KERRIE L. CARSEY
York College of Pennsylvania

A Review of Lisa J. Shaver, *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

In recent years, the field of rhetoric studies has seen a boom in scholarship that establishes women's voices within the rhetorical tradition. Following Cheryl Glenn's advice to reexamine various women's rhetorical activities, while also critiquing a patriarchal tradition,[1] scholars have been about the business of recovering forgotten rhetors and texts. These efforts have resulted in subsequent growth in feminist historiography. In a 2002 special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly,* Richard Leo Enos offered "Rhetorical Sequencing" as an archeology-inspired research heuristic, encouraging scholars to discover new texts, reconstruct the rhetorical situation, analyze the discourse, and display the artifact in a "reconstructed context."[2] Similarly, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell advises scholars to recover women's shared rhetorical experience, analyze oppressions, and recuperate women's works, all for the purpose of "challenging the dead hand of the past."[3]

Religious figures have taken a central place in these recovery efforts. Glenn analyzes the rhetorical practices of Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Anne Askew. Nineteenth-century figures such as Abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimke and revival preacher Abigail Roberts have received significant attention. These remarkable women boldly asserted their right to occupy the public rhetorical spaces that had been culturally coded as masculine. They "regendered" these spaces through a variety of rhetorical strategies.[4]

However, with such focused attention on these audacious rhetors, scholars risk reinscribing women's lack of power by singling out these figures as rare exceptions. So claims Lisa J. Shaver in *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press.* Shaver closely examines three nineteenth-century Methodist periodicals to recover everyday rhetorical activities. She seeks to balance examinations of "the most ardent activists" with that of "the nameless women who exhibited influence through women's organizations, conventional women's roles, and evangelical sites such as the religious press" (6).

Shaver's scope is larger than contemporary readers might imagine. By the year 1850, over one-third of American churchgoers were members of the Methodist church (4), and that population was "overwhelmingly composed of women" (6).

---

[1] Cheryl Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1997).
[2] Richard Leo Enos, "The Archeology of Women in Rhetoric: Rhetorical Sequencing as a Research Method for Historical Scholarship," *Feminist Historiography in Rhetoric*. Special Issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32(1): 65-79 (2002).
[3] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Consciousness Raising: Linking Theory, Criticism, and Practice," *Feminist Historiography in Rhetoric*. Special Issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32(1): 45-64 (2002).
[4] Nan Johnson, *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 2002), 113.

The "little narratives" Shaver analyzes in Methodist periodicals were one valuable piece of a thriving religious culture. They also act as a "liminal space between private and public spheres" (13) in which "women could expand their sphere of operation while maintaining social respectability" (14). Thus, Shaver provides a model for a research method that will provide a richer portrait of women's rhetorical activities within patriarchal cultures and institutions.

In chapter one, "Dying Well," Shaver examines memoirs, little narratives of the deathbed experiences of pious women, in *Methodist Magazine*. Narratives often portrayed the subjects' patience in the fact of suffering and utter faith in the promise of heaven. Shaver calls these memoirs "carefully constructed rhetorical compositions" that the Methodist church used to evangelize and to create a community identity (19). This epideictic function invited the elevation of the deceased as an example of Christian character. And because of the Methodist church's emphasis on the personal religious experience, the publication of so many memoirs about women established a rhetorical space in which the women's devotion to God "became an act of independence and recognition of self worth" (28).

Memoirs could be several pages long, and in the first seven years of *Methodist Magazine*, amounted to hundreds of pages of reading (23). They typically contained narratives of the deceased's upbringing, conversion, and holy death. They also often included a moral. Shaver explores the rhetorical function of each element. Particularly striking is the frequent "antithesis between the weakening body and the strengthening soul," which made a case for a "Christian conception of death" (31). Thus, women found rhetorical agency as saints, worthy of emulation and useful as an evangelistic argument for the faith.

In chapter two, Shaver continues her examination of deathbed memoirs in *Methodist Magazine*, asserting that "the deathbed became a far-reaching pulpit for female adherents…elevating them to the role of minister" (36). Whereas antebellum Methodist women were barred from the pulpit, their final exhortations and the witness of their characters placed them in ministerial roles. Shaver grounds her claim in the work of Roxanne Mountford, who posits that in the nineteenth century, ideologies circulated heavily in spaces which were inscribed as either masculine or feminine.[5] Shaver states that while the pulpit was coded as a space for vigorous, strong, masculine bodies, the deathbed "was occupied by a weak, inferior body" (39) and therefore matched cultural characterizations of women. Add in the facts that the bedroom was considered the most private area of the domestic sphere (women's assigned sphere) and that women typically cared for the sick, and the deathbed became a feminine space. The memoirs published in *Methodist Magazine* blurred the lines between private and public by sharing these women's words and experience with a large reading audience. Thus, Shaver demonstrates how memoirs granted women a rare rhetorical agency. Shaver is careful to stipulate that male ministers often wrote these memoirs and that this "postmortem promotion" (36) was obviously all too brief. But she makes strong ties between women's exhortations and preaching, showing clear parallels between Methodist views of both women and clergy. The ministerial role takes shape in these memoirs through the narratives of self-sacrifice, modesty, and obedience to the will of God.

---

[5] Roxanne Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 2003).

In chapters three and four, Shaver turns her attention to the *Christian Advocate*, a publication that eclipsed *Methodist Magazine* to become one of the most popular publications in America in the 1820s. This periodical contained secular news, sermons, doctrinal statements and debates, religious anecdotes, and updates on several Methodist organizations. Their Ladies Department shared women's experiences as "domestic evangelists, benefactors, benevolent organizers, and volunteers in the church's evangelical outposts" (54). Chapter three, "Contained Inside the Ladies Department," explores this column's role in drawing "tight borders around women's proper roles and proper sphere" (53). In other words, this publication upheld the patriarchal confinement of women to the domestic sphere, where the woman's greatest virtue is selfless subservience. Through analysis of the *Christian Advocate's* accounts of women's pious activities, Shaver explores the troubling cultural dynamic of assuring women of their powerful domestic influence, while containing them within structures of patriarchy.

Chapter four, "Stepping Outside the Ladies Department," examines the rhetorical agency evident in women's activities as reflected in the *Christian Advocate*. Just as she did with the deathbed memoirs in chapters one and two, Shaver asserts the publication's role in blurring lines between public and private for Methodist women. The pages of the *Christian Advocate* brim with reports and narratives of women teaching and supervising within the Methodist church's massive, nationwide creation of Sunday school programs. Women also conducted visits to the sick and the poor, distributed religious tracts and Bibles, conducted revivals, and supported foreign and domestic missions. As with deathbed memoirs, the church transformed these actions into arguments for holy living. These women's personal sacrifices and door-to-door efforts to raise funds for social causes enabled the *Christian Advocate* to depict them as foot soldiers for the Gospel. However, this sanctioning of public social activism seems to have unintended consequences; women were gaining experience in administration of organizations and funds and were sharpening their "leadership and rhetorical skills" (83). Shaver shows that even as the *Christian Advocate* was constructing boundaries for women's activities, women were assuming roles outside those margins (103). Shaver is careful not depict the growth of women's rights as a steady and "direct evolutionary march," but is able to assert that these expanded activists roles "laid the groundwork for the next generation of female social reformers, temperance workers, and foreign missionaries" (104).

In the final chapter, Shaver introduces the reader to one more Methodist periodical: *The Ladies Repository and Gatherings of the West* (*LR*). Established in 1841 and running for thirty-five years, the *LR* "was the Methodist church's version of *Godey's Ladies Book*, which was the most popular women's magazine of the era" (107). The rise of LR demonstrates the church's acknowledgment that female readers were a valid and valuable audience. But even more significant is the publication's emphasis on women's education. Shaver explains that the editors of the *LR* "addressed the connection between education and piety" (108). Contributors did uphold traditional values, but they also fought vigorously for equal education of boys and girls, writing scathing attacks toward anyone who claimed that women could not or should not match men intellectually. Shaver contends that the "*LR* empowered and sponsored women's rhetorical development by encouraging them to develop their intellect and directing their attention toward broader concerns" (109).

The *LR* featured expository writing and in-depth discussions of theological, scientific, philosophical, historical, and political discussions. Editors' comments on these pieces "implied that women should be politically aware and politically active" (117). Although female writers still did not publish sermons and theological treatises, they did contribute other theological genres such as meditations, Sunday school lessons, devotionals, and religious fiction, in addition to other genres such as poetry and travel writing. Particularly compelling is Shaver's exploration of Mrs. Lyttleton F. Morgan's series of profiles of female Bible characters. Shaver applies Jacqueline Jones Royster's "strategy of imagination"[6] to analyze Morgan's scriptural exegesis. Because so many female Bible characters exist in fragments, mentioned briefly with few narrative details, Morgan inserts emotion into the narrative and must imagine the anguish of Sarah as she prayed for her son Isaac, hoping against hope that as she gazed toward Mount Moriah that she would not see "the curling smoke which rose from the funeral pile of her only child" (123). Given the long, difficult road women preachers would face, and continue to face, in evangelical churches, this exegesis of biblical texts in an antebellum periodical is significant. Shaver ends the chapter with the bold assertion that by 1876, when the *LR* ended its run, "the magazine's mission was accomplished. It had helped usher in a new generation of club women, college women, teachers, and missionaries, as well as activist temperance women and advocates for women's rights" (125). So even as the magazine upheld traditional notions of marriage and motherhood, its efforts to develop women's literacy and self-cultivation further propelled women into public rhetorical activity.

In the Epilogue, Shaver hones an argument she has been developing incrementally throughout the book. Just as women's social and rhetorical pursuits in the Methodist press tend to blur lines between public and private, so the margins between rhetoric and feminist activism prove messy and hard to define. Yet today, scholars tend to cleanly divide feminism and religion. While this demarcation is relatively new, the tensions are not. Historically, religious women activists have viewed feminist activists as too radical, while feminists have viewed the religious as complicit in women's oppression. Shaver contends that this dynamic obscures common goals and obstructs the work of feminist scholars. She reminds her reader that "The first American women to speak before large male and female audiences were female preachers and evangelists, bolstered by their devout faith and prophetic calls" (128). Shaver provides a robust list of feminists, from Susan B. Anthony to Frances Willard, who grounded their beliefs in Quaker or Methodist doctrine and peppered their discourse with scriptural proofs. Further, the entire book, in its explorations of the greater levels of political agency within Methodism, balances claims that religion primarily oppresses women. Shaver asserts that religion can repress and empower, assigning women to subordinate roles or asserting an inherent, God-given equality with men. To "crop" religious beliefs from the portraits of early feminists is to turn a blind eye to the motivations and experience of these valuable texts and figures in the rhetorical tradition. Shaver thus opens important intersections between feminism, religion, and rhetoric studies.

---

[6] Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African American Women* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press: 1981).

This point leads to an important question that pervades Shaver's study. How do scholars recover women's voices when many primary texts about their experiences were written by men? Shaver does not hide the fact that most deathbed memoirs and many narratives of women's social activism were written by ministers. To what extent have these writers altered reality or coopted women's very lives in order to serve the writers' rhetorical purposes? Shaver addresses these questions intermittently, in direct and indirect ways. In the introduction, she employs Vicki Tolar Collins' term, "rhetorical accretion" to describe the act of speaking for, and possibly speaking over, another.[7] Shaver responds to this possibility of male ministers redefining their female parishioners by extrapolating the "collateral effect[s]" of this rewriting, such as the elevation of these women to the role of minister, an office they were unable to hold within the church (13).

Further, by progressing from deathbed memoirs to the devotions and political discourse in the *Ladies Repository*, Shaver surveys the shift toward women writing their own texts. She then can assert a causal link between earlier elevations of women's holy, evangelistic persuasiveness and the very opportunity to contribute to the Methodist press. Finally, Shaver claims from the start that she is examining the rhetorical strategies of Methodist women, and also of the press itself. This larger focus on the institution allows for a more nuanced treatment of that "odd coexistence" of upholding traditional gender roles on one hand and encouraging women's intellectual development and social activism on the other (125). Still, questions about Methodist women's subjectivity amidst this rhetorical accretion can hound the reader; thus, the book's introduction would benefit from a centralized discussion, and perhaps a more detailed heuristic, of feminist historiography.

In her efforts to analyze little narratives, to re-blur the lines between feminism and religion, and to establish a model for reclaiming lost voices, Shaver exhibits vast knowledge of the Methodist church itself—its doctrines, practices, and texts. Her knowledge and experience equip her to navigate Methodist periodicals and explore the complex power relations inherent in the little narratives therein. In all, Shaver sets a high standard for recovering voices from the "ambiguous and liminal spaces in which women are both empowered and contained" (133).

---

[7] Vicki Tolar Collins, "The Speaker Respoken: Material Rhetoric as Feminist Methodology," *College English*. 61(5): 545-573 (1999).

©Kerrie L. Carsey

Caresey, Kerrie L. review of Lisa J. Shaver, *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012) in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 13 no. 2 (Spring 2014): 132-137.