

BIESECKER CANNOT SPEAK FOR HER EITHER

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I am impelled to reply to Biesecker's attacks on my publications *Man Cannot Speak for Her* (hereafter *For Her*) and "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron" (hereafter "Oxymoron"). Her essay "Coming to Terms" (*Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 2 [1992]: 140–61) focuses on these two works; another is footnoted; and the "substance" of her attack would apply to at least five other of my publications as well as it does to the two selected.

Biesecker begins pleasantly enough, contrasting a paragraph from *For Her* with a paragraph from Gerard Hauser's *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*, and seems to find some merit in my words. I put it cautiously because immediately after citing me, she says: "As feminists, we cannot not want to be on the side of Campbell's revisionist history" (141). Cannot not want? Not, I think, a locution ordinarily chosen to praise.

Biesecker's first attack consists of a warning against the inclusion of texts by women because of its "potentially debilitating consequence," which is "female tokenism," and cites this definition of it: "'there's a false power which masculine society offers to a few women who 'think like men' on condition that they use it to maintain things as they are'" (141). She extends this attack by saying that the inclusion of particular texts by women serves, "albeit unwittingly, to perpetuate the damaging fiction that most women simply do not have what it takes to play the public, rhetorical game" (142).

This attack can be viewed in three ways. First, as an attack on me, my honesty, and my scholarly independence. Men have given me power on the understanding that I will support the status quo (and them?). But the attack cannot stand in sheerly personal terms because the things I have published must be part of this agreement to support the status quo.

So, second, the attack must also be directed toward my work on the earlier and contemporary women's movements and on the rhetoric of individual women, and here the charge begins to collapse. I have written of Maria Miller Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Coffin Mott, Carrie Lane Chapman Catt, and many others. These women wanted to "maintain things as they [were]?" Further, when I began this work, their rhetoric was not part of public address as it then existed. Hence, by definition, I cannot have supported the status quo.

Finally, because she has chosen to make this attack, I shall content myself with simply listing the third way the issue can be seen—that men empower women who are willing to attack other women who attempt to change the status quo.

Biesecker makes no logical case for her female tokenism charge. Indeed, if no one did any further work on women's rhetoric, it is not clear to me that female tokenism would be the result. I have written of some thirty women and their rhetoric plus the rhetorical outgrowths of such group efforts as the Seneca Falls Convention, the National Woman's Party, the Convention of Anti-Slavery Women, and of works adopted by conventions, e.g., Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1854 and 1860 addresses, and of groups in the contemporary feminist movement(s); others have added at least an equal number. Female tokenism? No, just a beginning. Of course, one may assume that all feminists (and she claims to be one) will refuse to add to the store of analyses of women's rhetoric and, instead, spend their time attacking what has been done. One may assume that; I do not.

But suppose, for a moment, that there is now female tokenism in our field. It was men who, over the years, excluded women from their rightful rhetorical place. Consider, then, the motive that could lead one to attack, *not the men*, but a woman who is trying to alter the rhetorical landscape.

Biesecker continues this attack by finding that I have implied that most women do not have what it takes to play the public, rhetorical game. Guilty as charged; most women do not have the ability to excel in public discourse. Where she goes wildly astray is in tying this notion to the idea that women are not as good as men in the rhetorical arena (142). The most vicious misogynists who claimed that women were by nature incapable of rhetorical excellence *never* claimed that all men *were* capable of such excellence. Indeed, the anthologies that excluded women for so many years

never pretended that all men were rhetorically gifted. Hence, to include the works of rhetorically gifted women merely gives their voices equal weight with those of men.

Biesecker next shifts to the notion that including women's rhetoric is a sort of affirmative action. (One might think that a feminist would see affirmative action positively, but no.) Including women's rhetoric, i.e., this particular brand of affirmative action, is bad because it perpetuates "cultural supremacy" and the "putative authority of the center" (143). This cultural supremacy and central authority rest on the evil of individualism, i.e., speeches included all originated with individuals, and I have perpetuated this evil.

The easiest thing to point out is that the claim is sheer nonsense. The rhetorical efforts of women were, with some exceptions, created by individual women, those of men, by individual men. But those women who spoke gave voice, usually at great personal cost, to the feelings and concerns of their silenced sisters; however, only the women's creations were systematically kept out of our anthologies and went unexamined in our criticism. Clearly, individualism was not a criterion for inclusion, one had to be a *male* individual to be included. As an aside, consider the naïve view of rhetorical invention implicit in this attack.

I have written of the unfair criteria used in our field that have excluded women and minorities.¹ Many speeches by white males have little rhetorical interest, but are studied for historical reasons. Women were prohibited from political office and the professions; hence, they could make fewer addresses seen as historically significant. And many women's efforts are highly significant rhetorically, but are still disregarded. Biesecker ignores these criteria entirely. It is the demon individualism she will confront, but now she adds a new wrinkle, that individualism in rhetoric is to be damned because it prevents the inclusion of collective rhetoric, "the most common form of women's intervention in the public sphere" (144).

Biesecker does not give a single example of what she means by collective rhetoric, an omission that would be surprising in any case, and is mind-boggling in light of her claim that such rhetoric has been women's most usual form of public discourse. Given her attack, it appears that works that emerge out of social movements, even those with multiple authorship, do not merit consideration.

I devote major sections to what might be seen as collective rhetoric in *For Her*, one to the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions authored by a group of women, another to the Ad-

dress to the Second Convention of Anti-Slavery Women, which was created by a committee and ratified by a larger group, and a third to the role of the banners of the National Woman's Party, all of which Biesecker ignores. The analysis of more contemporary women's efforts in "Oxymoron" focused on the discourse of individuals whose words cohered into a rhetorical movement that sought to alter the usual meanings of language (*pace* Foucault). And why should we conclude that social movements are not examples of what Foucault calls the "surfaces of emergence" out of which new "discursive objects" develop? Consider the role of contemporary feminism in creating such concepts as "sexism" and "sexual harassment," or is she claiming that we reaffirm the "putative authority of the center" in studying the rhetoric of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon?

And one is certainly entitled to certain suspicions. Biesecker will have nothing to do with cultural supremacy, with individual excellence, and she deplores the exclusion of collective rhetoric, whatever that is. Can this be a veiled attempt to make all expressive behavior by all women a part of rhetoric under the guise of collective rhetoric? The suspicions become a near certainty when, considerably later in the essay, she says emphatically that women have different rhetorical abilities and possibilities and that *we* (meaning feminists) must "take on the full burden of the notion of unequal or non-synchronous development" and declares that neither men nor an "individual woman or set of women, however extraordinary, can speak for all women" (158). (Has anyone claimed that they have or did?)

Biesecker may find it simple to take on such a burden and cast off the efforts of extraordinary women. Because she does not offer criticism, she can merely utter theoretical pronouncements. Of course, such pronouncements fall into a vacuum because she admits that her formulations will require the wiping out of half a dozen disciplines—"History, History and Philosophy of Science, Philosophy, Literary Studies, Foreign Languages and Literature programs, and even the more recent Women's Studies and Cultural Studies programs" (157)—and remaking them along unspecified lines. For myself, I very much wish to be associated with the artistic rhetorical acts of extraordinary women. And until she or someone else can show the value of collecting and analyzing some other body of work, I shall continue to prefer the memorable to the mediocre.

Biesecker condemns me for having used "consciousness raising" in my earlier "Oxymoron" essay, a phrase that is "underpinned or at least burdened by the whole history of psychoanalytic theory" (146). She has learned from Lacan to be skeptical of the "talking cure." This, I'm afraid, is mere thrashing about on her part. "The talking cure" is a phrase long applied to orthodox psychoanalysis. The "talking" involved was done by a person, often a woman, in the presence of a male authority who mainly kept silent, viewed women as defective men, and occasionally pointed out contradictions in the patient's remarks. For her to tie this sort of talking to the talking of women in groups fighting to understand themselves and their oppression, including oppression rooted in psychology, is preposterous. The origins of women's consciousness raising go back, not to Freud, but to Marx and Mao and religious testifying through which members went from division and a sense of individual guilt and responsibility toward a recognition of their common condition and its relation to the nature of the system in which they lived. That is what "the personal is political" meant and means. Does she imagine that women in the sixties and seventies sat in groups and bemoaned the absence of penises or lamented their ability to function rationally in the manner of males? And, as an afterthought, what can she mean by collective rhetoric if she wishes to exclude the discourse of CR groups?

Biesecker then turns to the concept of *techne*. It is no accident, I think, that individualism and *techne* are her targets because to have eliminated either and left the other would have been an embarrassment. She says her use of the term is new because she eliminates its ethical/moral connotations and that makes it possible to avoid identifying the agent with the agent's intentions or motives. The scholarship here is weak. Classicists have worked and reworked this territory, and the commentaries of Gerald Else, E. M. Cope, William Grimaldi, and George Kennedy draw quite different conclusions from those she advances.² As to her claim, I note that she does not explain how she has eliminated these qualities; she does not indicate the presence of these qualities in Plato and Aristotle; and she appears to confuse (a) the presence or absence of the ethical/moral dimensions of *techne* with (b) the relationship between an agent and that agent's intentions (155). Derrida and Foucault may regard (a) and (b) as similar or identical; Plato and Aristotle certainly did not.

However, one can understand Biesecker's attempt to eliminate *techne* or to clothe it in meaningless jargon. *Techne*, as an art, means that the products of that art are there to be dealt with. The products of rhetors are oral or written texts, and she clearly wishes to have nothing to do with such products. If she is to condemn individualism, she must, of course, also abolish the rhetorical texts created over the centuries by individuals. She can admit whatever she means by collective rhetoric because, presumably, there are no texts, no standards of excellence, and no individuals to worry about.

Finally, for those who value consistency, we witness here the striking spectacle of an individual attacking another individual in the cause of abolition of individualism in rhetoric.

It seems to me relatively easy to point to self-contradictions and fallacies in Biesecker's essay; it is more difficult to say just what she is up to. When one has excluded the things she clearly is not up to, only one thing is left. She is not adding to the store of knowledge about women's rhetoric. She is not explaining the nature and function of whatever it is she means by collective rhetoric. She certainly is not berating the males who have excluded and continue to exclude women from anthologies and texts and courses and rhetorical consideration generally. She offers the results of no critical analysis or archival research. What she does is assert so-called theoretical views. She spends some seventeen pages, plus footnotes, urging the abandonment of individual women and the rhetoric they created. True, part of one paragraph on the eighteenth page says we can keep our (male?) masterpieces, although there are no grounds in what she has said for so doing without committing precisely the sins she has spent seventeen pages describing. The only conclusion I can draw is that Biesecker means what her essay attempts to say. She wants to do away with the individuals and the rhetorical art they created. *She wants to silence them.*

Women were partially or completely silenced for centuries; then the women who dared to break these barriers were silenced in turn by rhetorical historians and critics and theorists. Now that some women have helped to make some of the voices of these once-silenced women heard again, Biesecker wishes to silence them once more.

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Notes

1. "The Communication Classroom: A Chilly Climate for Women?" *ACA Bulletin*, 51 (January 1985): 68-72; "The Sound of Women's Voices," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75 (1989): 212-20; "Hearing Women's Voices," *Communication Education* 40 (January 1991): 33-48.

2. Else writes: "[W]e in the Anglo-Saxon tradition are on the whole too far gone in individualism to think of 'poetry' as actually *made* by an Art of poetry. Yet that is what Aristotle, if honestly read, requires us to do." See *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 4. See also E. M. Cope, *An Introduction to Aristotle's Rhetoric with Analysis Notes and Appendices* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1867), p. 135, n2; William M. A. Grimaldi, S. J., *Aristotle Rhetoric I: A Commentary* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1980), p. 5; George A. Kennedy, *Aristotle On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 289.

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