In the end this small book by Jon Huer (203 pages plus bibliography and index) fails to provide the solid defense of tenure the author apparently intended. The research is dated, the analysis is slanted and oversimplified, and the presentation is careless. Jon Huer has set himself a challenging task, to defend the institution and at the same time attack those who embody it. Huer has the right to take on this task without putting his job on the line. As a reader and as a defender of academic tenure, I wish Jon Huer had lived up to the truth-seeking ideal on which the book is based.

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Every book generates itself from within some desire—more or less consciously specified—and fulfills or completes that desire (more or less successfully) through the labor of writing. Jarratt describes the desire from which her work moves in this way: “I begin with an impulse, a wish, an intuition—a desire for a different kind of history.” The sophists, of course, are the object of desire here as well as a different form of historical reflection. Jarratt turns to the sophistic tradition to expand our conceptualization of classical rhetoric which, she rightly claims, has been dominated too long by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Following Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Hayden White, and working alongside other revisionary historians in rhetoric and composition studies (e.g., Sharon Crowley, John Schilb, James Berlin, Victor Vitanza), Jarratt conceives history not as a science but as a kind of strategic intervention in the present. Thus, a history of sophistic rhetoric is meant to serve as “an alternative warrant” for contemporary rhetoric and composition studies. The desire for a different kind of history is also a desire for a different kind of future.

In a clearly written, highly readable style, Rereading the Sophists broaches the question of history and historiography most directly in the first chapter, where Jarratt looks to the sophists (particularly Gorgias and Protagoras) for a particular attitude toward history and for an identifiable practice of historiography. She aligns sophistic practice with a poststructuralist theory of history (e.g., Nietzschean genealogy), arguing that the sophists’ own historical work provides a model for rhetorical
histories that do not claim to directly represent the past but serve the social needs for the cultures out of which they arise. Citing Hayden White’s famous phrase, Jarratt observes that rhetorical histories are “provisional, culturally relevant ‘fictions of factual representation’” (12). In her own representation of sophistic discourse, Jarratt finds the sophists engage in disruptive and subversive practices—that is, they seek to disrupt and subvert the conventions of factual, continuous history, historical time, and simple cause/effect relations. The sophists provide an alternative model for historiography in which historical material need not form a neat, continuous chain from beginning to end (18). Through her analysis of the sophistic practices of antithesis and parataxis, Jarratt finds a model for opening up historical narratives to revision and reconstruction but one that does not abandon the need for a narrative that promotes action in the social and political world.

More is at stake in Rereading the Sophists than the articulation of a sophistic practice of historiography for rhetoric. What ultimately drives Jarratt’s research (which she acknowledges) is a desire to spell out a relationship between sophistic rhetoric and feminism and to align sophistic rhetoric with a form of gendered historiography. In working out the connection between sophistic rhetoric and feminism (primarily in the third chapter), Jarratt relies on the Derridean deconstruction of western philosophy to claim that both “sophist” and “woman” suffer a similar form of intellectual marginalization at the hands of philosophy, the consequence of which is that the sophists “take on a striking similarity to a discursive construct of woman” (64). Not surprisingly, then, the same attributes turn out to produce “woman” and “sophist” discursively: irrationality, magical or hypnotic power, subjectivity, emotional sensitivity, and most important the devaluation of both sophists and women through a reduction to style (65). While recognizing that the match may not be perfect, Jarratt nevertheless remarks that the number of similarities between “sophist” and “woman” suggests the possibility of tracing their parallel fates through history (66). Aware of the difficulties of pushing the analogy too far, she does not pursue this historical work here.

Instead, Jarratt turns her attention, once she has established the parallel, away from sophism and feminism and toward feminism and sophism. In other words, she wants to show that contemporary feminists—including Gayatri Spivak, Hélène Cixous, and Nancy Miller—are engaged in the practice of sophistic rhetoric. In particular, she focuses on Hélène Cixous and écriture feminine, suggesting that the similarities of Cixous’s discourse to the sophistic style are “striking.” The observation of their similarities (their mutual celebration of sensual pleasure in the sounds of words, the use of antithesis, the emphasis on storytelling, and the development of poetic effects in prose) leads Jarratt to conclude that
sophistic style “anticipat[es] in a fashion [the French feminist practice of] ecriture feminine” (72). Jarratt knows better than to claim that the ancient sophists were feminists (though Gorgias does come off as a prototypical male feminist in her rereading of his defense of Helen), but she does claim that contemporary feminists become sophists “by describing rhetorical solutions to the crucial problem of defining a theory with the most power for changing women’s lives” (78). Earlier Jarratt remarks that in the business of history-writing any realignment has a purpose, and her alignment between feminism and sophistic rhetoric is motivated by a need to build a coalition that benefits both parties: Feminism helps rhetoric by providing a way (and an imperative) to recover a range of marginal voices in its history; sophistic rhetoric helps the political project of feminism by providing additional “leverage for dislodging the patriarchal institutions whose foundations were laid during the sophists’ time” (79).

This is Jarratt’s strategy throughout her book: to observe parallels, resonances, echoes, and similarities—in short, to describe or construct analogs, identities, and alliances. While the parallel between sophistic rhetoric and feminist theory and practice seems finally to be the most important and productive association, other parallels are important to her story. In the fourth and final chapter, “Sophistic Pedagogy, Then and Now,” for example, Jarratt suggests that the sophists can indicate progressive directions for composition teaching today. To make these suggestions, she must first establish the relevance of sophistic pedagogy to the contemporary context; thus, she claims a parallel exists between the rise of the sophists as professional teachers (a change that signaled major political and social change associated with democracy) and the rise of the composition course in the 1960s which, she offers, is also a revolution in teaching produced by a period with similar democratic goals. Since the 60s, the composition course has established itself as a site for “re-democratization,” and sophistic rhetoric provides the historical precedent and model for what we now call “education for democracy.” With this parallel established, it is not surprising that Jarratt then suggests a parallel between ancient sophistic pedagogy and twentieth-century critical pedagogy. In fact, she calls critical pedagogy (especially when modified by feminist practice) a contemporary sophistic because it revives the democratic goals of sophistic rhetoric.

I cannot fault (in fact, I share) Jarratt’s desire to make the best case for the sophists, and I do not question her effort to endorse what she sees as the most promising basis for composition pedagogy—critical pedagogy reframed by feminist theory and practice. Yet her strategy of remarking parallels and establishing similarities is the most frustrating aspect of Rereading the Sophists. As the dominant strategy of
conceptualization and argumentation in this book, it is finally less persuasive than it is hypnotic in its pure suggestiveness. And this is no small problem, for Jarratt wants, most of all, to make her case persuasively. A sophistic method, she writes, works less according to logical validity and more on the force of persuasive and aesthetic appeal (28). The primary reason this strategy falls short of persuading me is that it often simplifies precisely where complexity is wanted. The point of the sophistic method is “to expose an increasing complexity of evidence or data, to resist the simplification which covers over subtleties, to exploit complexity toward the goal of greater explanatory power” (19).

The effort to identify similarity and create parallelism between discontinuous phenomena—Nietzschean genealogy and sophistic historiography, “sophist” and “woman,” ancient Greece and twentieth century America—has the effect of eliminating complexity, difference, and specificity and of creating continuity between distant historical contexts and problematic. It contradicts the emphasis on discontinuity and difference in gendered discursive practices. How is it possible to identify such diverse feminists as Miller, Spivak, and Cixous with sophistic rhetoric without somehow reducing the complexities of feminism or of sophistic rhetoric? If we speak of feminisms, should we not also speak of sophistic rhetorics? In Rereading the Sophists, however, sophistic rhetoric emerges as a unitary phenomenon, and patriarchy, from the sophists’ time to our own, seems to have no history whatsoever. The past may be a disputed area, subject to rereading, but it is also and irrevocably a foreign country.

Jarratt suggests that the history she desires “plays with material like Frankenstein with body parts” (28). Here she wants to suggest that a sophistic practice does not expose or uncover the unknown but rearranges and refigures the known, which means that invention can be collapsed with arrangement as a single canon of rhetoric (an interesting idea but also a reduction that could mean a loss of complexity). It also means that rhetorical historiography may seem monstrous as it fulfills its critical, strategic, and revisionary purpose. In Rereading the Sophists, however, and in spite of Jarratt’s best intentions and very capable navigations, I see the future envisioned disappearing beyond the horizon of resemblances, less than monstrous and all too familiar in its contours.

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