The Feminization of Composition: Questioning the Metaphors That Bind Women Teachers

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Over the past two decades, the field of composition has acquired the rather Janus-faced reputation of being "feminized," simultaneously welcoming the work of women, while marginalizing them as part-time faculty, lecturers, and adjuncts. As Susan Miller notes, composition collects women "like bugs in a web," an apt simile for the current situation of female part-timers (39). Indeed, Sue Ellen Holbrook describes composition as a field "saturated by women practitioners, focused on pedagogy, allied with education departments and school teaching, conceived as having a 'service' and elementary place in the curriculum, and pervaded by paraprofessionalism" (211).

Hence, three important considerations keep the "feminization" metaphor alive for composition teachers. First, composition is regarded by many as a "service" course that teaches "skills." Second, composition has acquired the status of being "drudge" or apprentice work because it is labor intensive and low-paying. Third, composition, with its reputation of being "service"-oriented and unprofessional, has become the province of women part-timers, adjunct faculty, and graduate students with only a few tenured, full-time women faculty sprinkled in between.

Thus, the "feminization" metaphor has a double-edged meaning for women in composition, simultaneously signifying their presence as part-timers and adjuncts, while also signifying their absence in positions of power and influence. Yet "feminization" does not necessarily correspond with a move toward feminist positions. Instead, it defines the work of women composition teachers as both literally "female" and "feminized" in the pejorative sense. Donna Haraway's general definition of "feminized" provides a useful understanding of how "feminization" denotes marginalized status. To be "feminized" is to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an
existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. (Haraway 86)

For the past century, women have “feminized” the teaching profession (particularly in lower level and lower paid positions). As early as 1888, an investigator for the “Association for the Advancement of Women” declared that “67% of the teachers in the country were women”—a noticeable presence, yet along with that noticeable presence was a noticeable absence of women in positions of power—only 4% of those women occupied administrative positions” (Grumet 83). Women’s entrance into the teaching profession corresponded with Horace Mann’s emphasis on a pedagogy that fostered character training and moral development in pupils, the “proof of which must be the capacity for voluntary obedience to duty” (69). While Mann argued that female teachers were more suited to cultivating morality in their students, he also kept his eye on the fact that it was cheaper to hire women than men. For nineteenth-century women, teaching often meant taking low pay and accepting harsh working conditions under the guise of noble, maternal service. In Mother/teacher, a study of the feminization of American education, Redding Sugg writes: “The first profession opened to women consisted of the sale of sexual love and was called prostitution; the second, an initiative of nineteenth-century Americans, was a traffic in maternal love and was called pedagogy” (Preface).

While Sugg’s analogy is extreme, he does point out the problems with exploitation endemic to the “feminized” field of teaching. Susan Miller describes the female composition teacher as having “qualities much like those of the mythologized mother; self-sacrifice, dedication, caring, and enormous capacities for untheorized attention to detail” (46). Women composition teachers continue to carry on the tradition of nurturing students, though not always unproblematically, as many have introduced feminist pedagogies as strategies of resistance and transformation. While feminist pedagogies resist patriarchal constructions of teachers, students, and the classroom, the metaphors commonly used to describe feminist teaching as “nurturing” and “mothering” risk being caught up in traditional inscriptions of the “feminine.” The authors of “The Politics of Nurturance” state: “We are, inescapably, also [our students’] mothers—necessary for comfort, but reinforcing a feared and fearful dependency” (Culley et al. 14).

Unfortunately, constructing the female composition teacher as mother reinforces dominant culture’s expectations for women as “natural” care-givers and nurturers. Furthermore, the image of the nurturing, sacrificing, mother/teacher is often held in opposition to the stereotype of the “arid, strident” feminist teacher. In the patriarchal economy of the university, feminist teaching is often regarded as the “locus of imbalance,
fanaticism, [and] eccentricity” (Bauer 386). Overall, the stock images that depict women teachers as either nurturing mothers or fanatic feminists downplay the challenges that feminist teachers issue to their students. Adrienne Rich writes of these challenges as a refusal “to accept passive, obedient learning and insist upon critical thinking” (244). “We can become harder on our women students,” she writes, “giving them the kinds of ‘cultural prodding’ that men receive, but on different terms and in a different style” (244). Feminist teachers can nurture their students, yet challenge them to think critically about their notions of gendered identity in the classroom and in the “world outside.” Mediating the process between nurture and challenge, however, is a difficult task that leads to resistances and ambivalences among teachers and students. In “The ‘F’ Word in the Classroom,” Dale Bauer argues that each agent—whether teacher or student—is responsible as citizen for ethical choices, although those choices often involve contradictory positions. Because agency involves a complex intersection of historically conditioned practices, discourses, and customs or habits, choice is never unambiguous or easy or unmediated. (388)

In Bauer’s description of the classroom, the feminist teacher is more aptly characterized as a mediator and facilitator instead of care-giving mother.

While feminist pedagogy provides a chance for composition teachers to challenge patriarchal ways of teaching writing, there is still the issue of inequity for women composition teachers. Like nineteenth-century schoolteachers, women composition teachers are still being paid less than their male counterparts and have fewer tenured positions. In 1980 two-thirds (approximately 64%) of the women in English departments (many of them composition teachers) were instructors, lecturers, or assistant professors (Holbrook 208). Furthermore, there is still a significant inequity in the number of articles published by women in the journals that shape composition studies, publication being the primary way institutions reward tenure, salary increases, release time, and travel money. Theresa Enos’s 1988 mini-study on the number of females published as opposed to the number of males published in journals—such as College English, CCC, PreText, and Rhetoric Review—demonstrates that men are more likely to be published despite the fact that they are a “minority” group in Rhetoric and Composition (213). These statistics should come as no surprise. The large number of unpublished, hence untenured, part-time women composition teachers corresponds to deeply ingrained social and economic traditions that have designated teaching as women’s work.
Moreover, teaching composition is still regarded in many circles as a sort of English department “housework” in which women “tidy up” student essays with painstaking, careful commentary and hours devoted to students in one-on-one conferencing. Meryl Altman further unpacks the “composition as housework” metaphor with a series of specific associations. Composition, she writes, “carries low professional status; [and] in many places...doesn’t really count as professional work at all (it is done by adjunct faculty and graduate students)” (501). In addition, teaching composition “is a task overwhelmingly performed by women; this is a national fact and problem, which no one in power talks about very much” (501). Hence, part-time composition teachers have much in common with the proverbial housewife who contributes greatly to the running of the household (or the university) but gets no actual recognition for it (e.g., tenure, salary increases, office space, resources).

As a “refugee” from the part-time, community college circuit, I am well acquainted with the feelings of disassociation and frustration that come from having an uncertain professional future. Part of what drove me from part-time composition teaching back to graduate school was not only the working conditions and low pay, but the fact that I felt too fragmented, alone, and cut off from conversations with my colleagues. All I had to do was look around me at the community college I worked at and I knew, by a quick head-count, that women were the shoestring part-timers and “freeway fliers” who traveled interstate I-5 daily, stopping to teach class after class at respective community colleges.

Now that I’ve returned to graduate school, I’m often told by my male counterparts that the fact that I am a woman and a feminist, combined with my Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition, will guarantee me a job and success. As one earnest male colleague bound for the MLA said, “I wish I was a woman this year. You women have it made—no one wants to hire white males.” Behind that comment stands the misconception that being a “marketable” woman and being hired will lead to success, publications, promotion, recognition. The story remains only half-told. Admittance to a male-centered institutional hierarchy does not guarantee success. Once women are “in the door,” the real difficulty begins. Sexual harassment, male professors who mentor then marry or have affairs with their female graduate students, inequity of pay and promotion are realities in institutions that are powered by men and staffed by women. As Adrienne Rich states:

The university is above all a hierarchy. At the top is a small cluster of highly paid and prestigious persons, chiefly men, whose careers entail the services of a very large base of ill-paid or unpaid persons, chiefly women: wives, research assistants,
secretaries, teaching assistants, cleaning women, waitresses in
the faculty club, lower-echelon administrators, and women stu-
dents who are used in various ways to gratify the ego. (136)

In this age of "post-feminist" thought, the social and economic
issues at stake for women in composition are often ignored. Part of a
challenge to feminist consciousness and feminist teaching seems to have
been spurred by the postmodern emphasis on metaphors of the "femi-
nine." French theorists such as Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, and Lyotard
have used the "feminine" to signify that which is outside the Cartesian
subject. Thus, "woman" is used to signify a break or rupture with
enlightenment values like Truth and Reason (the "feminine" becomes
"untruth" and a turn away from reason). Elspeth Probyn further de-
scribes the postmodern use of "feminine" metaphors as an encoding
process in which women, or impossible representations of them, serve as
"images without referents, bits of the feminine manufactured in the
media simulacrum. As such, they are essentially unconnected, not only
to each other, but also to any political position" (35)). One glaring
example of this phenomenon occurs in critical discourse where it has
become common for male theorists to adopt metaphors of the "feminine"
as metaphors for reading, writing, and teaching. We have deconstructionist
Jonathon Culler reading as a woman, Jacques Derrida writing as a
woman, and male compositionists celebrating a "feminine" pedagogical
style. This feminine metaphor "mania," in many cases, serves as a sort of
linguistic version of the invasion of the "body snatchers." As Alice
Jardine states: "To accept a metaphorization, a semiosis of woman...
means risking once again the absence of women as subjects" (37).

Exploring how metaphors of the "feminine" operate is crucial to
understanding how the symbolic functions in maintaining the oppres-
sion of women's material and social bodies. While it would seem that
metaphors of the "feminine" put women into discourse, in actuality, these
metaphors serve to reinforce traditionally inscribed feminine values
within a patriarchal context. One obvious example is the time-worn
maxim that women teachers are "naturally" more nurturing than male
teachers and thus more willing to accept a "psychic income" as compen-
sation for heavy teaching loads and stacks of freshman essays. In
addition, this attitude leads to the widespread belief that the "feminiza-
tion" of composition (the sheer number of women in the field) means that
composition is a field heavily influenced by feminism, a field where
feminists can flourish. Elizabeth Flynn counters that argument, stating
that "the fields of feminist studies and composition studies have not
engaged each other in a serious or systematic way" (425).

Since 1988, the feminist work of Flynn herself, Dale Bauer, Susan
Jarratt, Susan Miller, Joy Ritchie and others has provided a context in
which feminists have posed questions. This work is the beginning of a
dialogue about the "place" and "mission" of feminism in composition
studies. This dialogue, however, is limited to those who have access to
study groups, scholarly journals, and those who have time for reflection
upon methodologies, goals, and directions. There are many women
writing teachers who are part-time, scrambling to teach and grade papers
as well as negotiating other obligations, chiefly home, family, and other
employment. How can these women's voices and experiences be recog-
nized?

One hopeful area for recognition of part-time women composition
teachers is through the writing of feminist histories of the field that
highlight the working conditions and experiences of part-time women
faculty. Susan Miller's "The Feminization of Composition," Sue Ellen
Holbrook's "Women's Work: The Feminizing of Composition," and
Sharon Crowley's "Three Heroines: An Oral History" are valuable
histories—or "herstories"—of the "feminization" of composition. Femi-
nists in composition studies need to write more histories like these,
histories that fill in the blanks that James Berlin, Stephen North, and other
composition historians have left out in the parades of names, dates, and
definitions of discourse communities. As Adrienne Rich writes: "Our
history is the history of the majority of the species, yet the struggles of
women for a 'human' status have been relegated to the footnotes, to the
sidelines" (204). Many who are now graduate students and junior and
senior faculty in composition studies have their professional beginnings
in part-time composition teaching. Many will never forget the feeling of
being fragmented, jumbled between multiple teaching jobs. Many are
still in those very positions.

As composition studies continues to define itself as a profession, it
is important that women's voices be heard—the voices of not only the
full-time women faculty who have "made it," but women composition
teachers who are struggling with difficult working conditions. Feminist
compositionists need to question the metaphors that bind them as "my-
thologized mother/teachers" and ask themselves to what extent they are
being absented by those metaphors. Through analyzing the way women
composition teachers are constructed materially and metaphorically, and
through writing the histories of women in our field, we can chip away at
the grand master-narrative that has kept women in composition in a
"feminized" position.

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Works Cited


