

Rhetoric Before Postcolonial Theory?

Reading Response Week 9 (22 October 2007)

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I was quite keen to get into Lipson and Binkley's collection. While there's certainly an argument to be made that "rhetoric" as a discipline usually names a peculiarly European tradition, and that we have to be careful about avoiding many of our usual assumptions if we apply that term outside its European history, it's also clear—as the essays in this book argue—that other cultures engaged in practices that fit many definitions of rhetoric. I'm currently leaning toward a definition of rhetoric as the study and conscious use of choices offered by semiotic systems, where those choices are motivated by a desire to persuade,¹ and certainly that practice operates in all cultures, even if some of its forms will be culturally specific. And while *Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks* can't do more than provide brief glimpses of what rhetorical study might mean for some other historical and cultural moments, given the obvious limitations of length and the audience's presumed knowledge of these cultures, it's still a huge relief to at least acknowledge that motivated language use happens around the world. The "interruption" essays that we've been reading did some of this, of course, but obviously there's far more extra-European rhetoric than we could even survey within the structure of this course, so every bit is appreciated.²

But I admit I found the essays in *Rhetoric Before and Beyond* something of a mixed bag, even given the inevitable limitations of the format. Some showed a tendency to drift into catalogues of rhetorical devices, for example the last part of Sweeney's piece on legal rhetoric in Egypt—though I found her examples fascinating, and the essay as a whole seemed nicely rigorous and careful. Lipson's piece on *maat* contained more of what I'd call a rhetorical theory, since it attempted to associate specific rhetorical moves with a wider cultural practice. And Hallo, though his piece was essentially an overview and so much less specific than Lipson's, does offer some definitions of rhetorical practice as distinct from "ordinary" language use, eg "the ability to communicate in a lofty idiom" (27). At other times, I was struck by what appeared to be assumptions that have been, at least in my thinking, significantly challenged in critical theory over the last couple of decades. For example, a number of times I had to wonder if anyone in the collection was familiar with

¹"Persuasion" actually isn't quite right, or at least is usually conceived of in a more limited fashion than what I want here. I'm really looking at rhetoric as choices in signification made for the purposes of ideoculture—that is, of engendering and encouraging particular ideas in the audience. This is akin to linguistic pragmatics, though it's at a higher level than where pragmatics usually operates, and it focuses mostly on conscious choice (even though I do believe strongly that the unconscious should never be neglected in any study of human motivation). Interestingly, just last night Bob Johnson, Jeff Grabill, and I were talking about how LuMing Mao (whom I knew at Miami) uses his background in pragmatics in formulating his theories of Chinese rhetoric.

²Even with the interruptions and Lipson and Binkley, we still haven't read anything about rhetoric in India, Japan, Southeast Asia, Africa, etc. Well, there's no shortage of things to study, anyway...

Hayden White's *The Content of the Form*. Surely White's argument about how the various genres of historiography (chronicles, histories, etc) shape the historical record is relevant for Hoskisson and Boswell's piece on the annals of Sennacherib, for example, but neither they (eg 66: "as we have come to understand narratives in the West"—as if no one has an alternative theory of narrative!) nor Lipson and Binkley in their introduction (13; see also eg 19 when they talk about Watts' chapter) even overtly acknowledge the concept. And White is, after all, a historian, so I'd expect his work to be more visible in these fields than that of, say, a literature scholar.

Finally, I have to admit that the final section aside, I often wanted more synthesis in these essays. Lipson and Binkley complain that traditional rhetorical study focuses on the Greco-European tradition (indeed on the Athenian tradition, in their view) to the exclusion of other rhetorics, but in seizing on Enheduanna, say, as an exemplar these authors often seem to be replicating that exclusionary tactic. The cultures of the Mediterranean and Asia Minor interacted extensively and had complex ethnic, territorial, and commercial ties in the ancient era; after all, the Greeks were descended from the European horse-domesticating nomads that produced the Hittites who invaded Egypt, and were in constant competition with the Phoenician-Tyrian group and the Aryan tribes that became the Assyrians and Persians (not to mention the Aryan rulers of India). There was considerable intellectual exchange going on in the region throughout this period—Tyrian engineers built Assyrian temples, and were the same Phoenicians that gave the Greeks their alphabet, for example. So it seems overly reductive to simply make claims for rhetoric's origin in one or another of those cultures.³

In particular, I found Binkley's essay quite disappointing. I wanted to like it; Enheduanna is a fascinating figure for her status as an originary author-figure, what she suggests about gender and class in Mesopotamia (and how that relates to people in similar positions in other historical moments), and as a source for feminist literary recovery. But Binkley kept falling back on broad-brush assumptions that remained undertheorized and underexamined. Perhaps that was partly due to the difficulties of reducing dissertation work to a 15-page article, something I'm certainly sympathetic with, but many times I simply felt she was being glib or careless. Yes, it is certainly true that much historical scholarship is sexist, and it is possible that Bahrani (whose position Binkley apparently adopts wholesale) is correct that the scholars who deny Enheduanna's existence are motivated by a refusal to accept "a woman being in the position to write poetry" in the era (60-61). But surely we want something more than a suspicion of prejudice to counter these arguments? And Binkley seems particularly prone to replicating the dichotomies she decries, complaining about "this gendered paradox of the 'barbarians' vs. the civilized Greeks" (56) and the like but again and again holding up Enheduanna as an exemplar explicitly against (her characterization of) Greek and Greek-derived thought: "a geographic hostile Other" (54), her survey in passing of some of Said's and other theorist's critiques of Orientalism (54-56), her claim that in Mesopotamia "the mind was not separate from the body as in the Western philosophical tradition" (56), her claim that Inanna "becomes the Other . . . in the Old and New Testament" (58). While Said's work is tremendously important for postcolonial theory

³I was reminded of the largely unproductive battle between the advocates of Martin Bernal's afrocentric thesis (in *Black Athena*), which claims the origin of "Greek" thought in the Nile civilizations, and those of Mary Lefkowitz's counterclaim (in *Not Out of Africa*) that Greek philosophy and advanced thinking was *sui generis*. Clearly there's a fascinating history of intellectual interchange among the various peoples of the region over thousands of years, but this sort of scorekeeping is making it nearly impossible to examine the already-difficult historical record in a rigorous fashion.

in general and as a critique of European historiography of the Middle East in particular, it's hardly clear that it simply translates unchanged to ancient Greek or Hebraic thinking. More importantly, many important thinkers have since refined these ideas, particularly in light of poststructuralism, which is entirely absent from Binkley's chapter—even the simple concept that replicating the binaries she sees at work in traditional scholarship in the field might not be entirely productive. By the tenth time Binkley labeled something “Other”, I *really* wanted to see her offer a critical definition of that term. Near the end of the chapter, she writes: “Little in my theoretical background explains this troubling agency that stands outside of the singular male self-standard for the past two thousand years of history and religious sacred tradition” (59). Well, perhaps that's because she seems to be stuck in a somewhat uncomplicated mainstream second-wave feminist theoretical milieu, the position of, say, Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*. That was nearly thirty years ago; since then we've had, oh, Spivak's “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” to help us reconsider some of those ideas.⁴ I can't help but feel that Enheduanna would be better served by a more recent theoretical perspective.

⁴Even mainstream second-wave feminist theory in the US was actively investigating the limitations of the undertheorized “Other” critique in the 1980s, for example in a number of the essays in Elaine Showalter's *The New Feminist Criticism*, which acknowledged how the second wave had elided other categories of difference, such as sexuality, race, and class. Not to mention the extensive work of people like hooks, Anzaldúa, etc.