

**Stenberg, Shari J. *Composition Studies Through a Feminist Lens*. Anderson: Parlor Press, 2013. Print. 120 pages.**

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I admit when I first picked up Shari Stenberg's *Composition Studies Through a Feminist Lens*, I was skeptical of how thoroughly a book a mere half-inch thick could capture the rich scholarship in composition as read through a feminist perspective. Yet Stenberg impressively packs into 100 pages a coherent and comprehensive introduction to topics that emerge at the intersection of composition, rhetoric, and feminist theory. The third installment of the *Lenses on Composition Studies*, a series intended to introduce graduate students and upper-level undergraduates in composition to the field's major topics, this book "aims to spotlight how feminist contributions have made Composition Studies a more inclusive, innovative, and exciting field" (4). Stenberg's approach to structuring the book allows her not only to present concepts, tensions, and histories in rhetoric and composition but also to expose readers to various feminist research methodologies. In each chapter, Stenberg identifies a specific topic in composition studies and synthesizes feminist scholars' re-readings, responses to, and critiques of the topic. This structure demonstrates to her readers both the landscape of composition and examples of feminist theory in action.

Stenberg begins the book with the chapter "Composition's Origin Stories Through a Feminist Lens" in which she reviews and retells three of composition's origin stories, stories with which many readers of *Peitho* are likely familiar. She first discusses Harvard's entrance exam as the origin of first-year composition, whose purpose was to "fix" student writing. Next, she describes composition's move to legitimize itself as an intellectual field by adopting classical rhetoric as its ancestor. In the third origin story, Stenberg aligns the process movement's commitment to scientific methods and inquiry with its efforts to validate composition as a field of knowledge production. Though the origin stories themselves aren't told through a feminist perspective, Stenberg reminds her readers that a story always "depends on the lens of the storyteller" (3) and follows each origin story with purposeful summaries of how others have recast each story through a "feminist lens," or historiography, a research method endorsed by many feminist scholars. These feminist historiography

projects bring together topoi from feminist theory and composition studies to reveal the origin stories' effects on the field today. For example, composition's origin of "fixing" students' writing marks it as a service field to the university, a status that has led to sexual divisions of labor, exploitative labor practices, and the institution dismissing the intellectual rigor of the field.

Though the Harvard entrance exam and process movement origin stories are occasionally referenced throughout the rest of the book, the two subsequent chapters address the implications of the classical rhetoric origin story on composition studies. "Whether or not classical rhetoric is composition's ancestor," she argues, "the *values* of masculine classical rhetoric have forcefully shaped what we in contemporary western culture consider good argument and writing: linear, persuasive, objective-sounding, and clear" (20, original emphasis). While classical rhetoric may have legitimized composition as an intellectual field, the rhetorical tradition represents and privileges a small group of people and determines what the field values as good writing, tensions she addresses in the following two chapters.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Stenberg reviews feminist recovery work and scholarship on identity intersections to denaturalize master narratives of the universal thinker and the universal woman. In Chapter 2, "The Rhetorical Tradition Through a Feminist Lens: Locating Women," she challenges these master narratives by reviewing feminist scholars' recovery work on marginalized and silenced women. Embracing "overlooked" women's rhetoric rejects the concept of a universal rational thinker and, in turn, expands the rhetorical tradition beyond masculinist standards. To perform this recovery work, she says, "[W]e can hear women's voices in the tradition(s) if we listen hard enough, or, in some cases, if we listen for different *kinds* of rhetoric" (20). For example, women such as Aspasia, Diotima, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Margaret Fuller "borrow[ed] and appropriate[ed] rhetorical strategies to participate in the public sphere," (20) and recovery projects of these women's work "ask us to think in new ways about what counts as legitimate knowledge, argument, and speech acts" (22). Similarly, in Chapter 3, "Difference, Form, and Topoi Through a Feminist Lens," Stenberg references intersectional identity scholarship by Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Hélène Cixous, and Trinh T. Minh-ha and their efforts to denaturalize the universal woman. Accounting for identity intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and language avoids collapsing differences among women and claims legitimacy to the personal "as a way to enhance and further knowledge" (47). In both chapters, we see a move away from "the seemingly 'universal' rhetorical standards of clear, linear, logical prose" and toward new ways of thinking about what counts as knowledge, argument, and inquiry (44).

While the first half of the book addresses a few ways scholars have challenged and expanded the rhetorical tradition, the second half discusses the rhetorical tradition's influence on the composition classroom. In Chapter 4: "Teacher and Student Identity Through a Feminist Lens," Stenberg rereads through a feminist perspective three metaphors of the composition instructor. Two of the metaphors emerge from two of the origin stories: the "teacher as disciplinarian/mother/maid" metaphor in response to composition's purpose of "fixing" students and the "teacher as nurturer" metaphor in response to the process movement. Read through a feminist lens that interrogates traditional gender roles and expectations, yet another feminist research methodology she highlights, we see how these metaphors circulate gendered expectations of the instructor and lead to questionable labor practices. She ends the chapter with a discussion of the current pedagogical moment metaphor: "composition teacher as rhetor." In this metaphor, the instructor takes a rhetorical approach to pedagogy, meaning the instructor attends to the moment and context instead of enacting a prescriptive approach or identity. By stressing the importance of *kairos* and diverse identities, she reminds her readers there are many ways to espouse a feminist pedagogy, which is a particularly helpful message for her intended readers who are developing their identities and commitments as teachers.

In the final two chapters, Stenberg highlights the ways ideological analyses lead to different forms of feminist revision, particularly regarding what counts as research, argument, and writing in composition studies. In Chapter 5, "Research and Writing Through a Feminist Lens: A Focus on Experience," she discusses revisionist work motivated by reflexive practices. In an example of her own reflexive practice, Stenberg describes a classroom discussion wherein students list the rules they've been taught as to what constitutes academic writing, a discussion familiar to many composition instructors. Her students' responses are those many compositionists come to expect, such as no contractions, no first person, and good transitions, a reminder that classical rhetoric has forwarded a limiting and limited narrative of what counts as good writing and that many students have learned this narrative as academic writing dogma. Stenberg then leads students to "consider the assumptions and values that shape" the rules of good writing "instead of approaching [them] as neutral and universal" (70). An ideological analysis of these rules reveals "masculinist structures and practices" that feminist scholars seek to challenge and revise, and one way of doing this is through reflexive practices (75). Through reflexive practices, writers and researchers adopt new responsibilities and account for their language practices, power relations, politics of location, and personal experiences, and attending to these relationships shapes new ways of thinking about what counts as—and what it means to—research and write.

In another effort to promote the value of reflexive practices, Stenberg provides, throughout the book, questions for writing and discussion that offer her readers an opportunity to reflect on the ideas presented in each chapter, to conduct further research, and to respond to brief case studies. Including these questions throughout each chapter is an effective method to encourage her readers to engage with the book's concepts as students, teachers, and citizens in more critical and reflexive ways.

In Chapter 6, "Argument Through a Feminist Lens," Stenberg continues to discuss ideological analyses that lead to feminist revisionist approaches to argumentation. These approaches include negotiation, mediation, conversation, and rhetorical listening, all of which respond to the social nature of composing and avoid hierarchical relations of interaction that result from traditional monologic forms of argument. Highlighting feminist's revisionist work in these final two chapters offers an important lesson for the reader: what counts as academic argument is the product of an instructor's, a discipline's, and/or a community's beliefs about knowledge, evidence, and reason. Therefore, a critical look at argument surfaces its ideological commitments; how we assign, discuss, and evaluate writing shape students' beliefs on what it means to write and to be a writer.

Throughout the book, Stenberg is careful to present the complexities of feminist scholarship by locating convergences and divergences of feminist scholarship on composition. The introductory level of the book limits the depth in which Stenberg can capture competing feminist philosophies, yet she provides sufficient discussions of these philosophies to show her readers that a single feminist theory doesn't exist, and, more importantly, that diverging philosophies have contributed to more robust composition theories. Still, her most pointed commentary on composition and feminism comes in the epilogue and highlights this recursive value: "A feminist lens...does not rest upon final answers or closure; instead, it invites reflection, rethinking, and rewriting, so that feminist knowledge, writing, and classrooms are ever-evolving" (102). As we see, both feminist and composition theories are active and interactive scholarly pursuits that interrogate "what counts as knowledge, how we produce and share it, and who is considered a knower" (98). Her book, then, invites her readers to engage in "reflection, rethinking, and rewriting" of how they position themselves within composition studies.

The book appeals to practicing and aspiring composition instructors because it is readily applicable to classroom use. However, readers who expect to come away from this book with concrete lesson plans and projects to assign in their composition courses will be disappointed. Beyond the few short anecdotes of her own classroom experiences and those of other scholars, Stenberg smartly refrains from offering a compilation of classroom practice

activities. It seems that one of the main purposes of the book is to show that feminist theory is a valuable lens for re-thinking and re-seeing dominant narratives, and presenting a compilation of classroom practice activities would limit the potential for readers to engage in their own acts of re-thinking and re-seeing. Because she does not provide concrete lesson plans, she embraces the potential for her readers to function as feminist agents themselves, re-seeing and re-thinking their own classroom practices and pedagogical and feminist commitments.

Stenberg has produced a text that effectively and efficiently introduces emerging scholars to the composition field. This book would be appropriate as the representative introductory text on composition and feminist theories in an upper-level undergraduate or beginning graduate-level composition theory survey course or even for experienced teachers of composition to reflect on their own teaching practices and philosophies. Ultimately, this book serves as an excellent model for those practicing and aspiring composition instructors seeking to espouse feminist methodologies in their own pedagogy or scholarship.

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## About the Author

**Kelly Whitney** is a PhD student in Rhetoric and Professional Communication at New Mexico State University. Her research interests include epistemology in scientific and medical discourses, particularly as studied through feminist and disability rhetorics.