

ACTING UP AND ACTING OUT: UNDERGRADUATES' ASSESSMENTS OF CONTROVERSIAL FEMALE RHETORS

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Since medieval times, the memorable female rhetors of Western society are the ones who challenge oppressive gender roles set forth by men—roles that traditionally have not allowed women in the rhetorical arena at all. In 1408, Christine de Pisan wrote *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, in which her rhetoric presented “a model for the strategy and mother-wit that women needed to navigate the perils of a society often hostile to their gender” (Redfern 73). Ironically, Pisan herself was influenced by the religious persuasion of her time and viewed womankind as an immoral, inferior gender, and thus herself did not promote social change (75). While Pisan did not argue for women’s equality, she did establish a reputation as “a female intellectual, a well-educated, outspoken woman who could argue effectively and defend her positions” (82). Mary Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, used her 1792 feminist manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as a rhetorical tool to expose societal patriarchy, thereby “standing for other women of her time, especially those who had no understanding of their oppressed conditions” (Barlowe 118).

Pisan, Wollstonecraft, and many others played a part in the earliest inclusion of women in the rhetorical tradition. After the Enlightenment, with more women becoming educated and entering the public sphere, female rhetors sought instruction in rhetoric to compete with the male rhetors who dominated public discourse. Several reputable women’s colleges, including Smith, Wellesley, and Vassar, were the first to offer courses training women in the art of rhetoric (Wagner 185–86). Rhetorical analyst Joanne Wagner writes, “Women speaking and writing publicly in the late nineteenth century were constantly faced with this tension between developing a personal style in language and accommodating society’s stylistic expectations” (185). Mostly, however, these female students were taught to abandon their feminine mannerisms and express themselves using the same styles and topics that men did (191). As a result, an observer of the first debate competition between the women’s teams from Wellesley and Vassar noted that there was little difference between the rhetoric of the female debaters and their collegiate male contemporaries (188). “But no matter what the debate’s substance or style, the very act of public speaking in male terms was preparation for entrance into a society that many women hoped would see them as fully participating citizens first and women second” (188). Consequently, the rise in women rhetors in the early twentieth century became inextricably connected to the rise in the demand for women’s rights. Women who had received formal training in rhetoric led the women’s suffrage movement, and soon, “women not only wanted to vote; they also intended to hold political office” (Conway 203).

Yet even once women rhetors became more involved in government, they could not escape the shadow of male dominance. For example, the first female governor took office in 1925, but she was elected to replace her late husband, an inaugural practice that continued into the late 1960s (*History of Women Governors*). This gubernatorial trend confirms the assertion of French author and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote in 1949:

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being [. . .]. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Participant, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (337)

Hence, even after women were granted the right to vote, female rhetors were—and in many ways still are—confined in a male-dominated society.

Tired of being reduced to secondary members of society, many female rhetors of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and '70s emulated the actions of "bra burners" in their speech, using radical, controversial, and otherwise nontraditional behavior to draw attention not just to themselves, but also to pivotal women's rights issues. Taking full advantage of widespread media coverage, the vehicle that drives public awareness, they encouraged women across the United States to lobby for equal pay for equal work, freedom from sexual restraint, and safe and accessible contraceptives and abortions. Many believe that because of their efforts, modern women are now autonomous, possessing opportunities equal to men's and occupying a more prominent role in society than ever before. Conversely, there are those who question the effectiveness of the media's promotion of rebellion, controversy, and scandal as the prerequisites to becoming a famous female public figure. In modern society, this "bad girl" image may increase the popularity of Hollywood celebrities, such as actresses, socialites, and pop stars; however, this image often prevents female rhetors, such as politicians, activists, and journalists, from being taken seriously, thus decreasing their ability to be influential. After all, today's male rhetors achieve fame independent of any embedded societal expectations of how they should or should not behave. On the other hand, their female counterparts must either transcend rebellious expectations for their gender—and often settle for less attention or status—or succumb to being labeled by their rebellious, confrontational, or otherwise nontraditional style, rather than their actual contributions to rhetoric or public discourse and thus to society.

The past three decades have seen an onslaught of women not only as targets of the media, but also as leaders in the media. One example of such a leader is CNN news host Nancy Grace. This essay examines how Nancy Grace is changing the image of women in public discourse and, by extension, affecting the image of women in our larger society. Arguably, legal analyst and television personality Nancy Grace is more widely known for her outspoken, aggressive, and sometimes antagonistic behavior toward guests on her CNN show than for her activism and advocacy of victims' rights. In order to gauge the effect of her outspoken style on at-home viewers, I analyze the responses of thirty-five undergraduates at my university to Nancy Grace's rhetorical style as evidenced by her recent televised dialogue with a male attorney and minister. I ultimately argue that, while her rebellion against traditional gender roles has afforded other intelligent, outspoken women with advanced rhetorical skills a place in the public sphere, this rebellion is counterproductive to the women's liberation movement because it inexorably identifies female rhetors with controversy rather than showcasing their actual skill or leadership ability.

Gender Differences in Assessments of Female Rhetors

I analyze not only Nancy Grace's discourse, but also undergraduate students' responses to her rhetorical style. I chose to study the latter because I believe that the opinions of the college audience regarding female rhetors such as Nancy Grace are particularly important, not only because they have

proved to be so in the past, especially during the suffrage movement (Conway 204), but also because the public opinion of today's youth drives the public policy of tomorrow.

In April, 2006 and again in April, 2007, participants in my study reported individually to the Communication Resource Center, a student-friendly campus tutoring center at Samford University. At the completion of my study, I had a total of fifteen undergraduate males and twenty undergraduate females participate. After I briefly explained to each of them what to expect, they watched a short video clip that I had taped from *CNN Headline News* on March 27, 2006, in which Nancy Grace interviewed Steve Farese, the attorney of for Mary Winkler, the Tennessee woman who killed her minister husband in mid-March 2006. Subsequently, Nancy Grace interviewed Baptist pastor Tom Rukola, and reacted disapprovingly to his comment that women have a "secondary role" in the Church of Christ. It is her confrontational, no-holds-barred interviewing style, especially with male correspondents, that is one of the defining features of Nancy Grace's rhetoric. She demands to be viewed on the same level as the men she is interviewing, if not as superior to them. In doing so, she mirrors the rhetoric of Mary Wollstonecraft, her predecessor of over two centuries ago, by "her bold assumption that she could and should talk to men, especially since men's notions not only shaped the thinking of her time but the policy as well" (Barlowe 118). The following is a transcript from Nancy Grace's dialogue with her male guests on the video clip that I showed to the students in the study:

STEVE FARESE: I thought you were rather harsh with the Baptist minister. Just because someone says something doesn't necessarily make it so. In their minds, they may believe that's the truth and that's exactly what happened. I just haven't had the chance to hear that yet.

NANCY GRACE: Mr. Farese, what kind of cases have you defended in court?

SF: Very few—maybe about a hundred murder cases . . .

NG: And you think I'm harsh, and you represent people that commit murder? Never mind, you don't have to answer that . . .

SF: No, I would be happy to answer that . . .

NG: Okay . . .

SF: See, I believe in the Constitution . . .

NG: Right . . .

SF: . . . and I believe in taking an oath to do what I'm supposed to do, and that's to defend people to the best of my ability. I'm not laying out in the tall weeds sniping at people. I'm trying to do what I'm supposed to do.

NG: You know what, I really thank you for coming on tonight, because you knew you were gonna be on the hot seat. I—I'm very grateful for that. Everyone wants to know what is the defense for Mary Winkler, who's the lawyer for Mary Winkler, what's goin' on, what's the motive, and I appreciate you coming on, because you have been on the hot seat, and I thank you for that.

(Fast forward briefly)

NG: To Pastor Tom Rukola:— How are women positioned in the Church of Christ?

TOM RUKOLA: As far as I understand, they're treated with dignity and honor. Uh, it's the traditional Christian view that men lead the church, and, uh, women play a secondary role. And I think that they're treated with dignity, certainly, within the Church of Christ.

NG: A secondary role, but with dignity?!

TR: Yes . . .

NG: Um, okay, now I guess that's open to interpretation—that's a whole 'nother can of worms, preacher!

After they viewed this exchange, I asked students to describe their perceptions of Nancy Grace in the video clip, as well as their perceptions of the attorney she interviewed. When describing Nancy Grace, male and female students alike most often referred to her as *direct*, *blunt*, *straightforward*, *harsh*, *firm*, *confident*, and *assertive*. However, the gender difference surfaces in the connotations of the participants' descriptions of her. An overwhelming majority of female students—eighteen out of twenty—reported positive perceptions of Nancy Grace. They usually described her as *confident* and *assertive*, as though these are desirable traits in women. Conversely, eleven out of fifteen male students ascribed a negative connotation to Nancy Grace's directness, with statements such as, *She doesn't like men*, *It wasn't nice how she cut him [the attorney] off*, and *She's very short with men who have an older [traditional] view of men versus women*. It seems as though that by discrediting the way Nancy Grace antagonized one male attorney, male participants were defending all males. Also, male and female students described the attorney differently. Sixteen out of twenty female students described him in a negative and passive way, such as, *He seems uncomfortable*, *He wasn't as assertive [as Nancy Grace]*, and *He seemed intimidated [by Nancy Grace]*. On the other hand, thirteen out of fifteen male students portrayed the attorney in a positive light, saying, *He is not afraid to butt heads with her*, *He was businesslike under pressure*, and *He handled it well*. This suggests that we evaluate people's actions through the lens of our gender. Whereas female participants saw the attorney's lack of assertiveness as a sign of weakness and inferiority, male participants saw this as a display of politeness and stoicism.

There are several different theoretical frameworks within which these results can be interpreted. The first is Role Incongruity Theory, which suggests that people of both genders tend to regard women negatively when they exhibit "masculine" leadership or rhetorical traits (Atwater et al.). America's history of having mostly men in positions of power has established male communication patterns as the societal measuring stick for authoritative discourse. Linguistics researcher Mandy Manning explored this theory by comparing public perceptions of Hillary Rodham Clinton as first lady and later as senator, which revealed that she was viewed more positively in her former role than in the latter (109). Many reject her rhetorical style as senator because she seemingly abandoned the traditional "femininity" she possessed as first lady, becoming instead more rigid and authoritative (109). Nancy Grace is a female rhetor who has faced similar criticism for her expressive style and is often viewed as power-hungry and, hence, "masculine." The outcome of my study revealed that males did, indeed, tend to disapprove of Nancy Grace's aggressive rhetorical style, but, contrary to Role Incongruity Theory, females tended to approve.

Two comments about Nancy Grace especially stood out when compared to society's language use about men. First, a male participant claimed that it *wasn't nice how she cut him [the attorney] off*. Male reporters, Nancy Grace's counterparts, are constantly cutting off the people they interview, and barely any attention is ever drawn to it; arguably, it is even expected of them as a traditionally masculine way to assert authority. Comparatively, Nancy Grace has made a name for herself by cutting people off, likely because this is not a common attribute of female reporters. Second, a female participant described Nancy Grace not only as *in your face*, but also as *authoritative* and *to the point*. It is widely known that the feminine communication style is abstract, relationally focused, and contains many fillers, while the masculine communication style is concrete and to the point. Thus, this particular par-

ticipant found it significant enough to report Nancy Grace as an *authoritative* and *to-the-point* reporter, although it is unlikely that she would have assigned the same description to a male reporter with a similar communication style because his authority and directness would be expected. All this shows that, due to the Role Incongruity Theory, Nancy Grace is stigmatized and often viewed negatively because she has adopted a traditionally masculine communication style.

The majority of female students likely responded positively to Nancy Grace because their shared gender allowed them to identify with her, which represents Identity Theory (Stryker and Burke 284). Sociologist George Herbert Mead summarized Identity Theory with the phrase “Society shapes self shapes social behavior” (qtd. in Stryker and Burke 285). Thus, it is possible that female rhetors who continue to defy traditional norms of female behavior and communication style are essentially establishing a new role and identity for women in all of society. If this is the case, the female students in my study confirm this concept of reciprocal identity confirmation, in that they responded approvingly to Nancy Grace not only because they view her behavior as acceptable, but also because she affirmed their view of acceptable behavior for them to emulate as young women. Unfortunately, my study indicates that the majority of their male counterparts are not in agreement with them that Nancy Grace exhibits socially acceptable behavior for women. So long as males dictate the appropriate actions of females—whether or not they still do is up for debate—traditional feminine communication style will continue to be deemed inferior, and women who attempt authoritative communication styles will continue to be criticized for rejecting their gentler gender tendencies.

The Southern Impact on Assessments of Female Rhetors

From debutantes to Southern belles to the old saying that “Georgia peaches are the sweetest girls,” the American South has a cultural heritage of promoting a genteel image of women that is unparalleled in any other region of the country. It is often held that the South is a very distinct subculture of the United States, with social norms, beliefs, and attitudes that are not representative of those of the nation’s population as a whole. Specifically, many believe that the South still promotes an outdated cultural stereotype of traditional gender roles, whereas other areas of the country tend to be more progressive in their views of women.

Since I attend college in the South, many students, including the students who participated in my study, are Southerners. As Nancy Grace is from southern Georgia, a trademark characteristic of her television appearance is her Southern accent. Hence, I chose Nancy Grace for her status not only as a recognizable female rhetor due to her prominence on national television, but also as an identifiable female rhetor because of her image as a Southerner. However, I foresaw a lack of variability in participant demographics as a potential hindrance to the generalizability of the findings of my study. Nonetheless, a study conducted a decade ago by social science researchers Christine Day and Charles Hadley measured regional voting patterns and found that the South has undergone substantial “nationalization” in the past twenty years (677). “The South is no longer that unique region so ably analyzed by V. O. Key, Jr. (1949); it is one of the regions of the country that have undergone significant social and political change [. . .]. In fact, the increasingly diverse and politically competitive South became the largest—hence most important—region in presidential politics beginning in 1992” (677–78).

Even if the South has become more progressive within the past two decades, there is still a lingering cultural standard of how women should behave. Thus, Nancy Grace may dress like a Southern woman and talk like a Southern woman, but her confrontational interviewing style establishes her as

the antithesis of how a Southern woman is traditionally expected to behave. However, it is because she has rebelled against regional social norms for her gender that she has achieved national notoriety as the host of her *CNN Headline News* show. Without acting up, it is likely that she would have joined the ranks of thousands of other female news anchors whose influence extends only to local audiences. Since Nancy Grace is a nationally recognized rhetor, it would be interesting to examine how undergraduate students in other parts of the country respond to her, without the uniquely Southern preconceived cultural expectations against which to measure her behavior.

It would be highly beneficial to conduct further research not only on a sample of undergraduates from different regions, but also from more varied ethnic, socioeconomic, or religious backgrounds—all of which are factors that can contribute to perceptions of gender. The generally homogenous student body of my university, comprised mainly of white, upper-middle-class Protestants, lacks diversity in those areas. In order to gain further insight into my participants' family backgrounds and the ways in which they categorized appropriate gender roles, I asked them to describe their male and female relatives of two generations (grandmother, grandfather, mother, father). In particular, many participants expressed an obvious Christian background by describing their relatives as churchgoing individuals, and several students referred to their father as the spiritual leader of their household. Considering that fundamentalist Christianity typically places man in authority over woman, it is possible that such religious attitudes and beliefs influenced participants' responses regarding both their relatives and their perceptions of Nancy Grace and the attorney. Nevertheless, I am convinced that vestiges of sexism against women still exist in all areas of American society, infiltrating all regions and transcending all demographic characteristics such as religion. As such, I believe that potential regional and demographic differences in perceptions of gender, particularly perceived roles of female public rhetors, warrant further study.

Conclusion

Feminist historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich once said, "Well-behaved women seldom make history." This statement is confirmed by modern media, which constantly inundate us with examples of women who have achieved fame for defying social norms. In particular, the media have seen an increase in the number of female rhetors, including political commentators, legal analysts, and television personalities, who are famous for pushing people's buttons. Nancy Grace is just one example of a female rhetor who gets more attention for her controversial behavior than her rhetorical skill and the causes she represents. Another notorious figure is conservative pundit Ann Coulter, who recently made headlines for her personal attack on Democratic presidential hopeful John Edwards at the 2007 Conservative Political Action Conference. However, this notion of women acting up is not limited to one political party; female political commentators and politicians from both ends of the political spectrum have become famous for controversial behavior.

Perhaps one of the most notable modern-day examples from the Democratic Party is Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. Says linguistics researcher Mandy Manning of Rodham Clinton's role in advancing women's rights through her involvement in the political sphere, "Rodham Clinton is making language accessible to everyone, not simply as a means for relating white men's perspectives, but to empower women, by showing them how to use the language of men as a tool for ending inequality" (115). However, I question whether it is ethical, or even possible, to expect women rhetors to reverse the gender role socialization that they have received since birth, adopting instead the masculine qualities typically associated with rhetoric. Others question society's assignment of a gender label to

rhetoric, claiming this is an unnecessary practice that further oppresses women. Rhetorical analyst James Oldham writes:

I am not persuaded that there exists a distinct women's rhetoric or feminine rhetoric (just as I doubt that there exists a single men's/masculine rhetoric). On the other hand, it is clear that women's voices have been deliberately stifled [. . .] and that the ways in which women have practiced and promoted rhetoric have not obtained canonical status in the places where rhetoric is studied. ("Afterword" 319)

My study of a small sample of undergraduates revealed that the majority of females responded positively to the dominant communication style of a controversial female rhetor. Theoretically speaking, this could be because women like Nancy Grace—as well as Ann Coulter, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and others at the local and national levels—have made it more socially acceptable for women to take on a strong, active role in public discourse. Women nationwide who possess sentiments similar to those expressed by the young women in my study have the power to elect more women to governmental offices in the coming years. Because of this, political analysts project a rise in the number of women elected, confirmed by Rodham Clinton's potential bid to the Democratic presidential primary in the fall of 2007. However, the movement for women's equality has achieved nothing if voters elect women simply because they are women, and not because of the issues they represent.

After all, male politicians are not stigmatized for being male and all that that implies, mainly because men have traditionally been expected to be leaders in both rhetoric and politics. So how does it alleviate gender inequality by constantly stigmatizing female rhetors, especially female politicians, for being female rather than assessing their actual ability? In regards to Rodham Clinton, Manning states:

Through her utilization of rhetoric most often associated with masculine stereotypes [of] confrontation, aggressiveness, and authority, Rodham Clinton successfully [. . .] empower[s] women and transform[s] societal perceptions of female politicians. Hillary Rodham Clinton forces society to view her not as a woman, but as a politician; as a result, she is successfully renegotiating a woman's role in politics. (109)

Even still, the media continue to draw more attention to Rodham Clinton's role as a woman in politics rather than her actual involvement in politics, in the same way that her contender, Democratic primary candidate Barack Obama, is most often presented for his role as a black man in politics. In this case, gender and race both serve as distractions, not only from the candidates themselves, but also from the important causes they represent. We already have a government in which partisan rivalry distracts from the real issues at hand; do we really want the fact that women politicians are often forced to rebel against gender roles in order to get ahead to be another distraction from what voters should be focusing on?

Since rhetorical style is so closely associated with leadership ability, studying the connection between gender and rhetoric has ramifications not just in politics, but also in the workforce and many other social arenas. Prominent female rhetors set the precedent for how women leaders across the nation are treated and perceived. Although this past century has seen steady advancements for female rhetors and women in general, many still lack true equality with men. Historically, women have often been barred from instruction in rhetoric equal to that which men receive, and, once women do become rhetors, they are often not taken seriously as such. I am convinced that true gender equality is attainable only when rhetoric ceases to take the face of a man *or* a woman, of one communication style or

another. Only when rhetoric becomes identified with the face of the person or persons who are best equipped to publicly discuss pertinent issues, regardless of their gender, will women like Nancy Grace be assessed for their rhetorical skill and not for the level of controversy surrounding them.

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