

Graban, Tarez Samra. *Women's Irony: Rewriting Feminist Rhetorical Histories*. Southern Illinois UP, 2015. 258 pages.

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Women's Irony: Rewriting Feminist Rhetorical Histories is a significant contribution to history of women's rhetoric, to feminist studies, and to rhetorical studies (especially of figurative language). Graban argues that we need to move beyond current descriptions of the functions of irony in women's rhetoric: self-deprecation, a means of recognizing stereotypes, or a device for constructing a strong but feminine ethos. For Graban, irony in women's rhetoric instead promotes activism and disruption, engages multiple audiences across time, raises consciousness, and pushes us to reconsider how we do history. Irony allows us to approach an archive differently, complicating the relationships between women and agency, language and history, archival location and memory. This is a book that will be of interest to scholars and graduate students in Rhetoric and Composition, Women's Studies, and Nineteenth-Century American Studies.

In the Introduction, "Why an Irony Paradigm for Feminist Historiography, and Why Now?," Graban outlines the premiere themes located within her research: ironic discourse beyond intentionality, irony as rhetorical agency, irony as a gateway to historicity, and irony as a method of knowledge-making. Throughout the introduction, Graban makes clear her primary concern is *how* and *why* irony occurs, rather than defining "what irony is" (5). Graban seeks to generate discussion about the ways in which irony creates opportunities to destabilize and disrupt feminist historical work. Citing Jacqueline Jones Royster, Cheryl Glenn, Andrea Lunsford, and Patricia Bizzell, Graban's work responds to the question: "What comes next in historical studies of women rhetors?" (13). Her study offers answers to this question through her analysis of Anne Askew's, Anne Hutchinson's, and Helen Gougar's rhetorical performances of irony. The introduction, then, forecasts for the reader specific approaches to Renaissance texts, Colonial histories, and suffrage archives that enable Graban to reveal "irony's knowledge-making potential" (13).

In a brilliant first chapter on Anne Askew, Graban argues that instead of separating contextual study of Askew in Reformation politics and early modern gender roles from reception studies of her text, a methodology using irony

as a focus allows us to see a continuum of realization across multiple historical audiences of responses to Askew's irony. Such an approach forces us to see that Askew is not just resistant, but is inventing a civic discourse for women reformers, a plea for common-law rights for women. In this chapter Graban also reconceptualizes how the complexities of feminist subjectivities contribute to rhetorical agency. As an example of how feminist ironic discourse complicates the relationship between agency and rhetorical activity, Graban reexamines the trial of Askew as a critical site of historicized events. Graban problematizes the role of Askew as agent by rethinking Askew's use of silence, by relinquishing the attempt to discern whether Askew is truthful in her *Examinations*, by investigating her combination of logic and rhetoric and dialectic, and by exploring her invention of a Renaissance civic discourse for women. Graban explains how "reexamining texts to rereading histories to (re)using archives" (28) opens historical texts to interpretive possibilities that consider the agential interactions between multiple rhetors—writer(s) and audiences. She is particularly concerned with troubling historians' positioning of Askew by looking beyond Askew's own self-perception to include perceptions of other agents in Askew's trial and the distribution of her texts. Graban exposes the limitations of feminist historiography methodologies that merely piece together coherent metanarratives (51) by showing that interactions and performances between multiple actors have complex and residual implications that enable us to reconsider how Askew (and others) "successfully inhabit a textual event" (53). This analysis allows us to view from disparate perspectives the interstitial relationships between Askew's voice in the text and her multiple audiences—her immediate questioners, the King's Council, pan-Europe Reformers, and eventually historians.

In a second case study, Graban pictures Anne Hutchinson not as inhabiting or resisting expected domestic roles for colonial women's speech, but by representing her private experience as public religious belief, helping to produce her religious culture through irony. The residual implications of historicized rhetorical performances are evident in Chapter 2 where Graban considers how historians might study women's texts apart from their authorial intent or use of irony to overcome social censure. Graban examines "how language moves historically through Hutchinson's Colonial controversy and on what cultural logics could have been" (58), while considering the potential interactions between Colonial women's private experience and public language. Rather than read Hutchinson's text as "divisive" (60), Graban offers historians an opportunity to reimagine Hutchinson as a co-creator and producer apart from her traditional gendered or religious role. Graban examines Hutchinson's verbal exchanges with the elders using a four-pronged methodological approach: arguing beyond "words" and "works," engaging

a topos of difference, repositioning “ecclesiastic” as “civic,” and accepting a hybrid conscience (63). Graban’s analysis of Hutchinson makes several contributions to the study of women’s historiography. Besides arguing that, for Hutchinson, public and private were not strictly separate categories, Graban calls for a more critical consideration of how traditional methodologies ensure that Hutchinson’s identity “remains bound by narratives that are based in models of action and inaction” (91). Rather than read Hutchinson’s narrative only as an instance of her overcoming ecclesiastic expectations for women, Graban advocates holding in balance the tropes of “prophecy, maternity, and fecundity” (90) so that multiple readings of Hutchinson remain possible.

Chapter 3 recovers a little-known suffragette, Helen Gougar, and rehabilitates her image from dissident to ironist, not as agitating outside of the Suffrage Movement and nineteenth-century political parties, but as blending suffrage genres in order to deliver a message that, across her career, sought to unite suffragist, temperance, labor, and economic reform rhetorics. In chapter 3, Graban is concerned with the ways traditional methodological approaches to recovering historical texts embody assumptions and motives that drive limiting perspectives thereby determining how historians position historical figures. As an example of how historians might re-read where and why figures are historically positioned, Graban examines Helen M. Gougar’s political career, traditionally interpreted as antagonistic to mainstream suffrage goals, as an undeveloped site of re-discovery. Graban is particularly interested in potentiality and is persistent in advocating for the examination of “who or what else complicates” rhetorical situations rather than who has done or received the action (96). In Graban’s application of Sharon Crowley’s research, for example, she underscores the ways in which historiographers’ “impulses are as important as the narratives themselves” (96) as an example of looking at “*who or what else complicates*” (96-97) our notion of writing history, and as a way of ultimately challenging the underlying logic of canon formation. While most historians position Gougar as a minor “regional” suffragist, historians can open up a richer perception of the nineteenth-century women’s movement as full of different viewpoints by using a local archive and by approaching Gougar as ironist and dissenter. Graban analyzes Gougar’s political texts through identifying five strategic political responses and so further advances an alternative method of engaging with archival selections that disrupt traditional historiographical analysis. Through a case study of Gougar’s political affiliations, texts, and activism, Graban importantly warns against the tendency to oversimplify, advocating instead for methods of remembering and locating rhetorical situations through irony’s lenses—“in the interest of using irony to read through history and not merely in history—to unsettle the constraints of location or memory that might limit how we access . . . discourse” (132). Thus

Graban employs the irony paradigm to trouble the view of Suffrage as a coherent platform.

Chapter 4, "Freeing the Archon," further addresses the possibilities that emerge when we examine *how* historians recover and write history, rather than the particular *things* they write about. Graban's research allows us to consider "how historiographers can and should analyze ironic discourse in a theoretical milieu that understands history, language, memory, and rhetorical identification as contingencies rather than stabilities" (164). In her extended analysis of Gougar's political discourse, Graban poses a series of questions that advance historiography and feminist methodologies. What are suffragists' actual and probable impacts on the way we have done history? What are our other options for constructing and being constructed by these histories? How do other options bear on the function of *kairos*? What attitudes intrinsic to feminist recovery in rhetoric and composition contribute to historical studies in other disciplines? (145). Graban seeks answers to these questions through an analysis of suffrage archives as a site for "locate-ability" (145), seeing topoi in archival gaps, and defining ontological problems for third-wave recovery, especially how to acknowledge multiple feminist ideologies and how to maintain a dialectic between historical context and present memorializing. This chapter allows us to consider new sites of historical study that challenge normative assumptions that limit construction and recovery of archival texts. According to Graban, limitations can be mediated by "expanding the range of texts and methodologies we use to value activism" (149).

The final chapter, "Toward an Irony Paradigm," summarizes Graban's intentions for *Women's Irony* and its impact on feminist historians' methods of archival recovery. Graban argues against theories of irony that are traditionally formed "by and large, on the basis of expecting a coherent and orderly universe in which each discursive act is dictated by a single intention..." (167). Citing Rengar and Soward's "three-pronged" approach to feminist contradiction, Graban makes the case for an irony paradigm that considers new ways of recovering, arranging, and remembering feminists texts: an irony paradigm that has a transformative effect on its own theory building and on developing new theories of archive; an irony paradigm that represents rhetoric as a discipline that simultaneously focuses on its tasks, its knowledge-makers, and its students; and an irony paradigm that is interdisciplinary and enables a cross-cultural historical project. According to Graban, "absences of information and methodological gaps" (169) provide an important opportunity for historians to examine feminist contradictions by questioning historical practices and historiographical agency, as well as reconceptualizing how historians might use irony.

The irony paradigm for feminist rhetorical studies reveals the contradictions vital to a feminist discourse, opens up the collaborative nature of feminist interpretation, re-orientates archival memory as a dynamic social process, and raises consciousness, welcoming the innovation of students in the discipline. Although this work is primarily a theoretical study of the uses of irony, it also offers important archival research in the chapters on Gougar. If the study has a limitation, it is the dense theoretical vocabulary that Graban deploys that limits its accessibility for undergraduates and a more popular audience. The study's strengths lie in its new definitions of irony, its inventive use of irony as a method rather than only a figure, and its appreciation of archives as constructed. We strongly recommend Graban's study for scholars and graduate students interested in irony and in feminist historiography and archival work.

About the Authors

Daune O'Brien is an MA student at the University of Maryland in English, specializing in Rhetoric and Writing. She teaches upper-level Technical and Business Writing with an emphasis on digital and rhetorical construction. Her research interests include feminist, activist, and disability rhetoric. Her current research examines rhetorical accessibility, activism, and participatory design within the Special Education process.

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