

Cultural Rhetorics of Women's Corsets

A woman was restrained as much by Victorian society as by her corset.

—Postcard advertising
The Petticoat Expeditions,
National Film Board of Canada, 1999

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces: it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.

—Michel Foucault,
Discipline and Punish

One thread in the American nineteenth-century discourse of sentiment wraps itself around women's bodies.¹ This essay is about those bodies, women's writing, and sentimental rhetoric. The three intersect in corsets—and not just in those torso-squeezing contraptions that assured a woman's hourglass figure in Western bourgeois culture from at least the 1750s to the early twentieth century. In this article I address a number of cultural constructions, formal matters that perform a kind of *poesis* shaping a woman writer's heart, spirit, and body back in the nineteenth century, and now, too. The Canadian National Film Board ad quoted above views the corset and its culture only as "restraint." But sentimental rhetoric puts those corsets and cultural bodies in a different light. Rhetorical codes map a particular significance of

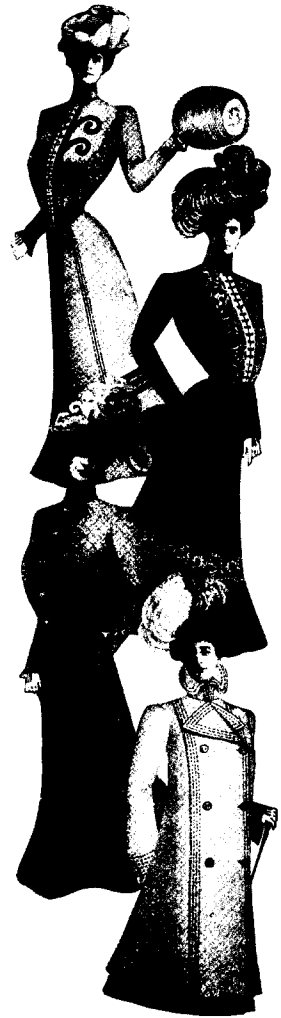


Figure 1 Coat advertisement,
McLure's Magazine (1896).

women's bodies, trace outlines of their material conditions and their writing, and may let us gain insights today from both.

To read corsets and women's writing, I propose that we engage formal rhetoric as an heuristic, so that through both rhetorical and feminist frames we may read something of how discourse shapes the feminine subject. By using sentimental rhetoric as an heuristic, I am urging a "return of the repressed," as Suzanne Clark (taking liberties with Freud) characterizes the sentimental (96). Moreover, I am arguing for a recognition of rhetoric as "metadiscipline," as Victor Villanueva insists in *Bootstraps*—or in Roland Barthes' words, for rhetoric as "discourse on discourse" (13). Some object to broadening "rhetoric" to include other than verbal discourses. But one might say the current expanded understanding resembles eighteenth-century theorists' view of rhetoric as an "omnibus term" with verbal codes as just one passenger on that bus (Bigelow 34).² If rhetoric can work as metadiscipline in this sense, then indeed "rhetoric makes history," as Jane Tompkins once claimed of popular nineteenth-century texts in *Sensational Designs* (141, emphasis in original). And knowing something about rhetoric in nineteenth-century women's lives puts that history better in hand. With such knowledge, we might then take a stronger hand in shaping today's selves—in other words, our own lives.

Two aspects of eighteenth-century rhetoric assumed that a woman's body would signify in particular ways. The first is a remarkable prominence given the female body in examples cited by theorists of sentimental rhetoric. It is a surprisingly small step from these representations to figures of properly corseted nineteenth-century women, and such links between rhetorical theory and corsets underscore the pervasiveness of "omnibus" rhetoric in nineteenth-century America. A second aspect pertinent to corsets is a spectrum from naive to sentimental that became a complex hierarchy implicit in sentimental discourse. Within this progression, a corset impressed apparently natural virtues upon the shape of a woman's body, qualities that somehow she lacked without the garment. In this essay I follow a thread of bodily rhetoric that leads first to women's bodies in the rhetorical codes, then into nineteenth-century networks of power traced by Foucault, and finally through the continuum of Continental sentiment into the lines of nineteenth-century women's corsets and specifically into their sentimental poetry. To end, I ask how corset-like discourse may shape us and our writing today.

First, although the body may seem out of place in an earlier system of deductive logic, there is no escaping the interrelation of body and intellect in codes of empirical rhetoric articulated in the eighteenth century.³ Sentimentalism insists on mingling persuasion with responsive bodies. The rhetoric of sentiment as that "liminal operation," as Suzanne Clark has called it, combines both affect

and conscious reasoning (96). In empiricism this liminality comes about because the body is a delicate instrument registering both sensory data and also feeling or passions. Obeying the rule of sensationalist epistemology that bodily impressions carry knowledge to the mind, both male and female protagonists in eighteenth-century British fiction “convey their virtue through their meaningful bodies,” Janet Todd reminds scholars. In this rhetorical code, “the most authentic emotions are signaled not by words but by tears, blushes, palpitations and fainting fits” (120). So too in US writing throughout the nineteenth century, it was commonsense that bodies would signify. In her study of nineteenth-century North American rhetoric, Nan Johnson cites, for example, Silus S. Curry’s rhetoric manuals as “taking the ‘whole body’ approach to expression” (144). And yet, despite concerted efforts lately to emphasize that discourse is embedded in material culture, bodies may still seem to be an odd site for understanding persuasion and poetry.

For some still follow F. O. Matthiessen’s identification of nineteenth-century US literature solely with the ‘American Renaissance,’ and these scholars still oppose real literature or serious rhetoric to “the ceaseless flux of Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth’s novels” and others of her ilk (x). Identifying a woman’s writing with corrupting “flux,” that is, with excrement or perhaps with menstrual flow, such critics have tried to avoid the entanglement of bodies altogether. They ruled the whole messy sentimental discourse out of bounds. While excluding sentimentalism from his modernist canon, Matthiessen nevertheless clearly sensed that bodies invoked by sentimental texts had disruptive power. Bodies resist order. They can be unspeakably aroused or moved. Bodies suggest difficult material context, historical contingencies, political and biological and racial pressures, and gender. Modern blind spots obscuring the bodily rhetoric of sentimentalism have “denied traditionally sentimental topics close investigation and, following the association of sensibility with effeminacy, made the sentimental style possible only as a lapse from ‘masculine’ rigour and moral and social seriousness,” says Todd (148).⁴ Much of what nineteenth-century sentimental discourse attempted to make conscious and encode has been banished to our unconscious. Julia Kristeva has observed that what is banished is by definition the unknown, the unconscious.⁵ One purpose of this study is to bring back to consciousness the missing persons suggested by corsets and women’s writing in sentimental discourse.

The first clue that pointed me toward reading corsets and sentimental bodies through the rhetorical codes was a small illustration squeezed in with other corset ads in the popular *McLure’s Magazine* of 1896 (see Figure 2). This advertisement for Delsarte corsets began to make sense of a collection of comments about corsets, illustrations of the contraption, and pictures of women in corsets that had been pil-



Figure 2 Delsarte corset advertisement, *McLure's Magazine* (1896).

ing up on my desk from the start of a longer project on antebellum poetry.⁶ The ad's brand name explicitly connects the "Delsarte system of elocution" (a popular course in oratorical performance) to an undergarment thought to be required by most middle- and upper-class women for proper demeanor and bodily carriage.

To locate Delsarte and corsets in nineteenth-century rhetorical tradition, I must first say something about the way any illustration or detail worked in sensationalist rhetoric. Cut from the cloth of empiricism, sentimental rhetoric sought to reproduce sensory impressions in verbal discourse that would get response from everybody in an audience. Since phenomena outside oneself were understood to make sensory impressions, then strong impressions counted for experience or empirical evidence. To this end, Hugh Blair's and George Campbell's rhetorical codes both recommended "vivacity" or lifelike detail, and also "perspicuity" or concise and direct delivery (Blair Lecture X; Campbell 216–84, 285–353). Energetic treatment was of course not new with eighteenth-century empiricists. According to Richard Lanham, the pre-Platonist Dionysius wrote that Lysias's verbal description appeared "before your very eyes," an instance of *enargia*. Lanham points out that Aristotle too used the term *enargia* to characterize words or phrases that are unusually vivid, and the seventeenth-century used

both *enargia* and “vivid” to denote its favorite “pointed” style (64–65). For the nineteenth century’s version of empirical thought, however, the “vivid” or “perspicacious” style would connect particularly to an emphasis on sensory epistemology. Today, writing instructors’ insistence that students must “be specific and use sensory detail” echo something like this sensationalist vivacity. And “perspicuity,” or speedy delivery, likewise resounds in the dictum from William Strunk’s *Elements of Style*: “Omit needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!” (xiii). Clearly, an impulse toward immediate sensation still motivates everyday and much academic discourse.

Because sensationalist methods advised brevity and sensory detail for effective discourse, it was thought that the rhetor using such tactics could almost immediately transport his own sensibility into the bodies of his audience. I use the male pronoun advisedly. While nineteenth-century women had more access to print literacy than before, very few had access to podiums of public oratory. In retrospect it is not surprising that early women orators and writers, moving boldly into what had been positions of exclusively male authority, found that they were open to moral question. Positioned as rhetors, women’s bodies became transmitters of powerfully charged sensations.⁷ In writing, women might mask their gender for a time, but the common stratagem of writing anonymously or under a male pseudonym itself confirms for me that the first women taking on the disposition of an up-front rhetor were suspect.

Rhetors who operated within sensationalist epistemology, then, reasoned that their language must intensely and speedily deliver a kind of “virtual reality” in order to elicit bodily affect from hearers. We are not so far from this assumption; long-distance telephone companies still bank on their customers’ desire for sound that’s “just like being there.” Nineteenth-century discourse that would best affect its audience had to reproduce reality. At the time, few were reticent about the potential of language to signify directly.⁸ If language were properly controlled by codes such as Blair’s and Campbell’s, then despite a new sense that truth might be socially constructed, rhetors could be confident that words served unambiguously to transmit impressions of material objects and ideas from one mind to another. Thus the nineteenth-century poet who tailored her or his verse to empirical fashions would represent bodies full of feeling, bodies meant to induce like affect in the bodies of readers.

Within this sensationalist epistemology, it makes sense, then, that John Greenleaf Whittier in his abolitionist tract “A Sabbath Scene” must devote as much space to pictures of a black woman slave fleeing up the church aisle as to his verse text arguing against fugitive slave laws in the North (1854). Pictures accompanying Whittier’s text were a rhetorical necessity that indelibly impressed the consciences of his readers (see Figure 3). Elsewhere, indeed, a gap

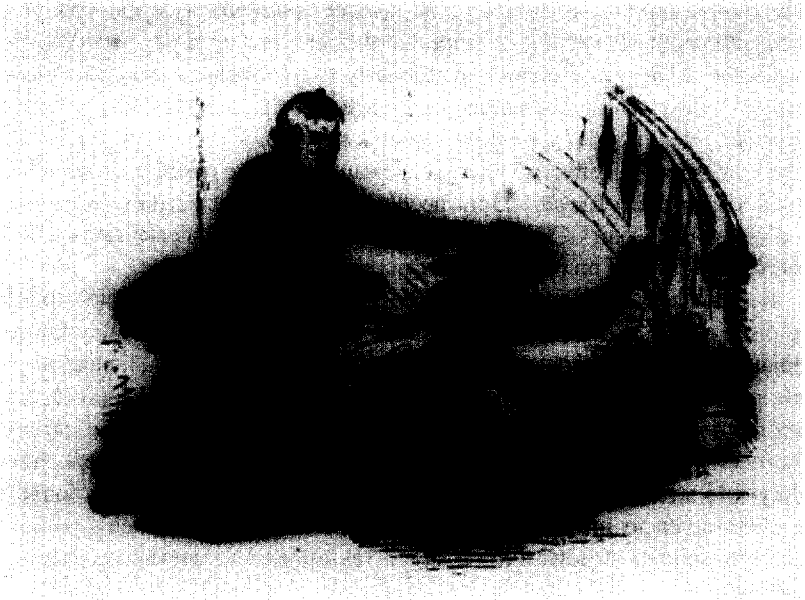


Figure 3 “A wasted female figure,” from John Greenleaf Whittier’s *Sabbath Scene*, Ill. Baker, Smith, and Andrew (Boston: John P. Jewet, 1854) 5.

in sensory detail seemed to be grounds for Whittier’s launching another 1850s verse attack on racism, his poem “On a Prayer Book” (*Poems* 408–09). It is important that this second Whittier poem condemned both publishers and readers of an American antebellum hymnbook whose frontispiece in the US edition was printed *without* an African among the freed slaves at Jesus’s feet. An earlier British edition had included both black and white slaves (see Figure 4). From what Whittier knew of the human mind, true religion could only make its mark if it included vivid sensory detail—that is, detail of a freed black person. Bodies in the text moved bodies in the audience of sentimental rhetoric.

Particularly for women poets and their readers, shaping bodies to accomplish rhetorical goals had enormous significance.⁹ Campbell’s rhetoric codified the practice of linking feeling to women in eighteenth-century novels and supported later representations of women’s tears as a persuasive tactic in many genres of American sentimentalism. He set up a metonymic exchange between terms of affect and the female body, advising rhetors to keep in mind that “distress to the pitying eye diminishes every fault” (133). And although he first cites the impact of a *male* friend’s death in a story told by Hume, Campbell’s longer

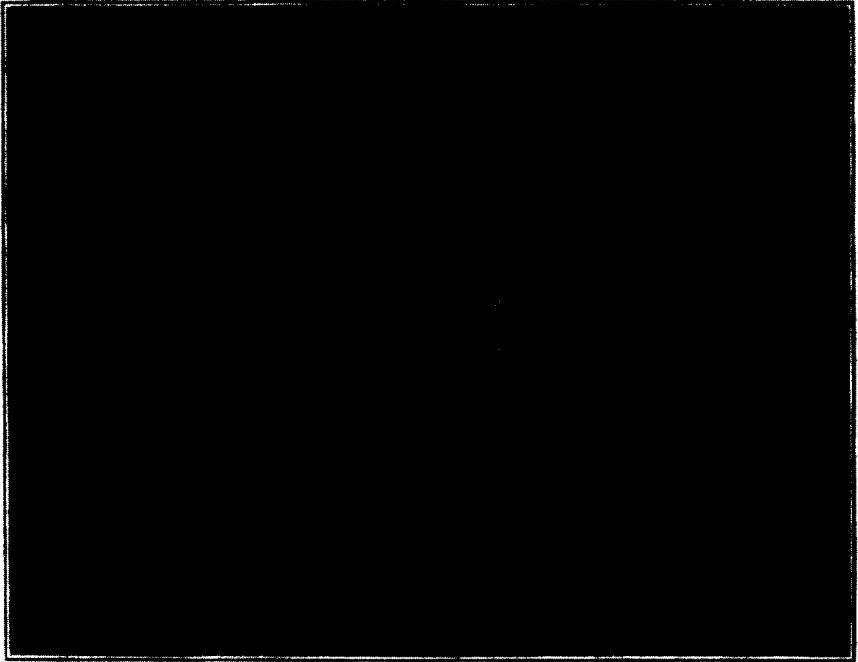


Figure 4 "Christus Consolator," painting by Ari Scheffer (c. 1830), rpt. in *Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier: Household Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1888) 408.

example of "distress" is gendered *female*. In effect, he squeezes both "mistress" and "beauty" into an identity with "tears" and "distress."

Nor is it a less powerful advocate for the mistress than for the friend: often does the single circumstance of misfortune subdue all resentment of former coldness and ill usage, and make a languid and dying passion revive and flame out with a violence which it is impossible any longer to withstand. Everybody acknowledges that beauty is never so irresistible as in tears. (133)

One might guess from this passage that Campbell has been reading about "beauty . . . in tears" depicted in sentimental novels, the narratives that Nancy Armstrong links to women's conduct books (1995). It is fitting that Paul Bator not long ago discovered Campbell's name among those of other professors on

the rolls of Scottish student literary societies who discussed, among other topics, popular novels of the day (1996).

Figures of a weeping woman, Campbell claimed, would prove an irresistible persuasive strategy. Like almost nothing else, he said, beauty in distress engages audience sympathy and will give rhetors a dependable vehicle for transporting sentiments directly into the minds of their audiences. Once an audience has attached itself to this figure, the rhetor may propel listeners or readers toward the moral action then proposed. It was Edgar Allan Poe who twisted this maxim into a recommendation that to arouse their readers' feeling, romantic writers should represent the death of a beautiful woman as "the most poetical topic in the world" (1463).

How do Delsarte and corsets fit into this rhetorical scheme? A French teacher, actor, and orator, François Delsarte popularized a system of elocution in the middle of the nineteenth century. Well-named a "system," Delsarte's course of study articulates an intricate web of bodily semiotics encoding the significance of postures, gestures, and dispositions of the face, torso, legs, arms, and facial features.¹⁰ I find it curiously appropriate that *elocutio*, from which Delsarte's system takes its name, is generally known to rhetoricians as one of the five stages of rhetoric. In antiquity elocution was understood to mean the final phase, delivery, or presentation of a speech (Bizzell and Herzberg 4). After Ramus in the seventeenth century, *elocutio* became synonymous with style, or the step following invention and arrangement of a speech text and was itself followed by memorization and performance (Bizzell and Herzberg 475–76). If *elocutio* is defined as dressing up a discourse with tropes and figures of a particular style, then surely also in the Delsarte system "style is the man" or woman. Posture of the body for Delsarte indicates putting on the moral and ethical demeanor of a rhetor, making ready for performance. Even before Delsarte set it down, this code of bodily rhetoric regulated *tableau vivant* and public speaking regulated under the auspices of empirical, sensationalist Enlightenment codes aiming to represent "experience" with vivid immediacy.

Notable chapter titles from an 1882 English translation of the *Delsarte System of Oratory* include "Semeiotics [sic] of the Shoulder," "Passion of Signs, Signs of Passion," and from Genevieve Stebbins' 1886 version of Delsarte: "Decomposing Exercises: Aesthetic Talk," and "Aesthetic Gymnastics." A bit of text from this last chapter suggests to me the significance of corsets in such a scheme:

First take your weight on both feet, toes turned out, heels near together. A normal form will have the curves of a line of beauty, viz.: two convex curves separated and joined by a concave one. The head

and leg form the convex curves, the torso forms the concave one, the head and the leg sympathizing. Now, when by an act of will we change the weight so it no longer rests equally on both feet, we must always bear in mind the fact that the head sympathizes with the strong leg, that is, the head should incline to the side of the leg that bears the weight; while, as we observed above the torso has an opposite curve from the head and leg, and so should incline from the strong leg, thus always presenting nature's line of beauty. Practice this now for me a few moments; I will call it off for you. Attention! Stand firm on both legs. . . . (92)

Sounds like a drill in high school physical education, and so they were, these Delsarte posture exercises, in some women's academies of the day.

The key for reading corsets, I find, is the Delsarte "line of beauty," which is comprised by two convex curves separated and joined by a concave one. Stebbins emphasizes that the torso above all "represents the moral element," and various parts of the torso then signify in their own ways: the chest as the seat of emotions or the "mental zone" is always thrown into prominence; the region of the heart (securely encased by bone or metal and stiff cloth) is the specific seat of the affections; and the abdomen or the "vital zone" is the seat of the appetites. Wearing a corset shoves the chest out, pulls the abdomen in. Thus, in a nineteenth-century corset, a woman's moral zone is "thrown into prominence" while her appetites would be kept well under control (207–08).

Note how a curious pair of pictures from another corset ad illustrates the Delsarte ideal (Figure 5). Reminiscent of post-World War II "before and after" pictures of male "ninety-eight pound weaklings" strengthened by weight-training programs, this picture promises that a woman who dons a corset will acquire a desired military silhouette. According to the rhetoric of corsets, we can see that the woman in these two pictures gains substance in the moral zone while her abdominal appetites obviously recede. These days, she may signify not virtue, but "beauty. . . in tears" from Campbell's scheme. Today, "before" looks a lot more "normal" (to use Stebbins' term) than the "after." There were, indeed, some in midnineteenth-century US culture who supported a women's health movement, and for them too corsets did not signal virtue, but pain.

Lydia Huntley Sigourney, widely known already in 1938 for her books of poetry and magazine essays, included in *Letters to Young Ladies* a long chapter "Health and Dress" that warned strongly against corsets. Women who remember girdles may be particularly able to sympathize with Sigourney's protracted and unsuccessful crusade against corsets. She warns first against the health risks of skimpy nighties and flimsy shoes in winter. Then of corsets:



Figure 5 Before and after, the “Straight Military Front” corset, *McLure's Magazine* (1896).

Another point of extreme importance in dress is to avoid compression. The evils of obstructed circulation are formidable. Stricture in the region of lungs and heart, is deeply perilous. Those watchful sentinels, who keep the sacred citadel of life—and never take rest when the other parts of the body slumber, deserve better treatment. How unjust and ungrateful to compel them to labour [sic] in fetters, like a galley slave, and to put those servants to the torture, who turn the wheels of existence, both night and day. (97)

Along with a woman’s own comfort and health, it may be that dropping US fertility rates were at issue in such warnings, for bearing children also played a part in strictures against married women’s dancing. Maintaining strength to survive childbirth was probably also a factor in Sigourney’s anticorset agenda. But Sigourney is not the lone antebellum anticorset protester. In *Transcendental Wild Oats*, Louisa May Alcott quotes her mother’s arguments against corsets. As part of a broader spiritual and political agenda, Quaker women often prominent in

abolitionist and temperance causes also refused to wear corsets. And Horace Greeley, unsuccessful candidate for the presidency in 1872, included an anticorset plank in his platform (Cross). With or without a corset, the woman's form bore a significance in the nineteenth century that we are only beginning to reimagine.

My first reaction is to endorse these anticorset crusades, but I've come to see that to impulsively join this resistance is to miss not only some of what corsets did *to* women—but also perhaps *for* them. Any particular bodily rhetoric does not merely restrict knowledge. To read this discipline of the human body as part of a signifying system that also produced writing in the American nineteenth century, one must keep in mind its specific links to that Lockean sensationalist epistemology. Discipline wrought upon bodies—whether by corsets, architecture, military order, or poetry—not only restrains bodies but also constitutes that epistemology and, not incidentally, comprises much of what we can know about individual and collective human subjects in nineteenth-century US culture. “We must cease once and for all,” Michel Foucault once urged,

to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes,’ it ‘represses,’ it ‘censors,’ it ‘abstracts,’ it ‘masks,’ it ‘conceals.’ In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (194)

Foucault's point is that when power is deployed in any discourse, even in sentimentalism and strategies of that system including corsets, those systems can be scanned not only for their repressive effects but also for what they produce.

Prison architecture, eerily enough, could be seen as one tactic of sentimental rhetoric pervasive in the nineteenth century. It is remarkable that Foucault used the diction of sentimentalism to describe prison discourse when he alluded to the work of prison reformer Benjamin Rush. Rush explained in 1787 that the design both of punishment and of buildings capable of rehabilitating criminals “will require some knowledge of the principles of sensation, and of the sympathies which occur in the nervous system” (128). In language startlingly parallel to Blair's and Campbell's terms for rhetoric in its omnipresent versions, Foucault himself wrote that it is the “force of sensibility and passion” that shapes subjects through codes of discipline such as the modern prison (106). He then famously elaborated on the persuasive power of institutional architecture to situate prisoners' bodies in separate cells. These cells in effect worked as frames allowing wardens both to keep an eye on prisoners under their charge and to interpret the

behavior of cultural misfits. Prison cells functioned as a crucial aspect of the method designed to transform criminal identities into compliant individuals.

The tenor of American nineteenth-century arguments conducted through architecture is suggested by Thoreau's disparaging reference in *Walden* to Horatio Greenough as a "sentimental reformer in architecture" (31). Here, I turn from considering the Scottish codes born of empiricism to a Continental version of sentimentalism. Greenough apparently used an aesthetic continuum of naive through ironic sentimental art described in Friedrich Schiller's *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795–1796), and Greenough's architecture was located at the most sophisticated end of the spectrum. Referring admiringly to "naive" artists, Schiller lamented, "*They are what we were. . . . They are what we should once again become*" (85, emphasis in original). In a tendentious industrialized world, Friedrich Schiller wanted to oppose a lost, natural simplicity with the kind of "intellect" and "understanding" employed by an elite he considered to be more sophisticated artisans in the "contrivance of art" (122–24, 104). Schiller imagined that so-called "naive" art could only be crafted outside the boundaries of the European sentimental aesthetic. One cannot miss in Schiller's discussion a romantic longing for natural origins.

In a contrast that is both deferential and condescending to "naive" art, the German romantic tradition consequently identified "sentimental" poetry with practically any literature (and indeed any discourse) that was consciously artistic. In sum, conscious or sentimental art by a highly moral artist in the European tradition would attempt to fashion discourse that would elicit feeling nearly identical to "primitive" emotions induced by a naive artist. Julia Ward Howe, for example, claiming in one stanza that her verses spoke to "rustics . . . of their own music, only deeper," was a poet who doubtless aspired to be the "sentimental genius" who, Schiller said, would arouse the passions of readers with a "free spontaneity" (164). The more artfully composed, the more apparently artless sentimental poetry should appear to be. Almost paradoxically, such art sought to inspire sentiments of elegant taste, so that anybody reading Howe's artful lines or entering Greenough's buildings would take on the sophistication of the artist's craft. Over such artifice, however, Thoreau obviously preferred the "organic" craft he had employed to build his own cabin. And he urged his readers and visitors (just as sophisticated as Greenough's, but perhaps less comfortable in Thoreau's drafty abode) to seek the more "natural" effect upon the spirit of a cabin in the woods.

If a study of sentimental systems yields knowledge "of him," as Foucault says above, then why not also knowledge "of her," of sentimental women and poets in particular? Another example of a Foucauldian argument in architecture is suggested by Julia Ward Howe's own reaction to the institutional design of the Perkin's Institute for the Blind near Boston. It can hardly be accidental that Julia

Ward Howe hated residing there in the Doctor's Wing. Howe's husband Samuel established and administered the school in the 1850s, and the poet lived there for a time under the scrutiny of her sister-in-law. Foucault's account of the prison panopticon's disciplining effects resonates uncannily with Julia's memory of the Institute's "long marble corridors that radiated out from the central hall" (Clifford 84–85). The sentimental woman poet was alert to disciplinary power permeating the Institute's architecture. As long as she lived there, its buildings reified Julia's position as a conventional doctor's wife, subject as the institution was to Dr. Howe's goals. She used Ward family money to purchase and move to Green Acres, a retreat that she imagined would better support the role she preferred: unconventional woman poet.

One step closer to corsets is military discipline of the body. While it was not one of the discourses named in eighteenth-century rhetorical codes, nevertheless such posture belongs with architecture and poetry among the suasive discourses. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault listed the eighteenth-century French militia's "signs for recognizing . . . a bodily rhetoric of honor" (135). Through rigorous training, a peasant boy's body came to assume the posture and manner of a soldier. That end was of course the object of a recruit's training. Not only did he lose all signs of peasantry, but he also gained identifying marks of soldiery as he took on this bodily code. If military bearing was not spelled out in the rhetorical codes, nevertheless that quite rhetorical system of military training worked as a powerful means to persuade a young man that he was to have a new identity and must act accordingly.

Disciplinary hierarchies produced and replicated between persons are reinforced, Foucault argued, by "bodily rhetoric" implicit in military training and architecture—not to mention in corsets—resulting in what Foucault called well-trained "docile bodies" (135). Admittedly, he rarely used the term *rhetoric*, and I do not automatically equate rhetorical analysis of verbal discourse directly with Foucauldian analyses of institutional power relations.¹¹ Yet, as I note, eighteenth-century rhetoric encompassed a wide range of nonverbal *and* verbal discourses. And Foucault's attention to power and the body sheds light on sentimentalism's profound effects upon women. In Foucault's terms a corset like any other discourse "produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of [her] belong to this production." If rhetorical analysis of sentimental discourse can tell us something about nineteenth-century people, then what did corsets, among other discursive strategies of sentimentalism, specifically produce in women's bodily lives? The next section suggests a number of those constructions.

I have long suspected that a corset was partly responsible for producing the impressionable young heroine of Susanna Rowson's 1791 sentimental novel,

Charlotte Temple. Charlotte's fainting dead away at the moment of abduction by Montraville was both a means of embodying her as sensitive to the extreme stress of the moment and also a method of absolving her of liability for the deed. Readers should find ourselves hissing at Montraville and sympathizing with Charlotte. She is at that moment the personification of "distress to the pitying eye," to use Campbell's terms. Those damned corsets likely had something to do with all the fainting in other sentimental novels, too. Surely part of the appeal to readers' sympathies in Susan Warner's 1851 novel *Wide Wide World*, is the progressive bodily restriction of sad little Ellen, for she very often personifies Campbell's "beauty . . . in tears." In what Tompkins in *Sensational Designs* called a kind of reverse *bildungsroman*, the novel's illustrations show her ever more tightly laced—until in her most abject and tightly corseted posture, Ellen meekly accepts the hand of her mentor/suitor in marriage (see Figures 6 and 7). The corset produces a girl entirely bound up by conventional expectations.



Figure 6 Young Ellen at Aunt Emerson's farm, from Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World* (1852) Ed. Jane Tompkins (New York: Feminist Press, 1996) 337.



Figure 7 Ellen with John, from Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World* (1852) Ed. Jane Tompkins (New York: Feminist Press, 1996) 560.

But again, we are mistaken if we imagine that constriction or disciplining, in the worst senses of both words, is the sole significance of corsets in a rhetoric of sentiment. Consider, in contrast, the person produced as Jo's sister, Meg, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is persuaded to corset up (against her mother's wishes) for a fancy party (see Figure 8). The way it is presented in these stills from the 1980's movie version, Meg's corset produced the same erotic outcome as today's "miracle bra." Some years after Alcott's novels became popular, Thorstein Veblen critically analyzed the woman's function in a middle-class Victorian household as an eroticized vehicle for display of wealth and of a man's "vicarious consumption" (140). The girl's mix of excited surprise, delight, and embarrassment over attention she received at a party persuades me that corsets were coded by both women and men for class, sex, and social value.

The obstinate girl who ignored Sigourney's warnings about moral and health risks might find that wearing a corset actually made her a lady of leisure. With it, she fit not only a tiny-waisted bosomy dress but also a social ideal of women with

position and power. Consider, for example, Lydia Huntley Sigourney herself in a photo carefully preserved among her other papers (see Figure 9). Even the anticorset crusader wore something looking suspiciously like a corset for this photograph. But then, “There were corsets—and there were corsets,” as Gary Waite, chief archivist at the Connecticut Historical Society, observed when I asked him about this picture. The corset was both a literally constricting discourse and also a sign of women’s status. Catherine Beecher, sister to Harriet Beecher Stowe and respected woman educator and literary critic in her own right, wore a corset for her most formidably authoritative portrait (see Figure 10). With a corset, she had girded herself to do battle with the world. Without it, a woman might be a resistant crusader for women’s health, one of the hard-working poor, or otherwise—as convention would have it, she was “loose.”

Many will recall Lady *Liberté*, bare-breasted symbol of the French Revolution, who not only represents freedom for the masses but also resonates with



Figure 8 Effect of a corset on Meg, from *Little Women*, Dir. Gillian Armstrong, Perf. Winona Ryder, Gabriel Byrne, Susan Sarandon (Columbia, 1994).



Figure 9 Lydia Huntley Sigourney, portrait (c. 1855) Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.

Rousseau's and Mary Wollstonecraft's campaign for breast-feeding infants—in opposition to elites' practice of farming out their babies to wet nurses. Margaret Yalom in her *History of the Breast* also makes note of the “empire” dress popular in some circles on both sides of the Atlantic after the French Revolution, a style permitting women to openly (if nonverbally) declare their political sympathies, and (not incidentally) it is a style giving them permission to appear uncorseted in public. Here, for instance, in a painting of the 1790s is Judith Sargent Murray, famous woman essayist of the new American republic (see Figure 11).

Sojourner Truth for me best embodies the significance of an uncorseted body. The brilliant first chapter of Carla L. Peterson's book, *Doers of the Word: African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North 1830–1880*, meticulously unfolds how Truth exploits codes of signification for a woman's body. In

one calling-card photo, Truth dresses herself in proper garb for a Quaker woman, suspiciously uncorseted, but nevertheless as properly domestic as any bourgeois white woman. She is sitting in a carpeted parlor with her sewing and a book—an interesting touch since Truth was not print literate (see Figure 12). But in another picture, also from a calling card, Truth appears in plaid and striped garments, presenting herself as decidedly lower- or working-class, with carpet bag and walking stick in hand (see Figure 13). After all, Sojourner Truth took up the role of itinerant preacher when she gained her freedom. You have to wonder whether Truth chose one card or the other for particular visits. This eloquent black woman cannily flaunted her culture's bodily rhetoric, for she is best known today from accounts that claim she bared her uncorseted torso to "prove" to disdainful white abolitionists that while she might not fit certain antebellum feminine ideals, she was indeed a woman.¹²



Figure 10 Catherine Beecher, portrait (c. 1860), The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.



Figure 11 Judith Sargent Murray, (detail), portrait by John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. John Stevens (Judith Sargent, later Mrs. John Murray)*, 1770–1772. oil on canvas, 50 × 40 inches, Terra Foundation for the Arts, Daniel J. Terra Art Acquisition Endowment Fund, 2000. Photography courtesy of Terra Foundation for the Arts, Chicago.

Sojourner Truth's knowing self-construction of herself as female appears merely "natural" only if she is located at the "naive" end of Friedrich Schiller's spectrum of aesthetic sentimentalism. Peterson says that Frederick Douglass dissociated himself from this "genuine specimen of the uncultured negro," apparently intending to locate himself at the other end of Schiller's continuum (29). I am beginning to suspect that one can hardly overestimate the influence of this schema of social and artistic categories in nineteenth-century culture, both in the US and Europe. It is a foundation of widely held views of the "noble savage," and I would guess it has even more to do with Darwin's construct of evolutionary "progress" than many would admit.

Painstaking in its attention to details of midnineteenth-century dress and culture, Jane Campion's beautiful film *The Piano* also illustrates how Schiller's system shaped a woman's body. As Aida undresses, echoes of longing from the European version of Romantic sentimentalism resonate both in the wordless language of her piano, and also in the eroticism of her "progress": from voluminous hoop-skirted, high-necked black dress and bonnet (properly artificial and senti-

mental), to bare skin above her corset (see Figure 14), to her completely nude body in intimate embrace with George Baines, a man coded as a member of the working class, if not of mixed race.

Much as I like the film, I must question the Academy Awards' preference for Aida's "progress" from corseted dress to nudity in *The Piano* (more recent is the same shift from corset to nudity by Kate Winslet as Rose in *Titanic*) over Beth's "progress" into a narrow-waisted French dress in *Little Women*. A worrisome voyeurism and a not very well-concealed racial imperialism accompanies the Academy's honoring of *The Piano* and not *Little Women*. That narrow view begs for more investigation. And in that challenge let's not miss the power of corsets and the sentimental women who wore them. Such oddly plastic bodily selves, manipulated by disciplines of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century codes of sentimentalism, are strangely familiar to anybody whose shoulders ache after sitting docilely hour after hour in front of a computer. So too for runners and cyclists of the new millennium hoping to discipline their own flesh. Ergonomics and fitness could be construed as other physical discourses



Figure 12 Sojourner Truth seated with knitting (1864) Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

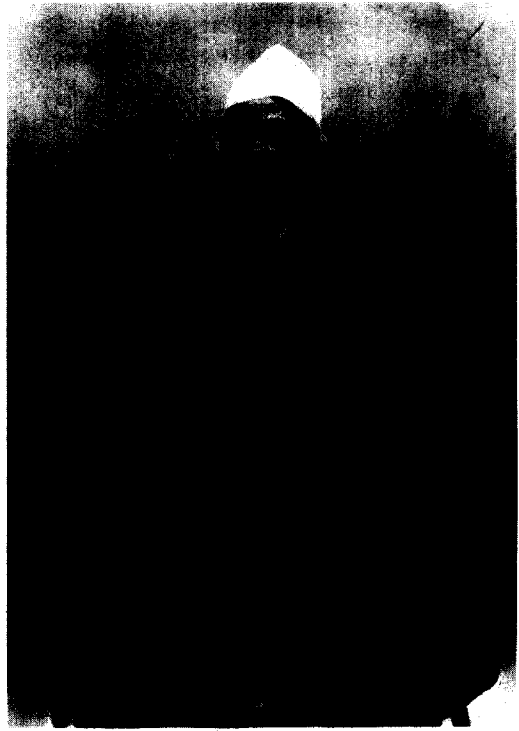


Figure 13 Sojourner Truth standing with bag (1864) Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

ordered by that omnibus term, *rhetoric*. I mention these disciplines to underscore the pervasiveness of rhetorical codes that still shape human subjectivity, and because our bodies too are shaped by cultural practices, practices that convince us of a particular sense of self. Finally, I want to turn to how our bodies today may take a different shape, that we are not immune to the pressure of corsets.

Not all that different a shape, though. Consider the *Victoria's Secret* corset appearing in this fall's new line (Figure 15). And another midriff from the lowly *Hanes* underwear catalogue displays the most popular corset of the season (Figure 16). Sold out, you'll notice. One explanation for why corsets are back "in" may come from today's alternative music scene, gender critic Carol Siegel says.¹³ That arena of youth culture has returned corsets to center stage—and not as undergarments. At the Ladies Leather Corsets Collection online site, there are even more stunning corset styles than I dare reproduce here. Figure 17 is one that would print out.¹⁴ With a goal something like stern Catherine Beecher's 150 years ago, perhaps a woman donning today's corsets puts on body armor to signify that she is tough

and streetwise in circles where she might without it be considered a soft target. And yet, I'm concerned that the *Victoria's Secret*, *Hanes*, and online corsets all show today's female torsos with no heads. Because we have repressed the cultural memory of nineteenth-century rhetoric, are we returning to its sign system more mindlessly than we might?

A thoughtful consideration of women's subjectivity in our own day will include a long view on corsets. They suggest not only the plasticity and politics of cultural self-construction generally and the constructedness of gender "identity" in particular but also the lengths bourgeois culture went to—and goes to—the last two and a half centuries to shape a preferred feminine figure. For me, corsets foreground the ambiguity of disciplining discourses. They constrict, but they also produce.

Nineteenth-century sensationalist rhetoric did indeed authorize a contraption that pushed many women into a properly sentimental body type. But I have argued here that the discourse also made possible the appearance of feisty,



Figure 14 Aida in corset at the keyboard from *The Piano*, Dir. Jane Campion, Perf. Holly Hunter, Harvey Keitel, Sam Neill, Anna Paquin (Maxfilm, 1993).

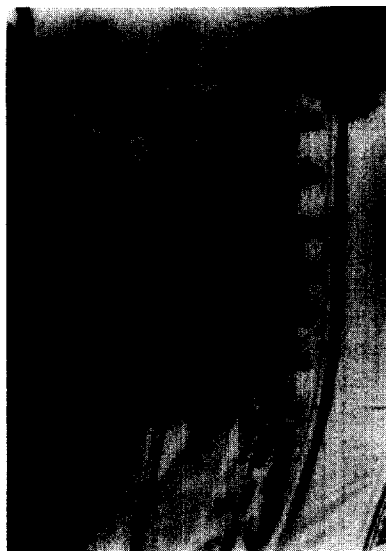


Figure 15 Corset advertisement, *Victoria's Secret* catalogue (Fall 2001).

preachy women such as Lydia Sigourney and Marmee Marsh who then argued against the corset. Clearly, corsets and women's writing were extensions of commonsense rhetorical codes that nineteenth-century culture engaged—in part to shape well-disciplined human bodies—and, not incidentally, to fit women's bodies into the image of the sentimental codes. However, corsets and writing, I find, also became disciplines that women put on in order to test the limits of feminine roles proscribed for them.

If we continue to retrace the rhetorical web of antebellum sentimental discourse in corsets and other genres, our search will yield long-forgotten relations between gendered bodies, in the same way that relations of power between bodies of incarcerated subjects and prison wardens come to light in Foucault's readings of architecture. If we pay attention, we may imagine why the early nineteenth-century spiritual awakenings were largely a revival of women (Epstein 1981). We might rediscover why it was moving and proper to refer in polite verse to "the gentle breast" of a lactating mother, as Sigourney did in her poem "The Lost Sister" and elsewhere (*Poems* 58–59) when other parts of an antebellum woman's anatomy were covered up. Why did representations of a woman's erotic passions almost always focus on the absent body of a loved one, as does the poet's desire for her imaginary lover in Julia Ward Howe's collection *Passion-Flowers*? Why did sentimentalism allow poets like Howe, Sigourney, Frances Harper, and Whittier to write on topics the new millenium's academic dis-

course still often resists: political revolution, race relations, religion, the dying body, a process of mourning? I do not pretend to answer these enormous questions here, but I do mean to suggest that rhetoric can help us reread nineteenth-century culture in a way that can include such questions in scholarly exchanges.

When we lost the heuristic of sentimental rhetoric, we also lost knowledge of this sort. As I have argued, however, reading sentimental corsets and texts may not merely reweave bodily rhetorics of the past. Sentimental rhetoric may also help us see our own disciplining discourses more clearly—even our own bodily rhetorics. For instance, modernist aesthetic prejudice today still resists representing the female body in serious verse. In an interview among his acclaimed PBS series on writers, Bill Moyers not long ago challenged African-American poet Rita Dove, then US poet laureate, on the propriety of print-

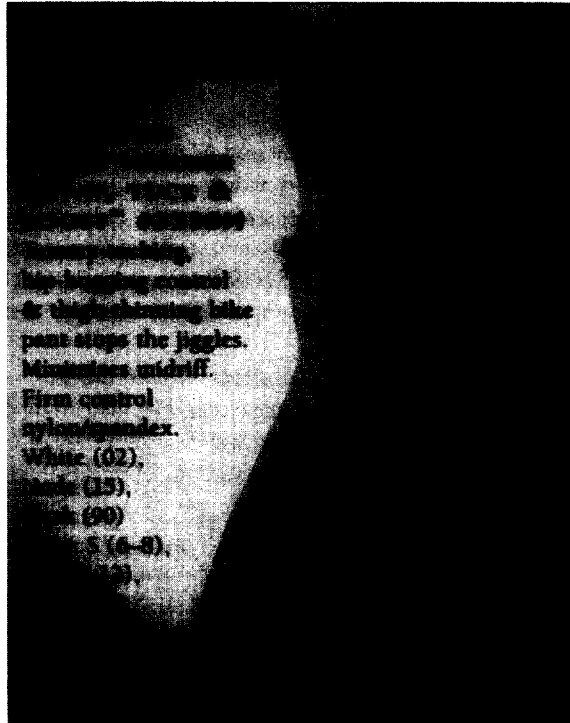


Figure 16 Corset advertisement, *Hanes catalogue* (1998). The *Hanes catalogue* is property of Sara Lee Corporation.

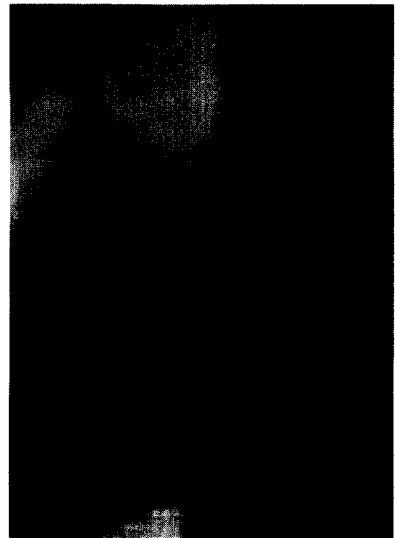


Figure 17 Online leather corset advertisement, from SC Ladies Leather Corsets Collection <<http://www.sonies.com/leathercorsets.html>> (28 Dec. 2000).

ing an intimate verse conversation with her young daughter, a dialogue that shapes sentiment concerning the female body. Here is an excerpt from Dove's "After Reading Mickey in the Night Kitchen for the Third Time Before Bed," a poem in Florence Howe's anthology of women poets, *No More Masks!*

She demands
to see mine and momentarily
we're a lopsided star
among the spilled toys,
my prodigious scallops
exposed to her neat cameo.

And yet the same glazed
tunnel, layered sequences.
She is three. . . .
 We're pink!
she shrieks, and bounds off. (443)

Unconscious of the rhetorical codes that may support a sympathetic reading of nineteenth-century culture, academic discussions have for too long been un-

able to read the nineteenth-century's coding of the body—but for far too long we have also been unable to read our own bodies.

I have drawn parallels between constructions of nineteenth-century feminine subjects by their corsets and their texts, and I have extended my observations on those corsets to discourses that shape responses to a woman's body today. To close, I want only very briefly to suggest a parallel between women's physical presence in the academy and women's writing: I wonder whether our conflicted self-presentation in clothing sanctioned today in the academy resonates with the conflicted academic writing we do in this dangerous territory, territory that often remains a masculine domain? As I have said, corsets and writing both constructed women's nineteenth-century selves that tested limits of a generally masculine culture. How might our academic "corsets" do the same?

There are ways a woman can knowingly exploit rhetorical systems that have been coded masculine. She can assume, for example, a masculine-identified persona and an apparently masculine style of writing, a rather ascetic "discourse of knowledge," as Kristeva has referred to it, and the woman may get her way.¹⁵ Perhaps this is our attempt to produce something like the "philosophical language" Catherine Hobbs says Locke tried so hard to protect from subjectivity (79). We have likewise so often presented ourselves on campus and at conferences in broad manly-shouldered jackets, tummies seeming flat in pleated pants, hair upswept to not distract from the work of a scholar (see Figure 18). The persona constructed in this strand of academic convention has made particular sense for a woman in a time when the professor is coded as masculine; maybe she slips under the radar of colleagues and students who expect a man in her position. Or a woman can aim to subvert "male" discourse with female-identified writing strategies. She says, "I am a woman," loud and proud. In this trend, some now dare quit the shoulder pads for bright curving, flowing skirts and tunics. Here, the author and authority's position is perhaps not transformed so much as switched in gender.¹⁶ But in either style, though much is gained, what "zone of appetites" is thereby again perhaps unwittingly suppressed, what narrow "line of beauty" or of "virtue" for that matter—to borrow Delsarte's terms—are women assuming in either sort of text or bodily discourse? Do these opposites only substitute one line for another?

Solely following either vogue may miss opportunities offered lately by entry of many more women outsiders from diverse backgrounds into academic locations and topics: opportunities to experiment, perpetually play as only some few have with norms, both of self-presentation and of writing. We might take part not only in switching discourses and places—but in making them transformative rather than embrace again some one corset as the line of truth or beauty.

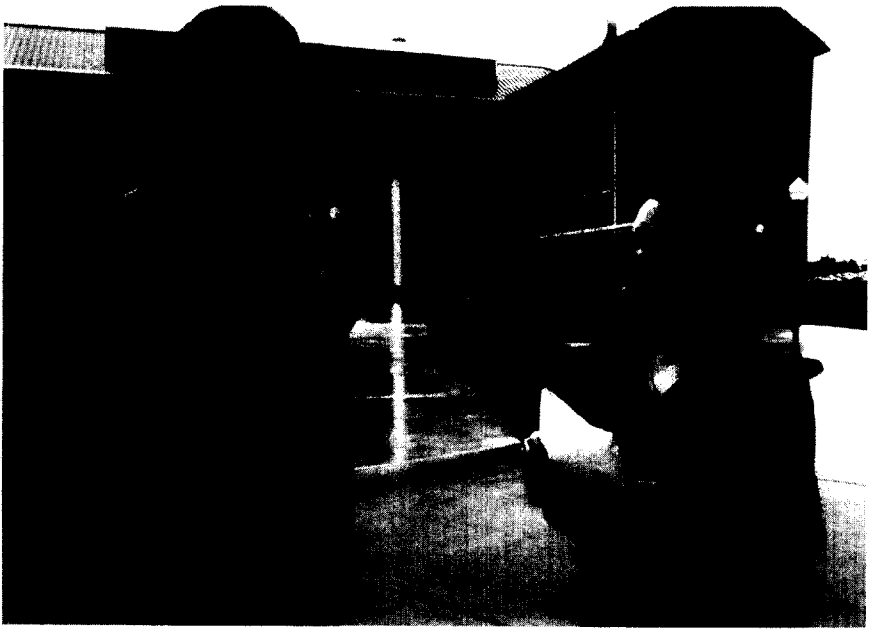


Figure 18 Academic 'corset' (Washington State University, 1999).

Notes

¹Many thanks to Catherine Hobbs and Kathleen Welch, the *RR* readers who both gave helpful, encouraging suggestions for this essay. Special thanks also to Jeannette Okinczyc in the WSU Vancouver MARS lab for her time and expertise as I prepared the illustrations and to the editors of *RR* and at Lawrence Erlbaum for their patient, careful work with this essay.

²This article is itself part of a fairly recent movement we might call "cultural rhetoric," a sibling to cultural studies in its concern for restoring to studies of persuasion considerations of power and context. The SUNY Syracuse PhD program in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric, established 1996, is one signpost of this movement. Earlier markers of the movement are traced in a sophisticated critique of "cultural rhetoric" articulated by Walter H. Beale in "Rhetoric in the Vortex of Cultural Studies." For me, the term *cultural rhetoric* marks my own effort to restore diverse and political dimensions of social context to nineteenth-century rhetorical codes, codes that overtly located strategies of print and spoken discourse among many other sign systems. And to extend those dimensions to figures of female subjects in today's discourse.

³I use the word *empiricism* here to refer to the epistemology that accepts generalizations, theories, and laws only when they are drawn from impressions upon the senses. In the twentieth century, "empiricism" was popularly associated solely with quantitative scientific experiments. Of course, discourses of the "hard sciences" are themselves offspring of sensationalist epistemology that produced the "scientific method," beginning with observable and repeatable experiments that collect

sensory data and proceeding inductively to theories. Theorists of personal narrative in composition studies, among others, Chris Anderson in meditations linking forestry and essays in *Edge Effects*, have lately revived the term in its broader but quite specific historical sense.

⁴After the eighteenth-century boom in sentimental writing by both men and women, Todd sees a decline in confidence in Britain among nineteenth-century male sentimentalists. She cites “sentimental passages of Thackeray and Dickens [which] have a mawkishness or an embarrassment quite foreign to Richardson’s novels or even those of Mackenzie” (148).

⁵Kristeva revises Lacan’s view of the unspeakable to assert that “the unconscious is not structured like a language but like all the imprints of the Other” (204).

⁶That project is due out soon from Southern Illinois University Press under the title *Serious Sentimentalism: A Rhetoric of Antebellum American Women’s Poetry*.

⁷Karen Sanchez-Eppler’s book *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (1993) is just one of several recent discussions of the problems faced by nineteenth-century women who addressed mixed, or “promiscuous” audiences. Christine Krueger’s *The Reader’s Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (1993) features women orators in British fiction.

⁸Catherine Hobbs has helpfully articulated Locke’s “two-step model of knowledge” and its complex relationship of language to ideas and things. She argues that “Locke offers a form of the referential theory of language, even though the ‘effects’ produced by ‘things’ are not direct imprints of reality but are simply our ideas of reality” (78). Hobbs maintains, furthermore, that Locke posited strict “rules for a philosophical language” to guard against the “extreme subjectivity” of varying impressions that might form in each observer’s mind. For “unless humans make extraordinary efforts to control language,” Hobbs finds Locke saying, “there will be no ‘Common Tye,’ no social contract” (79).

⁹Naomi Schor has argued in *Reading in Detail* (1987) that an interest in the significance of detail in Victorian writing crossed gender boundaries. Schor wants to complicate the usual hierarchy of abstract over concrete thought and asserts that linking a specific gender to either category is a social construction.

¹⁰In the chapter “Mind Cure” (134–54) of his biography about William Rounseville Alger, Gary Scharnhorst details a search for peace of mind through the bodily discipline of Delsarte’s system of elocution reminiscent of today’s yoga and meditation techniques. This quest was undertaken by Horatio Alger’s cousin, more famous at the time, William Rounseville Alger (1822–1905).

¹¹Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg assert that Foucauldian discourse and postmodern definitions of rhetoric traverse the same cultural territory. Bizzell and Herzberg’s anthology, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, includes Foucault, Derrida, Cixous, and Kristeva as rhetoricians of the twentieth century and justify this placement based on a definition of rhetoric resonating with Bigelow’s characterization of Blair’s and Campbell’s codes. Rhetoric, they say, has grown to encompass a theory of language as a form of social behavior, as intention and interpretation, as the determinants of meaning—both in the way that knowledge is created by argument, and in the way that ideology and power are extended through discourse. In short, to Bizzell and Herzberg, Foucault “makes a powerful argument that discourse (for which we may read *rhetoric*) is epistemic” (1128 parenthesis and emphasis theirs). James Berlin, likewise, insisted in his final book *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* that “in considering any rhetoric, it is necessary to examine its ideological predispositions.” And Berlin situates “rhetoric” in a broad identity with “signifying practices” by claiming in the very next sentence that “no set of signifying practices can lay claim to a disinterested pursuit of transcendental truth; all are engaged in the play of power and politics regardless of their intentions” (77).

¹²Conventional or unruly, Sojourner Truth does not represent all nineteenth-century black women, and to underscore the wide range of how black women present themselves, Peterson dis-

cusses ten other African-American writers and speakers in *Doers of the Word*. She includes photos of five of them, some corseted and some not.

¹³Carol Siegel is co-editor of *Genders* and author of three books on gender issues, including *New Millennial Sexstyles* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000). She is also Professor of English at Washington State University.

¹⁴Elsewhere you can download directions for lacing instructions, including what to wear underneath a corset and how to get the tightest fit. See "A History of Corsets" (2000).

¹⁵In her interview with Clark and Hulley, Kristeva says that "[w]hen one wishes to appropriate this discourse of knowledge, one imposes a certain asceticism on oneself at the level of style. From this perspective, when I began to work, it seemed very important to me, as a person and as a woman, to show that I could take hold of that discourse" (168).

¹⁶Robyn Warhol, among others, at one time recommended nineteenth-century sentimental display as an essentially feminine rhetorical strategy still effective today for making connections among English-speaking women. See Warhol's 1993 *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*. More recently, however, in comments that take specific differences such as race into account, Warhol has qualified her assertions. Hélène Cixous has likewise famously advocated an *écriture féminine*, to counter what she takes to be an otherwise masculine domain of writing (1976).

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