

REVIEWS

Rhodes, Jacqueline. *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modern*. New York: SUNY Press, 2005.

Cindy Moore
Eastern Kentucky University

It has been quite some time since I read a book that caused me to think, reflect, and question as much as this one has. What Rhodes does here is admirable on many counts. Besides demonstrating exceptional writing ability, Rhodes attempts two extraordinarily difficult rhetorical feats: a complication of feminist history without oversimplification (of the conversational threads and sources used to support her many compelling claims) and a serious contribution to composition theory that will appear relevant to classroom teachers.

At just 94 pages (excluding the notes and bibliography), the book is relatively short. Its overall length, combined with the brevity of its four chapters (15-20 pages each), suggests a quick read. Most readers will soon discover, however, that the book requires a good deal of time and steady, focused attention. With amazing amounts of carefully accumulated, precisely presented details, Rhodes packs each chapter full-to-overflowing. If you want to skim a book on feminism for a class project, conference presentation, or article, this is not the book for you. Unless the reader is as familiar with feminist history as Rhodes is, she will miss crucial points through any but the most deliberate of reading processes.

The book's basic argument, informed by Foucault's "notion of genealogical history" (6), is that the ability of feminists in Rhetoric and Composition to effect meaningful social and political change (what Rhodes sees as the primary goal of feminism) has been seriously compromised by their misunderstanding, misuse, and/or

neglect of important facets of radical feminism. This misstep, on the part of feminists in the field, has become, according to Rhodes, especially obvious in feminist discussions of technology that seem unaware of the “radical,” world-changing potential of the Internet.

Rhodes begins with a look at how Rhetoric and Composition specialists have represented and used feminist theories and practices since the publication of Cynthia Caywood and Gillian Overing’s *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity* and Elizabeth Flynn’s “Composing as a Woman” in the late 1980s. For Rhodes, these two texts are important not just because they turned the field’s attention to gender, but because they offered a theoretical framework for considering gender issues. While this lens was indeed feminist, it reflected only part of the larger feminist conversation—the “cultural feminist” part that tended to universalize women’s experience by “valorizing” “women’s ways” (e.g., of knowing, speaking, and writing). According to Rhodes, this partial lens was so compelling that subsequent feminist scholarship tended to adopt it “uncritically”—rather than investigating other aspects of feminism (especially 1960s radicalism) that would have enriched or complicated the view. Because these other facets of feminism were down-played, ignored, or neglected, feminists in the field have been doomed to repeat the initial, Foucaultian “grammatical error” (committed by Caywood, Overing, and Flynn), creating a composition-feminist history that “relies on a ‘logic of essences,’ a ‘logic of concept,’ and, finally, ‘a metaphysics of a crowned and coherent cosmos’ in order to legitimate itself as history” (20). While Rhodes does acknowledge feminist composition scholars who challenged cultural-feminist ideas (e.g., Susan Jarratt, Lynn Worsham, Eileen Schell), she argues that their efforts were, finally, inadequate—“not enough in themselves to help us escape the clutches” of a history that “ignores or misrepresents women’s *different* ways” (21, emphasis hers).

Having succeeded at poking holes in the “coherent narrative of feminism and composition” (21), Rhodes uses her second chapter

to show all that the radical-feminist movement *could have* offered feminists in the field. Because Chapter 1 is based on the assumption that many feminist compositionists don't fully understand radical feminism, she starts with an overview of the 1960's-70's political movement. Rhodes is particularly interested in those aspects of radical feminism that could have helped us think through concepts such as voice, authority, and community that were important to feminism—and foundational to the field—but were called into question by postmodern constructivist theories that challenged individual identity, agency, and social consensus. For example, Rhodes provides a very thorough analysis of how radical feminists blurred the lines between individual and collective identity through radical texts that were often co-written and/or written in styles that were meant to construct a social "self" rather than reflect an individual personality. While these texts may have been personally meaningful, their real power lay in the "emphasis on public, purposeful textuality" (48) encouraged by a broad, often underground, distribution network. Rhodes also does a good job of showing how consciousness-raising groups (the model for early feminist discussions of classroom collaboration and community) were not the harmonious feel-good rap clubs, as some comp-feminists portrayed them. While they certainly allowed women a place to share their personal stories of "patriarchal oppression," discussions were often confrontational and tense. Because their primary purpose was social change, any increased personal awareness through group bonding was only a first step to large-scale political action. Though Rhodes doesn't make it explicit, the clear implication here is that if feminists had fully investigated the consciousness-raising facet of radical feminism, we wouldn't have spent so many years trying to figure out why students in peer groups don't always get along and how to use their "dissensus" productively.

In her third chapter, Rhodes demonstrates how the Internet allows for the same kind of "textual activism" offered by the radical-feminist movement. Most obviously, the Internet offers feminists the chance to readily "hook up" with other like-minded

women across the country and around the world (53), in much the same way political pamphlets and underground newspapers forged feminist connections in the 60s and 70s. Most importantly, the World Wide Web allows for and encourages the “interplay of fixity and fluidity” which characterized radical feminist texts, especially feminist “manifestos” (54). Online writing, especially the “constructive” hypertext typical of radical feminist web sites, offers writers a means for creating a personally significant, yet publicly relevant, subjectivity that blurs the boundaries between “personal and political, resistance and authority, private and public, text and network, writer and reader” (94). Because, according to Rhodes, most feminist composition theorists have focused on the “anti-hierarchical,” “egalitarian” nature of the Internet (once again neglecting radical feminist theory and actions in favor of “cultural and liberal ideologies”), our view of its potential for women (and for feminism) has been severely limited. Rhodes’s primary project in this chapter, then, is to highlight the “curious absences” in the computers-and-composition literature (created by scholars like Selfe, Hawisher, and Sullivan); fill in the gaps with detailed descriptions and analyses of some “publicly transgressive” feminist online “discourses”; and then discuss how attention to the generative, subversive potential of these discourses can help move us away from disciplinary discussions that focus on making electronic spaces safe and comfortable for women toward conversations concerned with using electronic spaces to “effect meaningful change” (76).

In her final chapter, Rhodes turns her attention to teaching by discussing a “performative pedagogy” that will help feminists foster the “critical agency” necessary for social and political change. This radical-feminist-inspired pedagogy acknowledges the reality of students’ (individual) lived experience, but requires that they “situate” their experience, historically and socially, and view writing (particularly on-line writing) as a way to perform and/or revise their identity “in the context of different social relations” (82). In this way, Rhodes’s pedagogy works to bridge feminist approaches that depend on a unified sense of self and a

universalized sense of women's social status (i.e., "cultural" and "liberal" approaches) with postmodernist approaches that tend to downplay the real-life material consequences of being born female and the sense of individual agency needed to overcome these (e.g., cultural studies and critical pedagogy). To help her explain—and justify—her approach, Rhodes draws on a variety of theorists, both within and outside of composition, including Susan Miller, Henry Giroux, Patrick Shannon, bell hooks, Jim Berlin, and Pamela Caughie.

While I would enthusiastically recommend *Radical Feminism Writing, and Critical Agency* to feminists—and to anyone (feminist or not) interested in the potential of on-line writing for students—I would do so with two caveats. First, I would caution feminist readers that they may find Rhodes's presentation of early feminist texts (and the feminists who wrote them) a bit impatient, if not unfair. Because the Foucaultian theoretical frame highlights absences, the history of feminism in composition will inevitably be seen as lacking, its early scholars necessarily "short-sighted." A more positive reading of early feminist contributions can be found in Joy Ritchie and Kathleen Boardman's history of comp-feminism, published in the 1999 anniversary issue of CCC. Because their stated purpose is to "celebrate the vitality of feminism in composition" rather than expose its short-comings, Ritchie and Boardman discuss early feminist scholarship in terms of what it meant (to teachers, to students, to future scholars)—not in terms of what it missed. While the early work may have promoted one brand of feminist thought, it should be read, they suggest, as one of many narratives that "coexist and have multiple functions, often depending on the historical or theoretical context in which they are read" (587). Within this more positive—yet no-less-complex—theoretical frame, *Teaching Writing* and "Composing as a Woman" are neither "uncritical" nor "short-sighted," but are ground-breaking texts, reflective of a time when even the mere mention of the word *feminist* was "disruptive"—texts that made possible the last 20 years of feminist conversation in composition, including Rhodes's book.

My second caveat has to do with the usefulness of the text for teachers. In terms of pedagogical implications, Rhodes does a superb job of setting the stage for a discipline-wide critique of how electronic spaces have typically been used in writing courses—and how we can use them better, more productively. Her cogent theoretical discussions of teaching possibilities align well with recent calls by people like Kathleen Yancey to re-think our definitions of writing, of text, of writer “in relation to reader” (309) and to “extend” the “system of circulation” for student writing “beyond and around the single path from student to teacher” (310-11). Pragmatically speaking, though, Rhodes’s pedagogical plan lacks the specificity many teachers will need to translate the theory into practice. While Rhodes is clear about the goals of “performative pedagogy” (e.g., “making the personal political and *textual*, “insist[ing] on valuing *different* voices and “ways of knowing” for women) (93-93), she says little about how teachers can help students achieve these goals. Attention to concrete methods (assignments, activities) seems especially crucial for the enactment of Rhodes’s pedagogy because, as she acknowledges, the teaching approaches aligned with radical theory (e.g., critical pedagogy and cultural studies) are often resisted by students who desire to be neither critical nor culturally “enlightened.” That is, her project seems very promising, but she needs to tell us more specifically how to make it happen in the classroom.

Works Cited

- Ritchie, Joy, and Kathleen Boardman. “Feminism in Composition: Inclusion, Metonymy, and Disruption.” CCC 50.4 (1999): 585-606.
- Yancey, Kathleen. “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key.” CCC 56.2 (2004): 297-328.