

Literacy and Rhetoric as Complementary Keywords

Ben Wetherbee—University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

Brenda Glascott’s “Constricting Keywords: Rhetoric and Literacy in our History Writing,” one of six feature articles that headlined *Literacy in Composition Studies*’ inaugural 2013 issue, strikes me as an important essay—specifically, as one of those rare disciplinary metacommentaries that brings once unstated terminological tension into sharp relief. This sort of work matters now especially because, amid the growing push to integrate literacy studies further into the disciplinary fold of rhetoric and composition, scholars in the field will have to reckon with the opportunities and limitations that our evolving constellation of keywords entails. Glascott does this with candor. *Rhetoric*, for Glascott, constitutes a “constricting keyword” insofar as its predominance across composition histories “privileg[es] an audience-driven . . . approach” above any more “self-exploratory” approach that she associates with the keyword *literacy* (23). *Literacy*, by contrast, allows for Glascott the bidirectional analysis of language as both other-directed and self-directed.

Apart from remarks by symposium respondents to *LiCS*’ first issue (see Bizzell; Goldblatt; Kynard; Qualley; Salvatori), there has been little commentary on Glascott’s terminological distinction of rhetoric as other-directed and literacy as bidirectional but emphasizing the self. This distinction is provocative and potentially useful. It is also, I suspect, likely to grate against the convictions of many avowed rhetoricians (present company included). But I don’t say this dismissively. In this symposium essay, I take Glascott’s literacy-rhetoric division as a point of departure. I first address Glascott’s charges against rhetoric in order to revise the sense of the term her essay provides. I then specifically revisit Glascott’s commentary on Jaqueline Jones Royster’s *Traces of a Stream* and, finally, offer several ideas toward refiguring *literacy* and *rhetoric* as complementary keywords, perhaps to the detriment of *composition*. While I disagree with Glascott on several important points, my purpose is less to refute her position than to extend the conversation she introduces in a new direction. Above all, I appreciate that Glascott has broached the issue of rhetoric and literacy’s mutual relationship.

The modest defense of rhetoric I wish to mount here stresses the conceptual elasticity necessary for *rhetoric* and *literacy* to become mutually complementary rather than oppositional ideas. I pursue this goal by responding specifically to three of Glascott’s charges against rhetoric. Each of Glascott’s theses, in my view, entails some truth and some oversimplification.

1. *The discipline of rhetoric is “conserve-ative.”*

In distinguishing rhetoric and literacy, Glascott alleges,

As a discipline, rhetoric is inherently conserve-ative, actively conserving past practices, past knowledge, and insisting on the continuous application of these practices and knowledge in the present. In fact, this conservatism itself created the need for recovery efforts by rhetoric historians since the conservationist impulse creates a canon and builds a genealogy.

Feminist historians of rhetoric have been grafting discarded branches back on the family tree of the rhetorical tradition. (21)

I enjoy this description, particularly the arboreal metaphor. The image of the disciplinary tree suitably dramatizes the challenge of revisionary history, the tension that grows between maintaining one's conceptual-historical apparatus (the core hardwood of composition, rhetoric, or literacy studies itself) and respecting the individual case (here, the specific branch that one laboriously affixes to its disciplinary trunk). Sometimes, like bonsai artists, we must alter the shapes of our trees.

Easier said than done, Glascott might say. The “conservationist impulse” that she perceives implies a conceptual rigidity at rhetoric's disciplinary core. The argument might go like this: Classical rhetorical vocabulary—including, for example, Aristotle's *pisteis* (ethos, pathos, logos); his branches of speech (deliberative, forensic, epideictic); and the five canons of Greco-Roman oratory (invention, arrangement, style, memory, delivery)—overstay their historical welcome, conceptually shoehorning a wide range of latter-day discursive practice into prefab categories better suited to Demosthenes' philippics than, say, to the reading and writing practices of nineteenth-century African American women. Literacy studies is a younger discipline than rhetoric. It is, the argument might go, therefore less apt to retrofit linguistic practices into ancient molds and more likely to approach those same practices with hermeneutic openness, to see them on their own terms, as it were. “Literacy” beckons, perhaps, because it imposes no imperializing pre-categories.

We should take this negative image of rhetoric seriously. Disciplines make trouble, as Stephen Toulmin has argued, when their adherents don “professional blinders that direct their attention to certain narrowly defined considerations, and . . . prevent them from looking at their work in a broad human perspective” (140). Rhetoric is no exception, at least not completely. Rhetoricians are apt to interpret discursive practice in terms of appeals, tropes, *topoi*, and genres; they are therefore likely to pass over other considerations, such as the self-exploratory dimensions of language use that Glascott aligns with literacy. But the culturally and spatiotemporally contingent nature of persuasion has, I think, helped rhetoric see around its blinders better than most other disciplines—and certainly better than its epistemological cousins like logic, philosophy, and literary studies. The rhetorical tradition, moreover, transcends classical rhetoric alone. Patricia Bizzell has already objected that Glascott erases the reach of rhetorical traditions, which have extended to cover, for example, conversation, letter-writing, and literature (60). And Toulmin reminds us, further, that “interdisciplinarity” itself cannot shake its “debt” to the disciplines it moves among (140-41). By and large, I think rhetoric has admirably balanced core disciplinary coherence with a situational elasticity and interdisciplinary spirit; its conceptual vocabulary, even that from antiquity, has evolved to meet the conditions of modernity and postmodernity through interdisciplinary comingling with, for example, psychology, postmodernist critique of power structures, and, increasingly, ideological models of literacy. Rhetoric's twentieth- and twenty-first-century appropriation of figures ranging from Toulmin himself (a philosopher) to Mikhail Bakhtin (a sociolinguist and literary critic) to Bruno Latour (a sociologist of science) to postmodernist feminists like H  l  ne Cixous and Judith Butler has altered the shape of the rhetorical “tree” itself. More often than not, that is, I think rhetoricians really *are* disciplinary bonsai artists. The same goes for scholars of literacy studies—though theirs is a younger

tree.

2. *Rhetoric is a “prestige term.”*

Though rhetoric seems to provide “gravitas” through its connection to an ancient discipline, Glascott worries that self-avowed historians of rhetoric bolster their disciplinary “prestige term” by casting composition as rhetoric’s “degraded other” and strong-arming literacy out of the conversation completely (21). It is surely true that the appeal to ancient tradition lends rhetoric esteem. It is also true that these same ancient traditions, as mentioned above, can warp our understanding of modern discourse. Conversely, though, “composition” has arguably more pressing historical problems of its own—particularly those of institutional and cultural gatekeeping, cultural conservatism, and restrictive fixation on the first-year curriculum—which have been well documented and well analyzed (e.g. Miller; Ohmann 93-206; Crowley, especially 46-78, 215-65). Did rhetoric’s historical clout “rescue” composition from these unsavory connotations? Not exactly, I don’t think—but the disciplinary conjunction of rhetoric and composition, by applying the conceptual vocabulary of rhetoric to writing instruction, has certainly transformed the pedagogical and epistemological terrain of composition studies, arguably for the better. The yoking of *rhetoric* and *composition*, in other words, does more than tack historical esteem onto the latter. When Sharon Crowley, for instance, advocates a “vertical elective curriculum ... that examines composing both in general and as it takes place in specific rhetorical situations such as workplaces and community decision making” (262), she advocates a curriculum that demands rhetoric’s epistemological affordances, not just its highbrow cachet.

I contend below that rhetoric and literacy might similarly conjoin, perhaps to greater advantage even than rhetoric and composition. First, though, I want to append a passing note about the timeliness of prestige terms: If *rhetoric* once held more disciplinary prestige within English studies than *literacy*, I do not know to what degree its prominence will continue. Flagship journals, *College English* especially, publish increasingly more research on literacy, while young specialists in rhetorical theory and history notice fewer jobs in English studies seeking their expertise.¹ We should keep in mind that “prestige terms” are only prestigious in context. For emerging scholars in composition/rhetoric/writing studies, the term *literacy* certainly beckons; and *rhetoric* beckons with less confidence now than it may have fifteen, ten, or five years ago.

3. *Rhetoric privileges the “other-directed” at the expense of the self.*

This final charge of Glascott’s is the most conceptually rich and will occupy the remainder of my commentary. Here, it would be best to look directly at one of Glascott’s own brief case studies, which examines Jacqueline Jones Royster’s *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*, as well as Nan Johnson’s commentary on Royster in her book *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life: 1866-1910*. Here is the excerpt from Johnson’s commentary on Royster that Glascott highlights:

In *Traces of a Stream*, Royster expresses an expansive insight into the diversity of rhetorical practices that efforts to remap the territory of the history of rhetoric can offer:

Ultimately, then, within a context of inhospitable circumstances, nineteenth-century African American women used language and literacy as a tool to authorize, entitle, and empower themselves; as an enabler for their own actions; and as a resource for influencing and inspiring others ... [N]ineteenth-century African American women “read” and rewrote the world. They succeeded in developing a critical consciousness by which they envisioned their context, shaped their realities, and charted courses of action. They redefined their sphere of operation, imagining intersections for themselves among private, social, and public domains, and inventing ways to effect change using whatever platform was available to them. (234-35)

Although designed to define the particular parameters of African American women’s rhetorical traditions, Royster’s description of the rhetorical inventiveness of African American women also illustrates the kind of qualitative gain in historical insight into the range of what we can call *rhetorical* that feminist revisions of the rhetorical tradition have generated. (Johnson 9, qtd. in Glascott 21-22)

It is the exclusive repetition of “rhetorical” to which Glascott objects:

Rhetoric is not a keyword for Royster in [the excerpt on which Johnson comments], yet Johnson insists—four times—that Royster is describing rhetoric. Perhaps Royster’s “language and literacy” may be understood as part of a “rhetorical tradition,” but Johnson’s willful blindness to Royster’s actual keywords distorts one of the most important points Royster makes in this passage. (22)

That point is, Glascott continues, that Royster seeks to emphasize the process of critical consciousness about how individuals are “constituted by culture” and how they “can actively reconstitute” themselves through literate practice. This is, for Glascott, a question of literacy, not of rhetoric.

But I want to ask the contrapuntal question here. That is: Does Glascott’s oppositional configuration of *literacy* and *rhetoric* undermine her own reading of Royster? I believe it does. There is no doubt that this matter of literate critical consciousness (the deep “attitude of awareness” Paulo Freire calls *conscientização*) does centrally concern Royster, who cites Freire to explain how African-American women have critically reenvisioned their “sphere of operation” (Freire 109; Royster 235). It is also true that Johnson’s brief commentary neglects this topic. But Glascott’s recurring insistence that rhetoric is *not* a significant keyword for Royster baffles me. Glascott, in her effort to rescue literacy from rhetoric’s imperializing reach, seems to erect a false barrier between the terms, one that occasions an oddly compartmentalized reading of Royster’s book—a book that, in my view, productively clusters the keywords of *rhetoric*, *history*, and *ideology* below the umbrella term of *literacy*. (*Literacy* is, no doubt, her *primary* keyword but not her *only* keyword.) Glascott neglects to mention, for example, that Royster deliberately theorizes the term *rhetorical competence* to denote “the base of sociocultural knowledge and language experience ... [used] in the process of making meaning and conveying that meaning to others in the satisfaction of specific purposes” (48). “[R]hetorical competence,” Royster later notes, “is enhanced by the ways language use over time becomes a continually generative learning experience” (53)—thus, in my view, clarifying the reflexive, mutually constitutive relationship *between* (outwardly directed) rhetorical communication and

(inwardly directed) literate self-development. I'll finally note that the paragraph to which Johnson and Glascott refer, though it foregoes the actual word "rhetoric," does appear within a chapter Royster subtitled "Formal Training in the Development of Rhetorical Prowess," one which examines rhetorical resources and particularly the cultivation of ethos (see especially 210-12). Rhetoric is an important idea in this chapter. Literacy is too.

Glascott has read *literacy* and *rhetoric* against each other in a manner that, I believe, has obfuscated the conceptual reach of Royster's book and, more troublingly, placed these keywords in false opposition. But as I note above, Glascott's essay strikes me as valuable regardless. Here is where I agree with Glascott, and where I think her terminological distinction might help us as a field: Despite the disciplinary strengths of rhetoric I name above, Glascott is right that unidirectional focus on some varieties of "rhetoric" can relegate the individual language-using subject to a place of abstraction, shrouding matters of identity and linguistic self-development. Relatedly, she is correct to imply that rhetorical history too often shoehorns latter-day discursive practice into molds derived from classical rhetoric, and particularly Aristotle. This isn't to deny the enduring "usefulness" of classical rhetoric, as Ed Corbett once termed it, but rather a plea to consider the more expansive reach of rhetorical traditions, and how those traditions might usefully intersect with the timely concerns of literacy scholars. Rather than oppositional terms, I would position *literacy* and *rhetoric* as two fields within a continuum, the vast, messy, and intellectually rich center of which circumscribes the individual's dialogic encounter with (and appropriation of, and resistance to) the rhetorical texts she navigates as a process of self-becoming and that influence her own rhetorical performances in the future.

In other words, we should recognize that rhetorical practice initiates literate practice, which begets rhetorical practice, and so on. The rhetorical, outwardly directed performances—via books, films, professorial lectures, Facebook posts, and so on—that, for example, a college student encounters in day-to-day life will converge in her notebook, on her computer screen, and in her mind. The same student's literate, inwardly directed practices of reflecting on and writing about these performances will significantly shape her personal identity, self-understanding, and her use of language. And the next time she sits down to compose a rhetorical text, her identity—negotiated as it is from the rhetorical words and images of others—will spill onto the page. The complex, recursive relationship between such inwardly and outwardly directed discourses is, of course, bigger and more interesting than any one example illustrates, but the point is that both rhetorical and literacy studies will have something to say about the process.

As a modest starter, then, here is what I'll call a "greatest hits list" of rhetorical theory that deals, in one sense or another, with Glascott and Royster's concern about how identity and competence form through literate practice:

- (1) Cicero: The patriarch of Roman rhetoric was more overtly concerned with literary self-constitution than his Athenian forebear Aristotle. In *De Oratore*, Cicero's Crassus continually and emphatically restates the point that the good, virtuous orator must first and foremost become a polymathic student of philosophy, literature, and culture—for rhetorical competence springs from intimate cultural literacy (see especially bk. 1, § 2-8).

- (2) Kenneth Burke: Burke's theory of rhetorical identification from *A Rhetoric of Motives* plants one foot in the traditionally rhetorical sphere of linguistic persuasion and the other in literacy studies' sphere of linguistic self-constitution (see 19-29, 55-59). Here is Royster summarizing Burke's theory and its application to the study of literacy in *Traces of a Stream*: "If we apply [Burkean identification] to acts of literacy, perceived as essentially rhetorical events, we recognize that writers create a consubstantial space" that both welcomes audiences and constitutes identities of speakers and audiences (55).
- (3) Maurice Charland: In his 1987 essay "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*," Charland integrates Burkean identification and Althusserian ideological interpellation to analyze how rhetorical texts not only persuade but first *constitute*, or hail, an audience and name its identity. This essay neatly parallels and supplements the literacy practices of individual self-constitution that Royster and Glascott each discuss.
- (4) Michael Billig: In his book *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, Billig draws from the sophist Protagoras to examine how thought itself takes rhetorical shape, as a messy clashing of voices, authorities, and commonplaces. Billig's book reacts largely against the cognitivist preoccupation with the isolated brain, emphasizing instead the social sphere of linguistic practice that concerns scholars in literacy studies and rhetoric.
- (5) Mikhail Bakhtin: In his book-length essay "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin, a late but vital inductee into the Western rhetorical tradition, deals in great manifold detail with the question of how the individual assimilates the voices of others into her own inner heteroglossia, or field of voices. Of especial interest is the concept of "internally persuasive discourse," that which enters consciousness bound to a specific authoritative persona—the teacher, the clergyman, the novelist, etc. (342-49; see also Bialostosky 98-101, 152-59; Trimbur).

To be clear, my point is not that rhetoric has already solved the riddle of how literate practice constitutes identity and competence, thus obviating literacy studies. Quite conversely, my point is that, as Royster's book admirably demonstrates, the questions of inwardly and outwardly directed discourses remain irrevocably linked and mutually constitutive. Literacy and rhetoric forge a natural alliance, or ought to, on the broad, nebulous plane where these discourses meet; the thinkers above might join ranks with Freire, New Literacy Studies scholars, and others in helping us analyze the shared space of literacy and rhetoric. Kenneth Burke and Brian Street might occasionally rub elbows in the same bibliography.

I'll wrap up with this provocation: As core disciplinary keywords go, *literacy* and *rhetoric* together provide both a conceptual breadth and scholarly focus that, I would argue, outpace what *composition* offers. Bizzell, in her response to *LiCS*' inaugural issue, stresses the academic constraints that settle in once *composition* becomes a singular focus (60), and implies her own preference for *literacy* and *rhetoric* both. My own worry, which Crowley has also expressed in far greater detail (229-43), is that *composition* funnels our attention specifically into the first-year college writing classroom; *literacy* and *rhetoric* each gesture to larger fields of discursive practice. If the keyword *composition* flags behind *literacy* and *rhetoric* as a "degraded other," to borrow Glascott's phrasing, we should surely

question the reasons for degradation. But we should also accept they might be good ones.

NOTES

¹ A keyword search of *College English* (CE) articles dealing with “literacy” or adjacent terms (e.g. “digital literacy,” “information literacy”) yields 105 hits from 1996-2006 and 158 from 2007-2017—a 34% increase. Frequency of articles featuring the keywords “rhetoric” or “rhetorical” also rises, but more modestly, by about 12% (565 hits from the former decade and 644 from the latter). While the substantial rise in scholarship dealing with literacy reflects increasing disciplinary interest in literacy studies, my impression is that the subtle increase in “rhetoric” and “rhetorical” chiefly reflects not an increase in attention to rhetorical studies itself, but CE’s slow drift away from the discipline of literary studies and toward that which has historically adopted “rhetoric” as half its moniker. (A parallel search of “literature” and “literary” yields 1,135 hits from 1996-2006 and 801 since—a fairly steep 29% decline from what was once the journal’s primary disciplinary affiliation.)

I’ll add a less quantifiable point, which is that while rhetorical inquiry still heavily informs scholarship in journals like CE and *College Composition and Communication*, the projects of rhetorical theory, history, and criticism, when divorced from a pedagogical imperative (or another subspecialty, like translingualism or digital humanities), seem to be disappearing from these journals. My brief correspondence with the previous editor of CE suggests that the journal would today decline to publish, to pose two examples from two past decades, something like Jeffrey Walker’s “The Body of Persuasion: A Theory of the Enthymeme” (CE, 1994, a reconsideration of the rhetorical enthymeme via the examples of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Roland Barthes) or Jordynn Jack’s “Chronotopes: Forms of Time in Rhetorical Arguments” (CE, 2006, an examination of arguments about genetically modified foods that relies on Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope). Authors of such work would instead be directed to journals like *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Rhetoric Review*, or *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Despite the continued proliferation of “rhetoric” as a keyword, I believe CE has made itself more available to scholarship in literacy studies and less so rhetorical theory, history, and criticism. To be clear, this is no indictment of CE; rather, I think CE’s choices reflect larger disciplinary priorities, which others in the field have begun to track and measure. On that front, see Detweiler for a detailed empirical examination of the increasing distance between “rhetoric” and “composition.”

Finally, I’ll clarify that my remark about the difficulty navigating the rhetoric and composition job market as a young specialist in rhetorical theory and history stems from personal experience. To echo a point above, I found most hiring committees to value knowledge of rhetoric as, at most, a secondary matter—something that supplements primary identification with WPA work, technical writing, digital humanities, etc. Knowledge of literacy studies headlined more job ads; it appeared a hotter commodity. This does not mean, of course, that literacy now carries greater clout overall than rhetoric (the CE numbers above, after all, still heavily favor rhetoric); but it does suggest that literacy studies represents a currently and increasingly lucrative academic specialty.

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