

Jane Donawerth. *Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women's Tradition, 1600-1900*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 232 pages. \$60.

In recent decades, feminist scholarship has recovered a rich tradition of women's rhetoric neglected by historians for centuries. Women found ways and places to engage in private dialogue as well as public debate through letters, diaries, written and spoken narratives, classroom lectures, speeches, and even sermons. Extant writings by women along with reports of their speaking events have enabled scholars to reconstruct women's rhetorical *practices*, but until recently, little attention has been paid to women's rhetorical *theory*. Jane Donawerth, a professor of English at the University of Maryland, redresses that omission with her book *Conversational Rhetoric* in which she traces the development of women's rhetorical theory from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century. Looking at the writings of representative groups of English and American women and one French woman, Donawerth identifies several genres in which women gave evidence of rhetorical theory: humanist dialogues and defenses of women's education in the seventeenth century, conduct books in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, defenses of women's preaching from 1600 to 1900, and elocution handbooks in the nineteenth century. "Each of these genres provided a 'counterdiscourse,'" Donawerth maintains, "an alternative to the dominant rhetorical theory of the time." (12) That "dominant rhetorical theory" was, of course, the rhetorical theory practiced and promulgated by men. Since women did not have access to the academic or public venues through which men were taught the rules and styles of classical rhetoric, they developed their own rhetorical style and theory—a "counterdiscourse"—that "drew on women's gendered experience in conversation" (12) and enabled them to transcend "the gender constraints of speech and writing with great ingenuity." (13) Donawerth explores the way in which it became the basis for an identifiable and uniquely feminine rhetorical theory, constructed "out of the circumstances of women's domestic lives." (2)

The chapters of the book address the various genres Donawerth identifies as places where women writers demonstrated their "conversational" model of rhetorical theory. Readers who are interested in rhetoric or women's history will appreciate the representative figures and works that are carefully studied in each chapter. The chapter on defenses of women's preaching, however, should prove to have the widest appeal to those interested in homiletics and in the ongoing debates about the role of women in the church. Donawerth considers works by Margaret Fell, Jerena Lee, Lucretia Mott, Ellen Stewart, Catherine Booth, and Frances Willard, having chosen their writings from the numerous extant defenses of women's preaching "because they span the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and the transatlantic Protestant religious network" (73) and also represent the wide range of forms that such defenses can take. She is correct in recognizing that women who defended women's right to preach did so by "redefining preaching as testimony or holy conversation" (75) and by pointing out "biblical misinterpretations" (104) of texts used to prohibit women's public proclamation. Donawerth also correctly discerns in the defenses of women's preaching an emerging "language of rights" (81) that became essential to other movements for human rights—especially abolition and temperance and woman suffrage—in which women were the primary participants. Donawerth is less correct, however, in her conclusion that "[b]y the end of the nineteenth century, defenses of women's education and women's preaching are no longer needed as women achieve the right to public speaking." (143) Those of us who are women preachers even in the twenty-first century can attest to the fact that

the kinds of materials Donawerth addresses and the rhetorical strategies employed are as important as ever for defending our God-given calls to pulpit ministries.

The tradition of conversation as a model for discourse, Donawerth concludes, enabled women “to maintain the fiction of the private woman” (143) while participating in public discussions and venues, including pulpits. That tradition, however, declined or “fell,” as Donawerth puts it, around the turn of the twentieth century once women began writing composition textbooks for mixed-gender audiences and once they were more widely accepted as public speakers. That is not the entire story, however, as those of us who study women’s preaching in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century know. The tradition of conversational rhetoric—one that emphasizes “conversation as a model for all discourse, collaborative and consensual communication, and the art of listening” as well as “the gendered nature of communication” and “techniques of embodied rhetoric” (143-44)—continues today through the “*homilias*,” the pulpit “conversations,” of women preachers. *Conversational Rhetoric* offers interesting and compelling insight into the origins of the unique gifts women still bring to pulpit proclamation.

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