

Emphasizing the Suppression of Feminist Voices

Ashok Bhusal

Department of English, Rhetoric and Composition
The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

Abstract

This article highlights the suppression tactics used to marginalize four women rhetoricians from the prior four centuries and attempts to find commonalities among these rhetors. They are getting recognition for their long overlooked rhetorical skills. We, as students of rhetoric, need to continue to look for other women rhetors who have been largely marginalized or ignored and reclaim their contributions in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: rhetors, suppression, women.

Purpose

This work examines the suppression tactics used to marginalize or ignore four women rhetoricians from the prior four centuries, including seventeenth-century English writer Mary Astell, eighteenth-century English author Mary Wollstonecraft, the nineteenth-century American writer Margaret Fuller, and the later nineteenth and early twentieth-century African American writer Ida Bell Wells. Additionally, the four writers' use of rhetorical devices to inform, persuade, dialogue with, and move audiences to act are analyzed, as well as circumstances or rhetorical situations that prompted these rhetors to take pen in hand or take the podium. This article also attempts to find commonalities among these rhetors.

Discussion

The first writer under consideration is Mary Astell, whose first work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement for their True and Greatest Interest*, was a proposal for a Protestant nunnery for women. Christine Mason Sutherland, in "Mary Astell: Reclaiming Rhetorica in the Seventeenth Century," begins her analysis of Astell's work by commenting that she was well known and well regarded in her life time, but she was nearly forgotten after her death (93). Sexism, as one of the factors Joanna Russ points out in *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, was a contributing factor for this suppression. Sutherland points out that the particular rhetorical situation Astell was addressing was the plight of women who do not marry and need employment and shelter or whose lives lack in moral and spiritual sustenance. Sutherland continues that Astell obviously made a study of her readers (audience). She pointedly addressed her book to ladies, capturing their attention by appealing to their interest in charm and beauty, while realizing at the same time that men also must recognize her ideas. Sutherland admires the strong persuasive techniques Astell employs to win over her readers, including building anticipation by not stating her major proposal of a nunnery until she had written fifty pages of her book. Her proposal went unfunded, as there were strong sentiments at that time in English society against anything that seemed to suggest Catholicism or papal influences. Sutherland also credits Astell with boldly rejecting classical rhetorical techniques of confrontation or opposition in favor of her technique of showing respect, tenderness and caring for one's audience (115).

The eighteenth-century English writer Mary Wollstonecraft is perhaps best known for her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She was a contemporary of Rousseau and Talleyrand. Jamie Barlowe, in "Daring to Dialogue: Mary Wollstonecraft's Rhetoric of Feminist Dialogics," presents Wollstonecraft as a woman who believed in her own right to participate in dialogues with the leading thinkers of her day (117). The rhetorical situations that she addressed concerned the suppression of women through lack of educational opportunity and denial of equal rights in treatment and in law. Barlow also observes that, as a rhetor, Wollstonecraft capitalized on her own educational advantages to argue, persuade, give evidence, and reason to state her case to the powerful men of her generation. Wollstonecraft argues in *Rights of Women* that because men trivialized women's intellectual powers and marginalized their reasoning abilities,

they “victimized themselves as well as women.” She wanted men to see that including women was logical and advantageous to both sexes (118).

Annette Kolodny, in “Inventing a Feminist Discourse: Rhetoric and Resistance in Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*,” says that Margaret Fuller, the nineteenth-century Transcendentalist editor of *The Dial*, wrote over 250 essays and two books during the middle of the 19th century. However, Fuller’s legacy did not continue after her death. She, too, was marginalized until the feminist movement of the twentieth century. She is strong in providing reason and argument to persuade the audience. She ended her *Vindications* with the use of irony as a rhetorical tool. Kolodny says that prominent critics of her day called her work poorly organized and her arguments erroneous because men and women were not equal. Joanna Russ, in *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, would call this suppression due to sexism or the false categorizing of women as weak writers. Kolodny points out that Charles F. Briggs damned Margaret Fuller’s work as “not sufficiently plain and direct” and complained that the contents were loosely constructed.

Jaqueline Jones Royster, in her “To Call a Thing by Its True Name: The Rhetoric of Ida B. Wells,” discusses another important feminist writer Ida B. Wells and looks at her life and work and rhetorical significance. She, who was born a slave in 1862, rose to prominence as a journalist, speaker, and civil rights activist. She devoted over forty years of her life to speaking out against the horrors of lynching of black men, women, and children by illegal mobs. She toured England and Scotland and one of Wells’ rhetorical strategies was making US mob actions a campaign of international focus. She was exiled from Tennessee and found refuge in states outside the South. Her rhetorical strategies included using evidence and argument to persuade and she frequently quoted from press articles to legitimize her own words. Though she was not recognized widely at the time, her language had a significant impact on audiences to change their thinking and behaviors. The most important contribution that Wells did was to use the weapon of composition and rhetoric to bring about changes in society by closely analyzing her own life and including in her rhetoric that which she saw as truth.

From the above-mentioned articles, what we can deduce is that all of these writers were very powerful figures during their lifetimes. Mary Astell spoke and wrote to improve the treatment of women living in the seventeenth century, using her skills as a rhetor. Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century, Margaret Fuller in the nineteenth century and Ida Bell Wells in the early twentieth century, each had a strong belief in their ability to provide reason and argument as a persuasive tool. All of their works were marginalized, but recent feminist studies and African studies have recovered their contributions to rhetoric, perhaps because exigencies have shifted, constraints have altered, and the audience has changed.

Lloyd Bitzer provides a powerful definition of rhetoric. He describes rhetoric as “a mode of altering reality” using discourse to change the existing reality through conscious thought and action (4). Bitzer depicts an exigence as “an imperfection marked by urgency” that needs to be addressed (6). Astell, Wollstonecraft, Fuller, and Wells tried to change the exigencies they found in their world using their rhetorical skills. Though these four powerful women writers engaged

their powers of composition and rhetoric to alter existing realities, contemporary male attitudes remained rigid toward women and these women writers were soon marginalized or completely suppressed. Because of sexist and racist perspectives, their literary and rhetorical gifts were discredited and were not included in traditional historical study. The first three suffered from sexism whereas Wells faced both racism and sexism. However, present day scholars have belatedly begun to analyze their still relevant contributions to improve the status of women and their whole artistic and creative discourse.

Russ points out in her article “False Categorizing” that female writers were falsely categorized as weaker than the leading male writers of their era because of the prevailing attitudes resulting from the male-dominant culture. Astell tried to extend or challenge the ideas of her contemporaries, including Descartes, Locke and other thinkers and philosophers of her time. However, she was not treated as highly as her male contemporaries. Similarly, Fuller was a prominent member of the Transcendental Writers' Group, but she was not considered as important as transcendental writers such as Emerson and Thoreau or even close to them. Wollstonecraft's contemporary, Rousseau, maintained his stature while she became marginalized after her death.

Conclusion

At last, these women rhetors are getting recognition for their long overlooked rhetorical skills. The effects of years of marginalization or suppression are being rectified as interest and scholarly studies are illuminating their impressive literary and rhetorical gifts. Many of the reforms in societal attitudes toward women that they championed are being realized. In the twenty-first century, their influence will be a continuing presence in rhetorical study. We, as students of rhetoric, need to continue to look for other women rhetors who have been largely marginalized or ignored and reclaim their contributions in the twenty-first century.

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