

**HOW HELOISE HALTED HERESY: META-COMMENTARY ON
RHETORICAL EXCHANGES (OR, WHY I AM ALLOWED TO WRITE
THIS THESIS)**

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ABSTRACT

How Heloise Halted Heresy: Meta-Commentary on Rhetorical Exchanges (Or, Why I Am Allowed to Write This Thesis). (May 2015)

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Meta-rhetoric, or rhetoric that addresses rhetoric itself, is continuously metamorphosing and growing in acceptance. Discussions of this issue date back to ancient times, with Plato's *Phaedrus* examining the morality of practicing rhetoric and its instruction in school. "Writing about writing" has continued throughout the ages, with notable contributions from the figures I will examine in this study: Heloise, Sor Juana, Alison Bechdel, Cheryl Glenn, and Jan Swearingen. This topic has always been volatile, especially with the purposeful exclusion and oppression of women. For hundreds of years, women of note have been attempting to break down this wall, with religious, political, and personal motivations and goals. Though women have achieved many notable victories, the issue still bears significance, as gender identity is a timeless point of contention. Beginning with Sappho, this thesis will examine the roots of meta-rhetoric in women's writing. Other rhetoricians throughout the ages will be added to the canon, the common thread being the use of meta-rhetoric to achieve freedom for women's voices. The issue will be brought to the present day with a discussion of gender identity and sexuality, driven by the writing of Alison Bechdel, and of women in the academic sphere, exemplified by the work of Jan Swearingen. This discussion will assess how being a woman affects everything from an academic career to intimate relationships within society. This thesis will argue that Sappho

was a spark that ignited a fire of acceptance that continues to burn. While rooted in antiquity, meta-rhetoric continues to be a cutting-edge issue, which deserves more respect in both commercial and academic spheres, particularly to assist in understanding the contributions of those rhetors who are not always conventional, with a special focus on women. The study of meta-rhetoric has allowed women to be seen and heard in academic settings by disseminating their ideas and texts. The same advances should be made accessible to women outside of academia, in the commercial world.

DEDICATION

To Brad. Thanks for telling me to “just do it”.

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I do not think I would be here today were it not for the incredible English Department here at Texas A&M University. Their guidance, teaching, and care have molded me into a capable and functional student worthy of this research. I would especially like to thank Mary Ann O'Farrell, for opening my eyes to quirky literature, Jan Swearingen, for introducing me to the rhetoric field and guiding my steps ever since, and Apostolos Vasilakis, for never wavering in his support and effort to help (not to mention the incredible conversations in London).

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Definitions and literature review

Meta-rhetoric: the bones

Meta-rhetoric, or rhetoric that refers back to itself, has always been a topic of fascination and intrigue in the rhetorical community. One of the earliest examples of this sub-discipline is Plato's *Phaedrus*, where Socrates discusses the potential evils of teaching rhetoric to students. This study will explore why this rhetoric is different from other rhetoric, what impact it has had on society (and vice versa), and what goal each author is attempting to accomplish. At its core, meta-rhetoric has three distinctive characteristics relating to these qualities. This rhetoric is different from other rhetoric because it contains commentary on the very nature of rhetoric itself within it. Referring again to *Phaedrus*, Socrates comments that rhetoric enables a man to persuade and disillusion his audience with minimal effort, while engaging in rhetoric himself. Meta-rhetoric also has a special impact on society: it combines the two general disciplines of the English field to reach the maximum audience, while maintaining relevant topic structure. Socrates utilizes what he sees in his society as the potential danger of rhetoric and engages in a commentary in order to communicate his concerns; he creates rhetoric to discuss rhetoric. Lastly, meta-rhetoric has a very clear goal that the author is attempting to accomplish. The goal is to comment on society and its rhetoric, while creating a rhetoric to comment with.

Women and meta-rhetoric

Women in particular have produced a significant amount of meta-rhetoric. Though the suppression of women throughout history is a well-known problem, their uses of meta-rhetoric reach far beyond what many in the academic arena realize. The art of writing was widely confined to men, and women were not expected to produce works worth reading. Men grew and lived in the public sphere, allowed and encouraged to voice their opinions and to create literature, and women grew and lived in the private sphere, forbidden to speak in public and allowed minimal control over their voices and ability to create literature. While Sappho, Heloise, and Sor Juana were teachers within their individual cultures, they taught very specific subjects, and only to female students. However, it was quite difficult to maintain these laws of the private sphere when women began using outlets that were allowed—such as letters, diaries, poetry, songs, and conversation—to engage in rhetoric, and then utilizing their roles as teachers to other women to disseminate this information. Women began to produce exceedingly readable works through these outlets, and soon it became commonplace for their letters and diaries, especially post-mortem, to be shared in public, thus shattering the expectation for women's silence. Once women realized the power they held when their private words became public, they began to purposely utilize the practice of meta-rhetoric in their personal writing, creating a tradition of women commentating on society through seemingly harmless conversation.

Heloise, Sor Juana, and Alison Bechdel: the meat

Heloise is one of the most notable pioneers of women participating in the rhetorical debate. Her discussions with Abelard are widely seen as commentary not only on religion and the politics surrounding it, but on gender relations as well (Abelard 1). The rhetorical expectations of the

time are well covered in Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through the Renaissance*. Glenn also provides an illuminating look into women and meta-rhetoric throughout the ages as a whole, notably focusing on ancient and medieval women (Glenn ix). Some women, such as Sappho in classical Greece, could be considered the beginning of women engaging in meta-rhetoric, especially considering her role as a teacher. Her alleged homosexuality also contributes to her meta-rhetoric about women and love. In this same vein, Alison Bechdel is a contemporary example of meta-rhetoric concerning women's sexuality. However, Heloise more directly comments on her role as a woman in the 1100's in relation to the man she is writing to, writes more bluntly about the issues she sees within the church (a controversial topic if there ever was one), and simply offers more material to comment on. 500 years later, a Mexican nun penned a 20,000-word manifesto on women's education, confronting church authority with a confidence only found in men at the time. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz's Swan Song has been praised as a victory for women's rights to a voice, and the English translation of her letter exposes this fact in a beautiful way (Cruz 1). Sor Juana addresses the bishop who instructed her to stop writing with a grace and intelligence far beyond what was expected, or allowed, for women in her day, enabling a conversation to begin about the education of women and defying the strict rhetorical expectations of women when addressing a man.

While these women provided the building blocks for the trajectory of the field, more modern pioneers have emerged. One of the contemporary women whom is on the cusp of the issue is Alison Bechdel. With her tragicomic *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Bechdel exposes the painful issues of sexuality, especially homosexuality, and how it formed not only her life, but her father's as well. This book examines their relationship, and how it is a microcosm of the

relationship between the industry and the women they suppressed (Bechdel 1). This book will be examined as a piece of meta-rhetoric—a commentary on the conventional rhetoric about sexual identity and how they affect society—and also as a piece of multi-media, as it utilizes both words and images to express a powerful message.

Objectives

This thesis will identify the effectiveness of women's meta-rhetoric from Sappho to the present. It will also clarify the effects the rhetoric had on society at each time, and the effects each piece had on the later pieces, helping them achieve the status of classics. Modern rhetorical theory about gender will be outlined as a discipline with concrete connections with meta-rhetoric, with additional first-hand examples taken from Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and Jan Swearingen's "Song to Speech: the Origins of Epitaphia in Ancient Near Eastern Women's Lamentations". The expansion of research into meta-rhetoric will be suggested, with the notion made clear that more consideration should be given to the meta-rhetoric created by modern authors, both in the academic sphere and the worlds of commerce and business.

Methodology

Essentially, this thesis will examine past women rhetoricians, propose that their achievements are linked to one another due to a common goal, and prove that this goal (empowering women and their rhetoric) is still alive in authors today. This thesis will prove that classic literature evolves from cutting-edge rhetoric, and define a new rhetorical term in meta-rhetoric.

As a point of interest, many primary sources will be analyzed, providing raw material ready to be identified as meta-rhetoric. Sor Juana's letter and Heloise's letters are primary sources with minimal changes to the text from the time they were written until now. Secondary sources, such as Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetoric Retold* and "Song to Speech" by Jan Swearingen, will also be included. Women in rhetoric and meta-rhetoric itself will both be defined before presenting the individual authors. An overarching theme of the contemporary significance of both historical and contemporary meta-rhetoric will be maintained. This contemporary significance will be defined with an analysis of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Jan Swearingen's "Song to Speech" chapter through the lens of gender identity and their uses of meta-rhetoric to expound the issues held therein. The thesis will be completed by examining the meta-rhetoric of women pioneers, achieving the new-found understanding of meta-rhetoric through contemporary examples, and indicating its implications for future woman rhetors and their audiences in one cohesive document.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL META-RHETORIC

Rhetoric and women: an ancient relationship

Women in general, Sappho in particular

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates' discussion of rhetoric and the consequences of its practice is one of the first instances of meta-rhetoric, for in his discussions Socrates is highly rhetorical. It is clear that meta-rhetoric has existed since writing itself. In addition, the relationship between women and society has been defined since the same time period. Though a few female rhetoricians found their way into the public sphere, women in general were relegated to the private sphere, and men spoke publicly. As Cheryl Glenn states, "although male writers and literary characters most often articulated public rhetorical practices, a few female literary characters used language persuasively in the private sphere" (Glenn 18). Though these women existed, their works are difficult to find. Women were not considered to be significant members of the rhetorical community until quite recently, and the searches for historical examples of this phenomenon have frequently been nearly fruitless. For example, Sappho's writing is exceedingly difficult to find, as well as discussions of her existence during her time period. However, "early on, Sappho herself knew that her contributions to the intellectual movement would not be forgotten" (Glenn 18). Thankfully, even though her contributions were indeed forgotten for hundreds of years, recent surges in the importance of women's rhetoric have caused the resurfacing of her work. She paved the way for women, utilizing her given role in antiquity to communicate a vision of the world and women's place in it through poetry.

Women were expected to be caregivers from the beginning of society. Their tasks were based around the home, whereas men's tasks were based around the outside realm. In short, women were private, and men were public. This led to their respective relationships with their rhetorical callings: women were expected to not have a voice, whereas men were expected to communicate where everyone could hear. "Sappho...came to writing within the feminized *oikos* [private sphere] and outside the patriarchal and militaristic culture...[this] allowed her to assume her extraordinary literary gift, demonstrating female language use and consciousness" (Glenn 23). Human nature does not lend itself well to silence. This led to women utilizing their confinement to their advantage: they began communicating in the private sphere. They employed letters, poems, songs, diaries, and women-only meetings within homes to air their grievances with the various aspects of society. Some simply used them for what they were meant for: communication. However, through this communication, they created the meta-rhetoric that more contemporary writers utilize purposely. Sappho wrote poetry within her private life, allowing her writing gift to flourish in the parameters given to her as a woman. However, she was also a pioneer for women's education: she was an instructor in a girl's school. Her ability to discuss women's sexuality, the exclusion of women from men's arenas, and the relationships between women and men are the first instances of meta-rhetoric for women.

Rhetoric in the private sphere essentially became a cyclical relationship. Whether women intended to or not, they created rhetoric by molding their own personalities into their writing. This, in turn, communicated to other women who agreed with them, who began writing on their own and creating more rhetoric. Once this pattern was recognized, women began to use letters, songs, poems, diaries, and public meetings of women to their advantage in a more purposeful

way. They realized that this was the most effective way to spread information and opinions to other women, therefore they utilized it to do just that. This created meta-rhetoric. Sappho's example in particular was able to set the expectation for women's inclusion in meta-rhetoric: through her discussions of various rhetorical traditions of the genders, she created beautiful works of rhetoric herself. "I have a beautiful daughter, golden like a flower, my beloved Cleis, for her, in her place, I would not accept the whole of Lydia...." (Glenn 22).

Defining meta-rhetoric

A complex term

Meta-rhetoric is a term to define a work that refers to the practice of rhetoric in some way, and comments on it. Meta-rhetoric presents a commentary on its own language, and often calls attention to alternate ways of talking about the subject under discussion. Meta-rhetorical works discuss some aspect of rhetoric, and utilize rhetorical devices to persuade the reader to believe a certain point of view about the rhetoric. This could be anything from pathos, to asyndeton, to feminism, to key words. The ability for a piece of rhetoric to comment on rhetoric qualifies it to reside in this category.

Women and their rhetorical growth

Women in rhetoric in particular are exceedingly skilled at utilizing this tool to communicate their arguments and grievances. As Sappho illustrates, women communicating to specific people in their lives becomes a way to communicate with the world as a whole. Again, these women utilize their only means of communicating, the private sphere, to their advantage to make their opinions known to someone, especially on the rhetorical treatment of women. Letter-writing was a private

practice, in and of itself. The letters did not reach the large audiences; the only “audience” was the recipient of the letter. However, between shared gossip and posthumous published works, the letters of Heloise and Sor Juana were the agents of change in the disintegration of the private sphere. Therefore, women realized over time that sooner or later, their rhetorical conversations would be read by a greater audience than the person to whom they were communicating. Thus, purposeful meta-rhetoric was born.

What these women were doing is meta-rhetoric because they were self-aware; that is, the rhetoric they created was designed to be a commentary on rhetoric as well as society. For example, Sappho hoped that her works would be influential for a long time. She therefore made it a point to create a discourse that communicated how the relationships between men and women functioned, and how she ideally wished she could communicate with men in a more direct way. The women discussed in this thesis all utilized this self-knowledge and sphere-knowledge to communicate their distaste with the way the society of their time treated women’s rhetoric. The “meta” becomes the fact that they are engaging with the society in a conventional way—almost being tongue-in-cheek, knowing they are breaking expectations but fulfilling them simultaneously—but utilizing unconventional ideas and creating new discourse. This creates a “double-voice”, or an understanding that the women are developing a commentary on expectations of gendered rhetoric while also creating new gendered rhetoric.

Heloise and Abelard

A forbidden history

Heloise was the student and lover of Abelard, a twelfth century logician who was simultaneously incredibly respected and bitterly hated. When the affair between the two was discovered by her father, Abelard was castrated, and she was given a choice: either marry him or go to a nunnery. She decided that a nunnery would be a better option, for if Abelard were to marry her, it would indicate to his contemporaries that he had weaknesses of the flesh that must be satisfied by a woman. However, Heloise maintained her love for Abelard, even while living a chaste life in the monastery. After acquiring a correspondence between Abelard and one of his friends that laid out the history of Abelard's sins, she writes him to rebuke him.

Heloise's letters: exposing virtue ethics

Heloise's writings are very akin to the modern concept of virtue ethics, in contrast to Abelard's which maintain the accepted understanding of religion at the time, deontology. Heloise exemplifies the modern definition of virtue ethics: that what matters are not the actions of the doer, but rather the intentions of the doer ("Virtue Ethics"). Virtue ethics had its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, specifically quoting Aristotle's "golden mean" as a balance between the mind's various virtues and vices. Heloise clearly feels as though her vices are overtaking her virtues, and that she therefore does not genuinely belong in a nunnery. Her actions are pure, but her mind is not. Abelard, and the vast majority of intellectuals at the time, maintain the definition of deontology as truth: that what matters are the doer's actions, and that eventually the doer's motivation will match that of their actions ("Virtue Ethics"). Also referred to as "duty ethics", this method of thinking was the popular understanding of the time, especially for religious

thinkers. The existence of moral absolutes are assumed, and when one does a certain action, it is either “good” or “bad”, regardless of the thoughts one is having during the action. Heloise’s ghastly example of her failure based on virtue ethics is her own: she still thinks about having sex with Abelard, even while praying during Mass. She discusses her opinion of this phenomenon, stating that this indeed means that she is sinning while in fact seeming to pray. She says “wholly guilty though I am, I am also, as you know, wholly innocent. It is not the deed but the intention of the doer which makes the crime, and justice should weigh not what was done but the spirit in which it is done” (Abelard 53). Though condemning herself, she is also revealing virtue ethics—a startling advance in religious thought—which would not be identified until much later.

A meta-rhetorical maverick

Abelard and Heloise’s correspondence reveal that Abelard, though he maintained a patriarchal tone in his letters, clearly felt that Heloise was worth debating with on this subject. She created rhetoric while discussing rhetoric: her letters are written in a very accessible style for the time, as she maintains her respectful, subordinate role to Abelard, most notably seen in the beginning and end of her letters. However, she also discusses her feelings that deeds and sayings should not be taken at face value; that is, they need motivation to be interpreted. By interpreting her writings and not taking them at face value, readers can see that her rhetoric serves its purpose: she practices virtue ethics while explaining them. She respects Abelard as is the convention of the time; however, she also expounds upon her idea that her motivations and vices speak louder than her actions. Her motivation in writing this letter is to expand upon the understanding of virtue ethics and how the church functions within disciplinary actions, even though her actions seem to only communicate her desire to correspond with Abelard.

The legacy of Heloise

Virtue ethics is clearly appreciated in contemporary times, as the idea that one's motivations should be valued differently than one's actions is quite prevalent. It is also worthy of note that if this was the truth of the matter in those times, Heloise's decision to be a nun was fundamentally flawed and she should have instead married Abelard. This revelation of women having sexual desires and of their mental processing abilities was not common in her time period. Heloise used rhetorical advancements women were capable of making utilizing this meta-rhetoric by writing her letter as a subordinate to Abelard and commenting on his views of her actions, while simultaneously serving her own purpose of communicating about virtue ethics and their standing as a new way to interpret religious and everyday actions. Sor Juana enacts a similar tactic, writing to a superior bishop and accepting his requests, while also pushing the issue of women's education to the forefront.

Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz

A brief history

Sor Juana was a Mexican nun during the late 1600's. After succeeding in her pursuit of education, both secular and religious, she decided to share her education with others. She wrote poetry, plays, and prose, expanding the horizons for female authors, especially as a member of the convent. Also, carrying on the tradition of Sappho, she was a teacher in the religious girl's school.

After Sor Juana was offended by a particularly arrogant priest, she penned an opinion on the sermon that was widely circulated throughout the religious community. It reached the hands of

the Bishop of Puebla, who “responded with two apparently contradictory, but ultimately interrelated acts” (Peden 2). The bishop had the letter printed at his own expense, for he considered the writing itself to be imperative to the issue at hand. However, he also wrote a letter signed with a pseudonym, admonishing Sor Juana for her letter and encouraging her to spend her time on more honorable pursuits.

With her lifelong passion, her quest for knowledge, insulted, Sor Juana stewed over the letter for months before finally penning a 20,000-word manifesto in response. Dubbed “the unburdening of years of repressed frustration”, this letter was imperative to her legacy as a rhetor and as a forerunner of women’s educational rights (Peden 4). She acquiesced to the bishop’s advice, distributing her personal library to those of worthier rank and ceasing her writing activities after this letter. However, her importance in this thread should not be overlooked, because of her passion for the educational rights of women.

Women and education: Sor Juana’s purpose

Sor Juana is a leading advocate of education for women. It is clear in her writing that she considers this to be a worthy pursuit of her time, regardless of the bishop of Puebla’s feelings on the subject. Her work as a whole is beautifully organized and written, with readability and grace woven throughout. It is clear that, while she has educated herself, she has proven that women are capable of being taught given the chance. She laments that “I continued, then, in my studious endeavour...of reading and more reading, of study and more study, with no teachers but my books. Thus I learned how difficult it is to study those soulless letters, lacking a human voice or the explication of a teacher” (Peden 32).

Before—and indeed, during—this exultation of the importance of and desire for women’s education, women were considered to be of little good when educated. It was a waste of time and effort to invest in a woman in an academic sense, considering their confinement to the private sphere and their purposes of raising the family and ensuring domestic bliss. While many, like the bishop, approved of Sor Juana’s critique of the sermon, others objected to her undertaking a theological commentary. Sor Juana was certainly a trail-blazer; though nuns were educated, more widespread academic instruction of women was not common. If women were educated, it was about domestic duties, or how to interact with their superiors in a respectful way. This standard was shattered with the addition of Sor Juana’s plea that women be given the right for education. Her explanation for this follows a traditionally held belief that men should not teach women, lest there be sexual tension in the air. The community held that therefore, women must be taught by older women. Sor Juana exclaims “then is it not detrimental, the lack of such women? This question should be addressed by those who, bound to that *Let women keep silence in the church*, say that it is blasphemy for women to learn and teach, as if it were not the Apostle himself who said: *The aged women...teaching well.*” (Peden 76).

Sor Juana’s rhetoric: utilizing the private sphere

Letters were considered part of the private sphere during Sor Juana’s time. With that knowledge in hand, Sor Juana’s letter was the most effective way for her to spread her knowledge of knowledge, even if the people in her time period would not inherently be granted access to her letter. By utilizing an acceptable form of rhetoric for her gender, she was able to permeate the standards of her culture in a way that was acceptable to the public. Letter-writing, as practiced by Heloise, was exceptionally useful to communicate in the public sphere while maintaining the

social stigmas imposed on women in these times, simply because these letters were written to men. While Sor Juana's letter was actively suppressed in her lifetime and for some time after, it was imperative that she share her revolutionary understanding of women's education. Thus, women, as a gender, was validated by and exposed to the knowledge that women were just as worthy of education as men.

Sor Juana's meta-rhetorical style stems from the fact that her letter itself is rhetoric, and she is calling for the ability to create more rhetoric and to make it accessible to a portion of the population that has not been able to access it previously. Her letter itself is a work of art, with subordinate acknowledgement of a superior outlining the entire piece, but with biting words of freedom and equality in-between. Without this expected construction, her letter would not have packed the same rhetorical punch; but because she used the rhetorical constraints of the time to her advantage, her critique of the rhetoric itself was more impactful: by communicating her point in the subordinate role expected of her, she was able to more sharply show the offensive attack on women's intelligence. Her letter began to be recovered and widely read in the 20th century.

Impact of Sor Juana

As Peden states in the introduction to her translation of Sor Juana's letter, "in its orderly defense of the rights of women to study and to teach, and in the glimpses of thinly-veiled anger and exquisitely-controlled irony which probably were not perceived at the time, [the letter] is a unique document, what one critic has called a defense of the rights of women to education and culture that was to find no equal...for at least a century and a half" (Peden 4). The letter engaged with the private sphere of women's rhetoric, but the subject matter was able to break out into the

public sphere and prove that women deserved to be a part of it too. The first letter, her critique of the sermon, was worthy enough to be published by the bishop of Puebla. However, the fact that the letter was written by a woman was not respected. Sor Juana purposefully engages in an expected rhetorical outlet for her by writing this swan song in order to challenge the norm with her rhetoric. Thus, she opens the door for the contemporaries of meta-rhetorical expression to utilize unconventional rhetorical outlets to examine rhetorical constructs within their work. These contemporaries include Alison Bechdel, who is a maverick of her own, using the graphic novel to communicate the pains and problems with gender rhetoric, and Jan Swearingen, who examines women in the past as a way of empowering the women of the future.

CHAPTER III

CONTEMPORARY META-RHETORIC

Rhetoric and women today: empowering through gender and knowledge

Discussing gender: the definition

Gender is one of the most intense subjects for rhetoric to attempt to address. It presents a wide chasm to be breached, both between the sexes and between members of the same sex. What does it mean to be “male” or “female”? How does it impact one’s ability to communicate with other “men” or “women”, or even with oneself? Gender may be “merely a concept borrowed from grammar, [but] it, nevertheless, continues to have far-reaching effects on cultural notions of the relation between the sexed body and its behavior” (Glenn 173). The cultural notion of the relationship between the genders for thousands of years was males are dominant, and women are subordinate. Men are public, women are private. The standard was male, and it was created by men. “The masculine gender, just like every male experience or display, has come to represent the universal...prestigious practices like rhetoric [are] universally masculine” (Glenn 173).

The refining of a standard

This standard existed because of the conceived notion of men’s superiority and women’s lack of notable rhetorical discourse ability. However, gender has been refined by the studies and practices of women such as Cheryl Glenn, Jan Swearingen, and Alison Bechdel. All of these women have encapsulated the ability to regender rhetoric and its practice; that is, to redefine rhetoric to include women and their works within its fold. There are two different methods, but their result remains similar: the field of rhetoric has been expanded to include women, and they

have practiced rhetoric to accomplish this task. Glenn and Swearingen share the same method: utilizing academic discourse as a vehicle to discuss women in rhetoric, while including themselves in rhetoric. Bechdel utilizes the graphic novel, as an unconventional method of communicating with her audience about her struggles with gender, sexuality, and relationships.

Alison Bechdel

Her story

Alison Bechdel was raised by two English teachers, in a house that doubled as a funeral home. When she departed for college, she began to search consciously for her sexuality, reading written works by gay women of the past, and seeing how she related to it. She came to the conclusion that she was lesbian from her academic exposure to these women writers, and revealed it to her parents in a letter—utilizing the private sphere. Unbeknownst to Alison, her father had been a closet homosexual for nearly his entire life. Once her mother revealed this knowledge to her, she only had a few interactions with her father before his untimely death weeks later.

His death sparked a movement in her to examine both her own life and his, intertwining their history and the history of gender in a graphic memoir entitled *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Receiving numerous awards and accolades, this graphic novel was an unorthodox memoir in many aspects. It was not only a revelation of her father's life, but of her own, and of the way gender, sexuality, and rhetoric related to one another.

Pictures and words: her means

The ability of Bechdel to utilize the graphic novel as a means to communicate is a new development in the rhetorical tradition. But like Heloise and Sor Juana before her, she is using a method to engage in rhetoric that in itself creates rhetoric. While women have reached a more respected place within the rhetorical community by the time of Bechdel's novel, they still must sometimes use creative and unusual methods of relating to society in order to get their point across. The method with which a message is communicated is normally a symbol of the type of message being communicated.

Bechdel's graphic novel points to the strange and vibrant topic she is choosing to address: gender, and suppression of unorthodox practices and beliefs within that penumbra. Her intimate drawings and sketches frequently include bare and vulnerable details of her life. She describes her relationship with her father, and their lack of physical affection, by relating a story of when she felt "unaccountably moved to kiss my father good night" (Figure 1). She draws herself awkwardly kissing his knuckles and then ducking out of his bedroom in embarrassment. In the two panels, her father's facial expression does not change. He maintains a look of incredulity and sternness. She reveals a panel later that the embarrassment she felt in this moment "was a tiny scale model of my father's more fully developed self-loathing" (Figure 2). Her father hated himself because of his homosexuality, and his inability to present it publicly without criticism. Bechdel, on the other hand, feels much less shame and embarrassment about her sexuality. Much like Sappho, she presents it proudly and matter-of-factly, maintaining her identity regardless of the perceived criticism.



MY MOTHER ESTABLISHED A RULE.

IF WE COULDN'T CRITICIZE MY FATHER, SHOWING AFFECTION FOR HIM WAS AN EVEN DICIER VENTURE.



HAVING LITTLE PRACTICE WITH THE GESTURE, ALL I MANAGED WAS TO GRAB HIS HAND AND BUSS THE KNUCKLES LIGHTLY...

...AS IF HE WERE A BISHOP OR AN ELEGANT LADY, BEFORE RUSHING FROM THE ROOM IN EMBARRASSMENT.



Figure 1: Page 19, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

THIS EMBARRASSMENT ON MY PART WAS A TINY SCALE MODEL OF MY FATHER'S MORE FULLY DEVELOPED SELF-LOATHING.



HIS SHAME INHABITED OUR HOUSE AS PERVASIVELY AND INVISIBLY AS THE AROMATIC MUSK OF AGING MAHOGANY.



IN FACT, THE METICULOUS, PERIOD INTERIORS WERE EXPRESSLY DESIGNED TO CONCEAL IT.

MIRRORS, DISTRACTING BRONZES, MULTIPLE DOORWAYS. VISITORS OFTEN GOT LOST UPSTAIRS.



Figure 2: Page 20, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

The pictures enable Bechdel to accomplish her rhetorical goal: she aims to be different and surprising, because her and her father's lives are different and surprising. She wants to be shocking, because her sexuality is shocking. She wants to force readers to acknowledge her rhetorical standing and engagement in rhetoric, while she creates a new rhetorical standard.

Bechdel's purpose and impact

Bechdel's purpose was not to further the use of graphic novels as memoirs and autobiographies. Rather, she wanted to expose the lack of respect and understanding of the homosexual community and psyche, by forcing her readers to engage in a medium that they may not understand on the first encounter. Her graphic novel is meta-rhetoric because she is actually doing that which Sappho did, and that which Sor Juana and Heloise could not do: she is using a rare and unknown medium to women, to communicate a message about women. She also engages in the "double-voice" of meta-rhetoric in an unprecedented way. Her discussion of her coming-out as homosexual is interwoven with her discussion of her father's consistent closeted existence, providing a rich understanding of the two narratives and the connections and contrasts between them. She uses her newly-acquired lens of understanding to retell and reanalyze her childhood with her father, and reaches a poignant consensus about the case of gender identity.

The ability of her graphic novel to have an impact depends on its success to accurately portray the confusion, the pain, and the frustration of the gay community and its skewed gender standards. She accomplishes this by presenting her points in such a startling way. Her pictures speak louder than words; she utilizes graphics to paint a new ideal in the rhetorical canon. This

ideal is acceptance and the widening of the lens of acceptable rhetorical practices and viewpoints.

Jan Swearingen

An ongoing history

Jan Swearingen is one of a growing number of historians of rhetoric who engage in the noble practice of rhetoric, while instructing young minds in the practice itself. She has written numerous articles, chapters, and books about various aspects of rhetoric, including women within rhetoric. Her creation of these mediums to discuss rhetoric and women within it, predictably, are also modern examples of meta-rhetoric. Her chapter “Song to Speech: The Origins of Early Epitaphia in Ancient Near Eastern Women’s Lamentations” analyzes the history of women who were not suppressed, draws attention to the fact that women became suppressed, and encourages further consideration of ancient women and their rhetorical history, while also presenting the active voice of a contemporary academic woman.

Meta in more ways than one: the chapter, this thesis

Swearingen’s chapter discusses in detail the existence of and reverence of women in the rhetorical tradition of lamenting the dead and praising the living. She focuses especially on early Near East, giving examples such as Deborah, “a judge in premonarchal Israel and [who] leads her people in singing the great songs of victory and lament that are precursors to the Psalms” (Swearingen 214). After establishing this understanding of the importance of women in these situations, she asks and later answers the question of when and how women’s suppression into the private sphere occurred, considering these facts. Her chapter is bursting with quotes from

historical occurrences, primary sources, and sharp instances of women's importance in ancient times and their later suppression.

Her engagement in this chapter points itself to the reality of meta-rhetoric in contemporary writing. She utilizes the academic study of historical rhetoric to create modern rhetoric. By showcasing the intelligence necessary to accurately and effectively analyze this ancient situation and its merits, Swearingen is able to also clearly indicate that women can engage in this academic discourse in today's rhetorical tradition. She continues the theme of Sappho and Bechdel, by utilizing a medium that is not inherently prescribed to women: that of the academic article, or chapter. She is self-aware; by writing this chapter focused on ancient times, she communicates a modern rhetorical scheme of the inclusion of women in both the historical and rhetorical canon.

She is also involved in the words of this thesis itself. Acting as research advisor, Swearingen is once again engaging in the creation of meta-rhetorical academic discourse. She is encouraging the creation of rhetoric in order to analyze rhetoric of the past, both near and distant.

Direct impact: today's meta-rhetoric

Swearingen has created a microcosm of the rhetorical field today within her analysis of ancient practices of women. The field is constantly expanding and adjusting its lens, as more and more women are analyzed and analyze, create based on creations. Swearingen and Bechdel among others have forced the field to expand with two contemporary means of creating meta-rhetoric: the graphic novel and the academic discourse. These two media carry powerful messages within

them. Specifically, the graphic novel holds an air of unconventionality and shock-value, to communicate an uncomfortable reality, while the academic discourse holds an air of intelligence and grace, to communicate an understanding of the past and present. Generally, they both allow for the reader to grasp that these women are not only providing a commentary on past rhetoric, but creating their own, in order to allow women's hands in those fields. They have realized that the private sphere is shattered; what's public is private, and vice versa. The means through which they communicate their rhetoric about rhetoric is able to be shocking, and in fact, has more rhetorical impact because of its shock value. While the ideas contained within Heloise and Sor Juana's letters were groundbreaking, Bechdel's graphic novel and Swearingen's academic chapter, as well as the ideas contained within them, are equally groundbreaking.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

Uniting the past and present: becoming meta

Direct inspiration: Sor Juana and Swearingen

The parenthesis at the end of this thesis title is a tongue-in-cheek nod to the entire purpose of the work itself. In short, I am allowed to write this thesis because of the tradition of these women, the precedent that they set up by engaging in meta-rhetoric. Specifically, Sor Juana and Swearingen set the most direct line of history in which this thesis continues.

Sor Juana's purpose was two-fold: personal and public. Her personal goal was to bitterly critique the establishment of the church and its requirement that she cease teaching and writing, because of her gender. She disapproved of this practice, and was offended that she was actively being written out of the rhetorical and educational canon. However, she obliged, because had she not, she would have been seen as an active enemy of the church, presenting even stronger grounds for her suppression. Her letter was her last opportunity to communicate her distaste for the status of women in the church, and she used it to the last letter.

Her public goal, though her letter was not going to be public for quite some time, was to fervently push for the education of women, and the recognition of women as legitimate and viable contributors to the rhetorical tradition. She wanted to have long-lasting effects on the condition of women in society, and she argued for equality. As a teacher herself, she recognized the struggles of male instructors trying to teach young girls while also maintaining the

appropriate relationship between student and teacher. However, the small percentage of women who were educated made the appropriate relationship issue unavoidable. Her last letter, though it was a surrender of sorts, was also a call to action for both men and women. Men needed to respect women as deserving of education and of creative license to engage in the rhetorical tradition, and women needed to actively push for these rights to be afforded to them.

Swearingen actively engages in the meta-rhetorical canon established here by identifying powerful women in the past, inquiring into why the tradition changed to suppress women, and implicitly urging society to reverse the process. Her research into the past has revealed that certain women were not always suppressed, and that the women who were not suppressed were able to utilize their situation in a meta-rhetorical fashion to allow their viewpoints to reach people. It has also shown that at some point, suppression became more and more of a cage that could not be escaped, even by engaging in expected rhetoric for women. By researching these ancient successes and subsequent trials of women, she reveals a call to action for two equally important ventures: to reveal more of these suppressed women and their meta-rhetorical traditions, and to engage actively in contemporary meta-rhetoric in order to further the tradition. By being a woman herself and engaging in this academic discourse, she is contributing to this continuing line, and fighting against suppression by engaging in the field.

Education precludes contribution

The continued research into these women, such as what Cheryl Glenn was able to accomplish in *Rhetoric Retold*, is what will set the tone for the future of the meta-rhetorical tradition in women's societal engagements. When more women are found throughout history who were

suppressed due to their gender, who defied the odds and were able to accomplish this “double-voice” of meta-rhetoric, a shift occurs in the academic and commercial world. Women are given more respect and due education in the academic sphere, both with publishing their work and educating younger women of their potential. Thus, society as a whole begins to respect women more as a gender, as the trickle-down effect from the universities and academics occurs. This result occurs because women like Heloise and Sor Juana were not afraid to engage in the expected rhetoric of their time with dangerous ideas, and because women like Alison Bechdel and Jan Swearingen were not afraid to engage with rhetoric that was vastly unexpected.

Ongoing and future implications

Why was this thesis successful?

This thesis was able to continue the tradition of Cheryl Glenn and Jan Swearingen. A continuum of meta-rhetorical women with a common goal of communicating ideas about society was established. Sor Juana and Heloise had modern ideas that were encapsulated in historical texts; specifically, appropriate texts for women of their time. Gender equality, women’s education, and virtue ethics, as well as the ability to engage with society in a more public forum, were all ideas that were accomplished through these women that wrote before their time. In addition, Alison Bechdel and Jan Swearingen established that engaging with society utilizing meta-rhetoric has expanded, so more options are available to achieve the most impact. Bechdel’s searing commentary on gender identity is best encapsulated in her graphic novel, which forces the reader to feel the discomfort of both her father and herself in the act of reading about it. Swearingen’s academic discourse beautifully illustrates how far women have come in the ability to gain respect and education, while also beginning to unearth women in the ancient past who received this same

treatment. Her work leaves a harsh question: why were women suppressed after already having equality, and how can they gain that equality back?

It was also successful because of its ability to engage in the field of meta-rhetoric while defining meta-rhetoric itself. Much like Cheryl Glenn, a list of suppressed women and their contributions to rhetoric have been thoroughly expounded, while also adding another woman to the meta-rhetorical timeline. Meta-rhetoric is maintaining a self-awareness throughout a work; knowing the impact one's work could, and hopefully will, have on society because of the way it is being written about society. This thesis was written academically to establish that this is an academic issue as well as a cultural issue. Both the academic and commercial spheres must respect women and reveal their past, present, and future contributions.

Now what?

This thesis opened up a world of women, suppressed, capable of impact, and yearning for their work to be continued and their voices to be heard. To continue their work, it must first of all be discovered. Academic research must delve deep into the throes of cultures and societies to unearth women who used their diaries, letters, and other private discourse to create a commentary on public issues, such as Heloise and Sor Juana did. Their work must then be publicized and analyzed. This step becomes the crucial meta-rhetorical tradition. A woman's analysis of and commentary on another woman's meta-rhetoric must create a new piece of meta-rhetoric through the scholarly process of drafting the analysis itself. They must be aware of the impact their writing will have on the present society as they discuss rhetoric of the near and distant past. Finally, these analyses must be given respect as they are, and taught to other women

in the more commercialized world. If respect is given in the academic arena to women such as Jan Swearingen and Cheryl Glenn, the hope is that the commercial arena will follow.

Intelligence should not be defined by gender, but rather by ability to engage with the world, both mentally and emotionally. I am allowed to write this thesis because women in history have risked their respect, their religion, and their acceptance as “normal” to communicate the ideal that women should be seen as individuals with a voice. I continue in their tradition with my own meta-rhetorical analysis of their work, and I conclude by proving that meta-rhetorical exchanges written by women contain gems of insight into the society of the time in which they were written. Those gems should be polished and allowed to shine in the museums of academic and commercial acceptability.

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