
Reviewed by Dara Rossman Regaignon, Pomona College

Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women’s Tradition, 1600-1900 is in many ways the critical companion to Donawerth’s excellent anthology of women’s rhetorical theory, Rhetorical Theory by Women before 1900. Whereas that anthology begins in the fifth century BCE and includes authors from China as well as Europe and the Americas, this volume is focused on an English and American rhetorical theory that appeared during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Donawerth elaborates the 300-year history of a transatlantic rhetorical theory articulated by women about women’s speech and writing—a theory carefully documented in Rhetorical Theory. Conversational Rhetoric offers careful and detailed analysis of numerous important texts of rhetorical theorists, and will serve as an important touchstone for students and scholars working on those women’s work for some time to come. As a work of “revisionist and critical or ‘constructionist’ history of rhetorical theory” (xi), this book shows how women rhetorical theorists used conversation—intimate, informal, dialogic—as a “model for all discourse” (xi), offering a vision of communication that both complemented and challenged the masculinist emphasis on oratory, declamation, and argument.

The primary focus of the book is the female rhetorical theory that first started to appear in England between 1600 and 1800, in part through the influence of the work of the much-translated French author, Madeleine de Scudéry. This was a time when public speaking was particularly gendered, but during which access to education was becoming more and more widely available. As a result of both of these factors, writers were thinking about the nature and possibilities of women’s speech (2-3). To varying degrees throughout the period (and depending on class position, as well as other factors), women’s speech was restricted to private, interpersonal settings and to domestic, familial and often pedagogical, purposes. As a result, when women wrote or spoke to articulate their place in the salon culture of seventeenth-century Paris or eighteenth-century London, to justify girls’ education, to defend women’s rights, or to trumpet the cultural and political significance of feminine influence, they drew on the dialogic, consensus-based, and audience-focused nature of conversation for the framework that excused their speech (16). As Donawerth shows throughout the study, this model creates an ideal rhetoric that is relaxed rather than declamatory, intimate rather than formal, and peculiarly attuned to kairos.

The book is primarily organized by genre, although in several cases the genres map onto historical period, with detailed analyses of specific texts; this
organizational scheme echoes that in the Introduction to *Rhetorical Theory* (see pp. xxi-xxxiii). Chapter one focuses on the dialogues of Madeleine de Scudéry, Margaret Cavendish, Bathsua Makin, and Mary Astell. These treatises make no pretensions to opening up space for women as orators, but instead focus on the importance of women's education given their central roles in childrearing and letter writing, and as *salon* hostesses (18). In the service of these goals they begin to justify and theorize women's (public) speech by describing it in the non-threatening terms of conversation. Chapter two builds on these insights to show how conduct books in Britain and the U.S. further developed this notion over the course of the nineteenth century. Referring to one another and to at least some of the authors discussed in the first chapter, writers such as Hannah More, Lydia Sigourney, Eliza Farrow, Florence Hartley, and Jennie Willing argue that conversation and letter writing are rhetorical activities of equal (if different) importance to oratory and essay writing. Coding such activities as female and yet still widely influential, these authors use the ideology of separate spheres to make space for women in public, civic discourse.

Chapters three and four describe how this conversational model was used even more directly to justify women's public speaking. The third chapter—which spans the historical period being studied—examines defenses of women's preaching. While offering revisionist interpretations of the Bible that include identifying a lineage of women preachers, authors such as Margaret Fell, Lucretia Mott, and Jarena Lee theorize preaching as an informal, intimate mode of communication—in essence, as conversation. Chapter four further charts the breakdown of the distinction between “conversation” and “oratory” in its study of late-nineteenth-century elocution textbooks. By the late 1800s, American sentimental culture had found an ideal expression in women's public display of emotion. Elocution textbooks provided an occasion to theorize bodily autonomy through their discussion of how to “perform... emotion through voice and body” (105). Authors (and professional elocutionists and actresses) Anna Morgan, Genevieve Stebbins, Emily Bishop, and Hallie Quinn Brown “offer women empowerment to resist traditional feminine roles through control over their own bodies” (108-9). While elocution helped bring women’s rhetoric out of the parlor and onto the public stage, so to speak, it both used and rendered obsolete the conversational model. Theorists of elocution-as-feminine-rhetoric could draw on the same oratorical models that had dominated rhetoric for centuries; they no longer needed the more dialogic and informal model of conversation.

Donawerth opens her conclusion asking why the conversational model vanished:

By the end of the nineteenth century, there was a firmly established women's tradition of rhetorical theory devised by women.... At the end of the nineteenth century, however, this women's tradition created by women rhetorical theorists simply disappeared, as thoroughly as the first English colony in America on Roanoke Island. What happened? (126)
She offers two answers. First, she points out that the conversational model had, for three centuries, been instrumental in justifying women’s participation in public political and religious discussions. As it succeeded, however, and the separation of spheres began to break down, there was less need to code women’s public speaking as private and hence conversational in nature. Second, Donawerth draws attention to the dramatic changes at the end of the nineteenth century in who attended and taught at the college level. Donawerth’s conclusion examines several composition textbooks written by women and aimed at a co-ed audience. This becomes a suggestive meditation on the ways the conversational model migrated from a rhetorical theory into a pedagogical strategy, one that continues to shape the delivering of composition instruction.

This is an important and groundbreaking book. *Conversational Rhetoric* sheds light on an intersecting set of rhetorical theory texts that have hitherto gone under-examined. Scholars of nineteenth-century Britain may be disappointed to find that country and period comparatively under-represented, but given the contribution Donawerth makes both to the history of rhetorical theory and to the pre-history of American composition history and pedagogy, those scholars should be inspired to round out the picture. This text offers a compelling narrative for the rise and fall of a distinctively female rhetorical theory that was at once separate from and aware of the tradition of canonical male oratory. At the same time, the story Donawerth tells never feels teleological; the discussion of eighteenth-century authors, for example, does not seem constrained or limited by the aspects of their theory that influenced later authors. I find myself periodically frustrated in reading it, however, because I wish that Donawerth had theorized and historicized her notion of “conversation as a model of all discourse” (xi) more fully. While in the early chapters her analysis distinguishes between what *conversation* seems to mean in the various texts she discusses, these distinctions drop out later and the focus is on how the various authors mobilize a more monolithic concept of *conversation* to their various ends. But that is perhaps a task for future scholars, as they build on this generative work. In addition to being of interest and value to such scholars—of feminist theory, feminist rhetoric and rhetorical theory, rhetorical theory *tout court*, and the various genres Donawerth discusses here—this book makes a valuable contribution to composition historians’ quest to better understand the conceptual genealogy of our discipline and its pedagogies.

*Claremont, CA*

**Works Cited**