor and the down-trodden. In these same books, the contributions of African American women to public life, women like Sojourner Truth and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, were not recorded, the editors and writers thus cooperating not only in preserving the stability of gender roles, but also in perpetuating the icon of the ideal American woman as white and middle class.

Elaborating the impact and significance of gendered space, Johnson remarks that while women orators were not recognized in the nineteenth century, women writers including Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Sarah Orne Jewett, sometimes were. Here I would both build on and complicate that notion by suggesting that some women writers of best-sellers were both writers and, within their text, "orators." As June Hadden Hobbs argues that some nineteenth-century women challenged the master narrative about androcentric models of Protestantism in their writing of hymns ("*I Sing for I Cannot Be Silent*": *The Feminization of American Hymnody, 1870-1920*, U Pitt 1997), I would argue that some women challenged women's limited access to the pulpit, one example of public space, by writing didactic fiction. I think, for example, of Phelps' *The Gates Ajar* (1869) or of Margaret Deland's *John Ward, Preacher* (1888). Like Stowe (whose character Candace challenges orthodox religious views in her sermon-like testament in her 1859 *The Minister's Wooing*), Phelps and Deland were raised in staunchly religious families and were well accustomed to pulpit rhetoric.

Both *The Gates Ajar* and *John Ward, Preacher* address the question of salvation; Phelps writes about heaven, and Deland writes about hell. The main character of *TGA*, mourning her unsaved brother's Civil War combat death, is devastated by the orthodox sermon she hears on heaven; in fact rather than comforting her, its three points and proof-text simply add to her grief. In a way, this orthodox sermon, occurring early in the novel as it does, functions as a catalyst or springboard: the remainder of the novel is a persuasive and public account, a sermon if you will, about the limitations of orthodoxy and the benefits of a religion of the heart.

In *JWP*, the set-piece sermon also represents an orthodox position, also a position the protagonist cannot accept. Helen Ward is unable to understand that anyone could believe in the kind of hell her husband describes in his sermon. John Ward, on the other hand, is horrified that his sermon does not awaken Helen to her unbelief. He thus forbids her his home until she can see the light—or in this case—the dark. Without ridiculing the orthodoxy that John Ward epitomizes in his sermon, Deland uses her novel as a pulpit from which to present a counter-argument to the orthodox sermon.

Here then are two cases in which nineteenth-century women writers participate in public discourse: they compose sermons that function both as a set-piece in a novel and, more loosely, as the argument of the novel. Read with Johnson's project as both background and foreground, these examples invite further interrogation. In particular, are these novelists stepping into the arena of public discourse, and in some oblique or nuanced way, being recognized for that? Or, from another point of view, Does the fact that the female fictional characters counter "male orthodoxy" with "religion of the heart" support Johnson's argument that when nineteenth-century women ventured into the public space, they did so according to prescribed gender codes, men preaching from their heads, women from their hearts?

Finally, several smaller points about Johnson's text. The Notes are rich with explanation and helpful related materials, and they deserve, I think, very careful reading. The Works Cited also contains a wealth of sources for both teaching and further scholarship. A disappointment, at least for me, is that Johnson's text gives little recognition of the complexity of the publishing histories of nineteenth-century rhetorics. In her text, for example, Johnson cites 1834 as the first publication date of Newman's *A Practical System of Rhetoric* (26). And in the Works Cited, she cites only an 1842 edition (208). But Newman's rhetoric first appeared in 1827, and a substantively revised stereotyped edition was published in 1835. So for readers with an ongoing and specialized interest in understanding the relationships of the well-known nineteenth-century rhetorics to contemporary teaching and research, questions that remain on the table include, why does Johnson use the 1842 edition of Newman? And, if it is a reprint of the 1835 edition, does it offer less, the same, or more support for her argument than, say, the 1827 edition? I have similar concerns about the dating of a number of other texts Johnson cites. While this information might matter less to readers in fields other than composition/rhetoric, it would nonetheless seem helpful for all readers to have a taste of the publication histories, and especially the date of the first appearance, of these early books.

In Nedra Reynolds' work on the geographies of composition, she borrows the concept of "transparent space" from geographers and spatial theorists to argue that classroom and other academic spaces are not transparent or

innocent, but, rather, are ever in need of interpretation. Johnson's book is, I believe, a persuasive as well as eloquent argument that rhetorical space in American life from 1866-1910 is far from transparent. Instead, it was carefully constructed by writers of academic and popular texts alike as a masculine space, a space that did not invite women to participate in the public conversation. I applaud Johnson's book, especially her use of little-known materials, and I believe it will earn a wide readership, both now and in years to come: reaching beyond itself, *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910* serves as both springboard and model not only for the ongoing recovery of women's voices but also for ongoing analysis of the ways in which cultures can, at any moment in history, decide who is authorized to speak in a particular forum . . . and who is not.

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