

Review: *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press*

T J Geiger II

Shaver, Lisa J. *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2012. Print.

Lisa J. Shaver's *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press* makes a significant contribution to the study of women in the history of rhetoric. A project that uses an astounding range of theoretical resources, attends carefully to a stunning array of primary materials, and sheds light on an important subject, *Beyond the Pulpit* brings into focus the lives and words of women reproduced in Methodist publications in the first half of the nineteenth century. By examining texts written by women, about women, or directed toward women in three major Methodist publications, Shaver manages not only to reconstruct for readers significant dimensions of the textual communities in which women were involved, but also make a convincing argument about the rhetorical power of roles women chose for themselves and those to which they were assigned. In Christianity, the belief that death precedes new life—resurrection—is foundational. Thus, it seems wholly appropriate that Shaver opens her book's introduction with a resurrection scene. Shaver recalls the stories Methodist women told about her grandmother at the bereavement dinner following her funeral. This memory launches Shaver's account of how she came to trace the rhetorical activity of Methodist women through existing scholarship. She claims that more attention is

needed to the “little narratives” (as opposed to grand, sweeping narratives) of women outside the clearly public and institutional space of the pulpit. Shaver draws on scholarship from feminist rhetorics, literacy studies, religious history, and cultural geography alongside voluminous primary materials to reshape the standard historical account, which offers a trajectory in which women were transformed from active rhetorical participants in religious efforts during the eighteenth century into a constituency silenced by the increasing institutionalization of denominational structures in the early nineteenth century. Shaver details in her first chapter the emergence of the monthly periodical *Methodist Magazine* and the central place of memoir in that publication. A posthumously published account of an individual’s life and death composed by another, the memoir serves a ritualistic and rhetorical function. These stories of men and women “dying well” transform them, through compositional and editorial decisions, into evangelists who embody a Methodist theology of death: death could serve as a moment of spiritual perfection and an encouragement to others in their lifelong process of conversion.¹ It is primarily through memoirs, through physical death and a genre-enabled resurrection, that women appear in the pages of *Methodist Magazine*.

Turning to women’s memoirs in her second chapter, Shaver argues that these published stories elevate religious women to roles with rhetorical power akin to that of a minister, a role officially denied them in life. Preceding the development of women’s deathbed scenes as a popular American literary trope, nineteenth-century Christian women’s memoirs often focus on words spoken from their deathbeds. Through memoirs and especially deathbed scenes, women become “iconic ministers” whose actual

¹ In this review, I followed Shaver’s occasional lead in using the present tense to refer to what is conveyed within the publications. She argues that the memoirs are not strictly histories, but rhetorical and (at times) semi-literary creations. Though not done consistently throughout the book, Shaver at times stylistically and rhetorically reinforces that argument by writing about the content and effects of these texts as one might about literature, in the present tense.

or represented holiness encourages others to ongoing spiritual development (37). Though memoirs were significantly shaped by men (frequently composed by ministers, introduced with letters from family members, and edited by publication officials), they sometimes include women’s journal and letter excerpts. Journal writing is a central practice of Methodist spirituality (a debt owed to John Wesley) and was more likely to be engaged in by women than men as a means to self-construction.

The “Ladies’ Department” of the *Christian Advocate*, the subject of Shaver’s third chapter, appears at the back of the popular republican and evangelist weekly magazine. Shaver situates the Ladies’ Department as part of the nineteenth-century domestic canon that both generated and policed the rigid gender boundaries that relied on an ideology of separate spheres of activity for men and women: public and private, respectively. Even as the Ladies’ Department encourages women to a narrow range of roles (holy mother and virtuous wife), Shaver insists that in the process of bolstering such traditional roles, these representations point to women’s expanding rhetorical influence through activities that were once the province of ministers: the spiritual edification of men and children.

Attending to those representations of women within the *Christian Advocate* that appear outside the Ladies’ Department, Shaver’s fourth chapter is also her longest. By examining stories (sometimes composed by women themselves) of women’s individual and collective benevolent activity, Shaver argues that women become privileged models to be emulated and agents in history who gained a range of rhetorical and organizational proficiencies. According to Shaver, these skills and activities laid the groundwork for the next generation of women’s political and reform work in the late-nineteenth century that often receives more attention from rhetorical scholars. As Sunday school teachers depicted in the *Christian Advocate*, women further a key nationalistic and evangelistic project: the spiritual development

and denominational instruction of children. In this role, they also moved spiritual literacy curricula away from simple memorization and into a dialogic and dynamic encounter. Shaver demonstrates that depictions of ministers' wives and women missionaries (sometimes not actually given that title) reveal the fact that women engaged in these efforts negotiated not only increasingly public roles, but also traditionally gendered domestic expectations and labor.

Shaver's final chapter examines the *Ladies' Repository*, a Methodist periodical specifically addressed to women. This Methodist "version of *Godey's Lady's Book*" (107) promotes women's reading for intellectual and moral development. Contributors and editorial comments frequently entertain the nineteenth debate about women's education, calling for women's education to be equal to that of men. Through a discussion of letters to the editor, poetry, and scriptural exegesis published in the *Ladies Repository*, Shaver documents the ways in which this periodical offered ordinary women a range of opportunities to exercise their rhetorical powers.

In a short epilogue, Shaver evokes the image of women heralding the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment (and, thus, women's voting rights) in the House of Representatives by singing the Doxology, a prayer sung in many Protestant liturgies. Shaver confronts the modern readers' potential sense of this scene as odd or illegible by reminding readers of the religious motivations and contexts that frequently informed U.S. women's public speaking. Those historical women also found justifications for their speaking in Christian scriptures. Despite this history, Shaver notes ironies both historical and contemporary. Historically, the caricatures late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century churchwomen and feminist activists held about each other often prevented mutually beneficial action around shared concerns. Contemporary rhetorical scholarship focuses on those historical women whose reform projects align more closely with today's normative political project and often forgets those women engaged in what might ostensibly

seem like more conservative endeavors. Shaver urges attention to the histories and women this frame leaves out.

While there is much to recommend *Beyond the Pulpit*, I'll focus on three features that make it a particularly important study, and the features I call attention to run throughout the entire text. First, the approach Shaver takes to locating religious women's rhetorical activity is brilliant. By engaging not only religious periodical pieces penned by women, but also those depictions composed by men, Shaver points to unlikely but richly layered sites that demonstrate women's rhetorical influence. In this way, she provides a model for how to recover the rhetoric of ordinary women when records of their own composition are few. Second, Shaver consistently illustrates how the women who populate the pages of the U.S. religious press defy the notion that a reader can easily identify (and thus dismiss) any given rhetorical moment as simply a mobilization of traditional gender roles or the idea of separate spheres. Even when men filtered and controlled women's representations, Shaver points to the enabling potential such representations contain. Moreover, supposedly private spaces are consistently transformed into rhetorical spaces with a deeply public feel: deathbeds made into pulpits, homes turned into sites for evangelism, and Sunday school classes transformed into missionary fields. Third, and connected to the second point, Shaver portrays the complicated agency women achieved through roles both selected and assigned. Whereas another scholar may have primarily seen in women's memoirs as troublingly narrow constructions of women at the hands of male religious leaders, Shaver identifies how they point toward women's acquisition of ministerial powers that through publication and consumption would not be confined to the deathbed. Likewise, with those socially scripted roles of mother and wife, Shaver highlights the complex motivations women brought to the roles and the rhetorical power women gained from these roles in order to exert a measure of control over their circumstances.

Even as I thoroughly recommend *Beyond the Pulpit*, I do wish Shaver had more fully addressed issues that speak not just to the fraught nature of the gender ideology in which her subject participated, but national and class ideologies as well. For example, Shaver does note the “cultural imperialism” in which Christian women engaged through missionary work (87) and the *Christian Advocate*’s romanticizing of women in poverty (79). However, the former is definitely downplayed and that also seems the case with latter. Citing multiple times the church and Christian women’s work among Native Americans as well as the role of religious periodicals in connecting Christians during the U.S.’s westward expansion, Shaver’s treatment would have been enriched by accounting more thoroughly for the cultural and political imperialism Christian women furthered both abroad and at home. Responding to potential critiques of how the *Christian Advocate* might be interpreted as, at times, encouraging women in poverty to simply accept their circumstances, Shaver claims that such objections deny “the evangelical context and culture” of the women and the publication (79). To my mind, critiquing or acknowledging the consequences of a community’s rhetorical actions (about non-Christian peoples or poverty) does not mean dismissing evangelical motivations. Rather, it means treating all ancestors with the utmost respect. Furthermore, such acknowledgement would further our understanding of the complicated dynamics in which Christian women participated.

Despite this qualm, let me reiterate that *Beyond the Pulpit* is convincingly argued and well-supported. Shaver’s investigation adds invaluable depth and texture to our understanding of the rhetorical activities and agency of Christian women in the U.S.

About the Author

T J Geiger II is a doctoral candidate in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric, and he teaches in the Writing Program at Syracuse University. He holds a B.A. in history and English from Lamar University and an

M.A. in English as well as a Graduate Certificate in Women’s Studies from Texas Woman’s University. His research focuses on advanced writing pedagogy and history, computers and writing, religious rhetorics, and feminist rhetorics. His articles have appeared in *CCTE Studies* and *Peitho*, and he has an article forthcoming in *College English* about religion in the writing classroom. He is currently completing his dissertation, a two-institution study of the undergraduate writing major through student surveys, interviews, and written work.