

Statement on Scholarship

Melissa Ianetta, University of Delaware
Spring 2007

The first work I had accepted for publication while in rank as an Assistant Professor, “‘To Elevate, I Must First Soften’: Rhetoric, Aesthetic, and the Sublime Traditions” (*College English*, 2005) is foundational to my research agenda, for it establishes the historiographical method that informs my subsequent work. In it, I examine the misapprehension of the sublime in contemporary rhetorical and literary study by focusing on three watershed periods in the development of the term: the Classical period that produced the rhetorical treatise “On the Sublime,” the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment reflected in Edmund Burke and Hugh Blair’s influential revisions of sublimity, and our current understanding, which restricts the treatment of sublimity to its aesthetic elements. This essay both reclaims the Classical notion of the rhetorical sublime and reveals the ways in which contemporary assumptions truncate the concept’s intellectual heritage.

The approach developed in “To Elevate . . .” grounds my other historical scholarship, which focuses on the ways in which current notions of disciplinarity in the fields of rhetoric, composition, and literature distort scholars’ understanding of the evolution of English Studies. While my earlier research focused on the sublime, a term readily understood by both literary scholars and rhetorical theorists, my more recent investigations focus on improvisation, which has long been neglected by scholars in both fields. As early as the pre-Socratic tradition, improvisation was seen as the ultimate end of a rhetorical education, a finely trained ability that combined a rhetor’s understanding of an audience’s ideological commonplaces with his apprehension of culturally acceptable arrangement patterns and the learned facility to combine the two extemporaneously. While this model dominated Classical rhetorical study, since the mid-nineteenth century rhetorical improvisation has been associated either with ad hoc eloquence, in which the rhetor simply creates discourse without forethought or training, or with a rhapsodic rhetoric, which springs from innate talent or divine inspiration. Returning improvisation to the history of rhetoric, I believe, can improve our understanding of the insoluble bond between rhetoric and poetic that has been ruptured only in our recent intellectual history. Part of this project, “‘She Must Be a Rare One’: Aspasia, *Corinne*, and the Improvisatrice Tradition,” has been accepted for publication by *PMLA*.

In addition to its implications for our understanding of the development of rhetorical theory, the reclamation of improvisation has important pedagogical implications that I explore in my current project. In “‘The Crown of All Our Study’?: Timed Writing and the History of Rhetoric,” which I am drafting for circulation this summer, I examine improvisation in two works. One is the earliest extant pedagogy of improvisation, Quintilian’s *The Orator’s Education*, which locates improvisation at the apex of rhetorical training. The other is the so-called “death of invention” in Hugh Blair’s highly influential *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783). I argue that the rise and fall of improvisation is important as more than a historical narrative, for the evolution

of improvisation brings new light to contemporary debates concerning timed writing exams. Timed writing recollects the classical improvisational exercises seen in Quintilian's treatise, for both rhetorical situations are founded on the assumption that the rhetor can interpret easily the values and expectations of his audience, both encourage the rhetor to employ arrangement patterns readily recognized by this group and both draw arguments from the ideological common places shared by rhetor and audience. Thus in Classical rhetorical education, aspiring orators studied common place systems, such as Aristotle's common topics, and learned highly codified arrangement patterns like the Athenian funeral oration. Reflecting the influence of such Scottish Enlightenment rhetorics as Blair's treatise, however, contemporary process-based pedagogies prioritize originality, discard the classical notion of audience, and denigrate rhetorical common places as clichéd. While Blair's treatise may have displaced the Classical paradigm's popularity as a pedagogy, however, the rhetorical situation of current high-stakes timed writing reveals the endurance of the classical model of extemporaneity and its ongoing clash with Blairian rhetorical systems, for such timed writing exams as the new SAT require students to analyze an unknowable audience, write in readily recognized yet non-formulaic patterns and invent material that is original yet suitable for the occasion. Students often fail in timed writing situations for reasons that can be ascribed to this clash of models, as seen in timed essays that misdiagnose audience, rely on cliché for substance, and use such formulaic patterns as the five-paragraph construction. Test reform, I conclude, must draw upon both rhetorical systems to better address these issues of audience, arrangement and invention in student instruction, in test construction, and in reader preparation. As with my work in the rhetorical-literary intersection, then, this essay works to reconnect rhetoric and contiguous areas of study.

Like my work on improvisation, my other scholarship in the history of rhetoric explores interdisciplinary space with a goal of questioning current intellectual boundaries. My collaborative essay "Surveying the Stories . . ." (*Rhetoric Review* 2005) examines the history of rhetoric as it is taught in departments of English and Communication Studies. By juxtaposing the preference in English departments for anthologies of primary material with the predilection in departments of Communication for historical summaries, this essay questions recent assertions that rhetoricians across the disciplines share a common conception of rhetoric's history. So too, "'Stand Mum': Rhetoric and Silence at the Lexington Academy, 1839-1841," which is currently under review, uses recent developments in rhetorical theory to improve our historical understanding. It deals with current rhetorical histories of the nineteenth-century normal schools, which tend to view woman's entrance into the classroom from one of two perspectives. Some scholars, such as Robert Connors, argue that women's expanded role in the classroom as teachers and students contributed to the truncation of rhetorical education because of woman's non-combative nature. Other scholars, such as Kathryn Fitzgerald, cite the same demographical shift as a cause of the expansion of classroom rhetoric. I propose a third view. Based largely on records from the nation's first normal school, I challenge notions of woman's entrance into the classroom as an irenic force and draw upon recent work in the rhetorics of silence to demonstrate that, although their agonism may have been quieter, women were no less resistant students than their male counterparts.

Complementing this work in rhetorical theory is my interest in its practical manifestation in writing studies. Accordingly, in “If Aristotle Ran the Writing Center: Writing Center Administration and Classical Rhetoric” (*The Writing Center Journal* 2004), I contextualize improvisation among rhetorical theories of Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle to taxonomize the administrative rhetorics of writing center studies. In a similar vein of rhetorical praxis, I was invited by the editors of *The Writing Center Journal* to write a rhetorical analysis of the International Writing Center Association 2005 Conference (“Concerns are Translated into Conversations of Sudden Community”).

Like my explorations of the intersections of rhetorical, literary and composition studies, my other articles attempt to bridge an interdisciplinary gap that manifests itself as tension between the scholarship of writing center studies and writing program administration. For example, I received a grant from the Council of Writing Program Administrators to fund data collection for the collaboratively written essay “Taking Stock: Surveying the Relationship of the Writing Center and TA Training” (*WPA: Writing Program Administrator* forthcoming). This essay examines the often-vexed relationship between the composition program and the writing center and attempts to broaden our understanding of the relationship between tutoring experience and the development of teacher pedagogy. I was also invited to lead a collaborative essay on writing program administration, “Polylog: Are Writing Center Directors Writing Program Administrators?” (*Composition Studies* 2006). In this essay, six writing center directors examine their administrative roles to address professionalization debates between writing center directors and other writing program administrators. My current administrative research project again engages the disciplinary divisions that characterize modern English Studies. “A Great Divide?: Writing Programs and Lit-GPAs,” a collaborative essay I am coauthoring with five UD graduate students, questions an assumption implicit to writing program administration scholarship, namely, that only composition studies graduate students serve as Graduate Program Administrators (GPAs). In countering this assumption, we examine questions of authority and expertise related to the use of literature graduate students in writing program administration. Like my historical work, this administrative scholarship addresses the gaps created by disciplinary biases.