

KEY CONCEPT STATEMENT

Material

Elizabeth Fleitz

You know that we are living in a material world
And I am a material girl.

—Madonna, “Material Girl”

I. Material (n.): the matter from which a thing is or can be made.

The chorus of the 1984 hit “Material Girl” declares both pop icon Madonna’s obsession and contemporary culture’s fascination with surface-level beauty and decoration. This kind of attention to the physical aspect of human lives, while praised in the song, is often denounced as inferior and shallow. However, in feminist rhetorical studies, scholars are just as fascinated by material culture as the original Material Girl. Materiality is of great significance to scholars of women’s rhetorics, particularly in relation to the physical body (see especially Johnson, Levy, Manthey, and Novotny, this issue). Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Jones Royster, in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, note that scholars are paying attention to genres of composing that involve material practices, including needlework, cookbooks, and journal and letter writing, among other forms (61). As Jack Selzer argues, the physical components of a subject have rhetorical power to at least the same, if not a greater, extent than language (8). Carole Blair illustrates this concept in her analysis of U.S. memorials, noting that “rhetoric’s materiality constructs communal space, prescribes pathways, and summons attention, acting on the whole person of the audience. But it also allows a rhetorical text to ‘speak’ by its mere existence” (49-50). As these scholars explain, rhetoric can be a concrete presence, acting on and through bodies and spaces to produce communication.

II. Material (adj.): denoting or consisting of physical objects rather than the mind or spirit.

a) A focus on the body is central—may I say, material—to the study of women’s rhetorics. Simone de Beauvoir observes that “the female, to a greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species,” going on to note that women’s bodies regularly impact and disrupt women’s lives, while men’s bodies

do not (60). Women's bodily functions are often uncomfortable, painful, and focused nearly exclusively on procreation. Sherry Ortner continues this argument, proposing that women's oppression is based upon the fact that women are regarded as being closer to nature (body), while men are closer to culture (mind) (355). Indeed, throughout the history of European and American art, "men act and women appear," according to John Berger (47). Further, women's bodies and their close associations with procreative functions often put women in less respected tasks in society, such as childcare and housework. By contrast, Ortner suggests that due to this close connection to nature and the physical body, women have a unique perspective on humanity (356). Because women have historically been excluded from public discourse, they have frequently adopted the available means to communicate, often taking advantage of the gendered body-mind dichotomy and focusing on the bodily forms rhetoric takes. For scholars of women's rhetorics, this focus on the material body is fitting, as it can help to expose not only women's bodies and work but also the innovative ways women have used the available means of persuasion in order to construct meaning.

b) Debra Hawhee explores not only the material but also the productive nature of bodily rhetoric in her work on the connection between athletic and rhetorical training in ancient Greece. She observes that the pedagogical strategies of both activities are parallel, noting that in ancient Greece, a persuasive encounter "is more than perception—mind meets (and masters) matter—instead, it is a bodily production, a mutually constitutive struggle among bodies and surrounding forces" (150). In this context, as scholars of women's rhetorics know, privileging mind over body is a fallacy. Instead of working with this dichotomy, these scholars seek out and value studies of the body, embodied communication practices, and ways of knowing that reflect women's unique knowledge about the materiality of daily life (Ebert 25). Hélène Cixous notes that women should take advantage of their physical experience to explore their identity, famously noting "woman must write her body" (287). She argues that this focus is subversive (288). In fact, an exploration of the physical body can help to explode familiar definitions of rhetoric. As Philippa Spoel argues: "[A] feminist approach to embodied rhetorics opens up possibilities for re-integrating bodily, emotional ways of knowing [. . .] into the process through which rhetors and audiences generate together socially and historically situated knowledges" (201). Studying the body, then, allows feminist rhetorical scholars to explore the productive power of rhetoric.

III. Material (n.): facts, information, or ideas for use in creative a book or other work.

a) Material conditions of women's lives, from their bodies to their living situations, have historically had a major influence on their ability to be literate and produce rhetoric. Virginia Woolf, writing in *A Room of One's Own*, makes the argument for material conditions that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). The act of writing is difficult, she notes, even with material privileges; she explains that especially for women, "these difficulties were equally more formidable," to speak nothing of the open hostility women writers often endured as well (52). The issue of the material roadblocks women face is central to scholars of women's rhetorics.

b) The overall complexity of women's material conditions offers much in the way of rhetorical study for scholars of women's rhetorics. For example, Carol Mattingly explains how in the Victorian era, dress became not just a way of disciplining women, but in fact a way to resist—thus, "women made dress speak for them" (7). Wendy Dasler Johnson, writing on corsets of the Victorian era, argues for women's bodies as rhetorically productive texts (207). Like corsets, discourses of power are both repressive (binding in traditional expectations) as well as productive (producing new discourses) (213). Elaine Hedges, describing the rhetorical power of American women's embroidery from the Victorian era to today, links the material text directly with the women's body, asserting that "the textile artifact had become women's own self-habitation, dark with both suffering and her hidden potentials, the skein her very skin" (350). Scholarship like this uncovers the rhetorical power of the material dimension, illuminating the variety of alternative rhetorical practices unique to women.

IV. Material (adj.): important; essential; relevant.

Within the very definition of this term is an argument for the importance of the material to feminist rhetorical scholarship. Studying women's working and living conditions, as well as their composing practices, enables scholars of women's rhetorics a fuller, multidimensional approach to ongoing and new inquiries. In particular, rhetorics explicitly involving the body, physical space, and/or everyday objects call for expanded historiographical practices. Kirsch and Royster confirm this idea, describing feminist historiography as diverse and inclusive of a variety of avenues of study, especially material rhetoric. They also identify research into women's rhetorical practices as characterized by a variety of methods, all of which are considered equally useful and relevant. Calling for even greater attention to embodied materiality, Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol, in their introduction to *Haunting Violations*, argue for making direct connections between a woman's body and her agency, noting how women's identities are formed through "negotiation of the material and discursive domains" (6). Thus, it is important for scholars of women's

rhetorics to explore these connections and develop ways to study the intricacies and diversity of women's material experiences (6).

Similarly, studying material rhetorics involves careful attention to the various ways rhetoric can be made manifest. This charge challenges the mind-body dichotomy by seeking to equalize the components involved in rhetorical production in order to arrive at a better understanding of material rhetorical practices unique to women. Adrienne Rich argues for this kind of focus, writing, "[Women must be] locating the grounds from which to speak with authority as women. Not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it" (213). Indeed, feminist rhetorical scholarship must continue to remap, reinscribe, reinvent, reinterpret, and most importantly reclaim the body along with other aspects of material culture and experience. Thus, the concept of material is material to women, and to scholars of women's rhetorics, as we are all Material Girls.

Works Cited

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin, 1972. Print.
- Blair, Carole. "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality." Selzer and Crowley 16-57. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène. From "Sorties." *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetorics*. Ed. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2001. 283-290. Print.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.
- Hawhee, Debra. "Bodily Pedagogies: Rhetoric, Athletics, and the Sophists' Three Rs." *College English* 65.2 (Nov 2002): 142-162. Print.
- Hedges, Elaine. "The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work." *Tradition and the Talents of Women*. Ed. Florence Howe. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1991. 338-364. Print.
- Hesford, Wendy, and Wendy Kozol. *Haunting Violations: Feminist Criticism and the Crisis of the "Real."* Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2001. Print.
- Johnson, Wendy Dasler. "Cultural Rhetorics of Women's Corsets." *Rhetoric Review* 20:3/4 (2001): 203-33. Print.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones, and Gesa E. Kirsch. *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. Carbondale: SIUP, 2012. Print.

- Mattingly, Carol. *Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women's Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth-Century America*. Carbondale: SIUP, 2002. Print.
- Ortner, Sherry. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" 1972. Rpt. in *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. New York: Norton, 2007: 350-367. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1986. Print.
- Selzer, Jack. "Habeas Corpus: An Introduction." Selzer and Crowley 3-15. Print.
- Selzer, Jack, and Sharon Crowley, eds. *Rhetorical Bodies*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1999. Print.
- Spoel, Philippa. "Re-inventing Rhetorical Epistemology: Donna Haraway's and Nicole Brossard's Embodied Visions." *The Changing Tradition: Women in the History of Rhetoric*. Ed. Christine Mason Sutherland and Rebecca Jane Sutcliffe. Calgary: U of Calgary P, 1999. 199-212. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. Annotated Ed. New York: Harcourt, 2005. Print.

About the Author

Elizabeth J. Fleitz is an Assistant Professor of English at Lindenwood University. She teaches courses in first-year and advanced writing, grammar, and the teaching of writing. She recently launched a new minor in Writing and Professional Communication. She received her PhD in Rhetoric and Writing from Bowling Green State University in 2009 with her dissertation exploring the rhetorical practices of women through the process of sharing and collecting recipes. She is also co-editor of the Reviews section of *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*.