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A Feminist Legacy: the Rhetoric and Pedagogy of Gertrude Buck represents a thorough and respectable treatment of the seminal contributions of Buck. Bordelon’s endeavor to recover Buck’s contributions to rhetorical history and thereby “rectify the marginalization and erasure of women in the history of rhetoric and composition” is judicious (6). This book is significant in light of the current resurgence of rhetorical studies, supported by the academy’s eagerness to unearth works of unrecognized or undocumented contributors to the field has supported. It exposes not only the discriminatory proclivity of traditional agonistic rhetoric of the nineteenth century, but also explores the impact of the social and political activism of women who labored to transcend it—their influence in education and society and the legacy they bestowed. Bordelon’s study extends the focus of preceding works, which primarily address Buck’s contribution to rhetoric and argumentation. They were largely analyzed outside the context of nineteenth-century historical setting and within the milieu of current practice. Bordelon elects to contextualize Buck’s contributions within a larger framework that includes its historical context and application to current practices. Bordelon scrutinizes Buck’s work inside the more expansive context of Progressive America and the reform endeavors of middle-class women, stressing the social, political, and communal nature of Buck’s involvement in “broader reform efforts” (121). She thereby presents an argument against the commonly held notion that women’s entrance into the academy only “feminized and personalized the teaching of rhetoric in the latter part of the nineteenth century” (121). Bordelon sets out to valorize Buck’s efforts and succeeds. A Feminist Legacy is a comprehensive study that could help historians to understand the significant impact of the rhetorical activities of nineteenth-century women writers, both then and now.

The text’s conservative size masks the wealth of detailed information rhetoricians and historians will find enlightening: this book of merely 241 pages has dedicated 46 pages to features that are useful for future researchers. Bordelon provides details like box and file numbers for archival sources in the list of primary sources; a separate list of secondary sources; a section called “notes to pages” that gives additional explanations about portions of the text; and an index. To future researchers, she generously bequeaths information harvested from many hours of archival research, hoping readers will embrace the process of rethinking archival methodology (8). The detailed twelve-page introduction delineates Bordelon’s motivation for this research, her specific focus for each chapter, and a mini critique of Buck’s duality. Consequently, the reader is acquainted with the author’s purpose for the text, which sets the tone for the in-depth discussion that follows. Bordelon’s first-rate job outlining her own goals for the text and inserting Buck’s overall goals as an educator-reformer, however, make the subsequent repetition of those goals seem redundant. The book comes replete with an embedded photo album, which invokes a (re)memory of women’s obvious presence in the academy, A Feminist Legacy, the latest addition to “Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms,” is a perfect fit for the series, which espouses the interdisciplinary nature of rhetoric and feminism and showcases how these methods change the attributes of the rhetorical tradition from elitist, agonistic, male-dominated, and public to display the more egalitarian, dialogic, irenic, enriching and private qualities attributed by re-gendered, inclusionary rhetorics.

Bordelon’s discussion begins with an overview of Buck’s life grafted onto chapter 1’s exploration of Buck’s feminism and “social” outlook, analyzing how those characteristics informed Buck’s classroom pedagogy and fashioned her moral code and rhetoric. Bordelon argues that Buck’s social focus informed her feminism, which was implicit in all her interests—pedagogy, rhetoric, theater and organization—and was more akin to “social feminism,” which embraced reform that included, yet exceeded, the cause of women’s rights (14). Buck’s stance that people are fundamentally “social” beings manifested itself in her perspective that rhetoric is a device that equips them to develop parity in their relationships. Bordelon proposes that Buck’s ethics were inherent in her reactions to and participation in the various reform movements of the Progressive Era—education, women’s suffrage and the Little Theatre Movement. She also illustrates how, in lieu of Kant’s traditional fare of ethics and the agonistic approaches to rhetoric that ruled the day, Buck fashioned women-centered alternatives (149). A reader may feel somewhat bereft, however, of the personal essence of the subject since there are few personal, familial details that may have softened the portrayal of Buck as primarily cerebral.

This author’s admiration for her subject is evident in the meticulous narrative details of Buck’s educational and professional life and work, and the result is a fairly unbiased analysis of Buck’s contributions. Bordelon highlights the many “firsts” associated with the pioneering educator: for example, Buck was the first Ph.D. recipient in rhetoric and composition in the United States. The magnitude of such accomplishments attests to the viability of Buck’s candidacy for recovery, and Bordelon’s prudence in undertaking the task. However, to her credit she does
scrutinize the constraints and contradictions evident in Buck, Vassar College, and the Progressive Era, thereby making her evenhanded discussion credible. Though this book is largely about Buck’s contributions, Bordelon is insightful in including others whose efforts intersected with Buck’s or through whom Buck’s influence garnered significant contributions in the field of social education. Chapter 2 touches on the similarity between Buck and Harriet Scott’s endeavor to democratize pedagogy, and Bordelon underscores the efforts of other women in the period. She describes the pattern of neglect apparent in privileged eastern and coed-universities where men were revered while women were ignored. In the next three chapters, Bordelon analyzes exactly how Buck’s Vassar experience influenced her initiatives in the English Department and affected her collaboration with her colleague Laura Wylie; contextualizes the rhetorician’s feminist approach to teaching argumentation; and investigates Buck’s involvement in founding the Poughkeepsie Community Theatre, which linked Vassar with the surrounding community. By examining how Buck and Wylie introduced democratic writing practices in college, Bordelon’s study furthers Lucille M. Schultz’s work on nineteenth century children’s composition texts and the democratic writing practices in American schools (7). In addition, Bordelon assesses Buck’s emphasis on the inductive method, evaluates her textbooks, particularly *A Course in Argumentation* (1899), and compares Buck’s methods with those of her contemporaries Adams Sherman Hill’s *The Foundations of Rhetoric* (1892), with its apparent bias against women, versus that of Joseph V. Denney and Fred Newton Scott’s *Composition-Rhetoric: Designed for Use in Secondary School* (1897), a more accommodating resource for teachers. Bordelon concludes that Buck’s method of encouraging personal observation and free thinking “challenged the conservative, patriarchal emphasis of traditional methods” (104). In its entirety, this book contributes to the efforts to (re)gender the history of rhetoric as Bordelon unequivocally recovers the significance of Buck’s rhetoric and feminist democratic pedagogy in argumentation, which has become a lasting legacy.

My review of this book would be negligent if it failed to acknowledge a current bequest of nineteenth-century women scholars—a woman’s right to participate in public life. That past commitment is a legacy to this twenty-first century’s historic moment seen in Senator Hillary Clinton’s 2008 campaign to win the Democratic Party’s nomination for candidacy in the presidential elections. This is a moment of recovery not only of women’s works but also of their involvement in public life. This is a significant site for discussion of women’s progress, considering that the contributions of women writers, scholars, activists, and reformers were largely criticized or ignored by the male-dominated system a century ago. Many of their works are considered examples of cutting-edge scholarship and pedagogical brilliance, which gave way to influential current-day theories and practices. In consideration of current interdisciplinary interests in rhetoric and composition to transform the rhetorical tradition from the visages of discriminatory agnostic practice to a (re)gendered inclusionary one, Bordelon’s book is decidedly timely and welcome. If rhetoric and feminist scholars are interested in connecting rhetorical inquiry with contemporary issues of opportunity and diversity, we need to acknowledge those pioneering women who have contributed to theory and pedagogy in rhetoric and composition—and include their works in our canon.

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