

Peitho

Newsletter of the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition

Volume 9, number 1

Fall 2004

essay



[Peitho fleeing the seduction of Leda](#)
[See Peitho Revisited](#)

Issue Contents

[Walking in the Footsteps of a Historical Subject](#)

essay by Gesa E. Kirsch
 Bentley Gollege

[The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment, and Abolition](#)

Jacquiline Bcon
 book review by Shevaun E. Watson

[Peitho Revisited](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Membership](#)

[CWSHRC Home](#)



peitho staff members

Susan C. Jarratt,
 co-editor
 Department of English
 and Comparative
 Literature
 University of California,
 Irvine
 CA 92697-2650
sjarratt@uci.edu

Walking in the Footsteps of a Historical Subject

by Gesa E. Kirsch, Bentley College

I recently returned from a trip to the Bancroft Library Archives at UC Berkeley, where I studied the papers of Dr. Mary Bennett Ritter, (1860-1949), a physician, women's rights advocate, and civic leader active in California at the turn of the nineteenth century.¹ One of the many things I learned is that being there physically, both in the actual archives and location where the historical subject lived, is invaluable; there are many things I would not have been able to explore virtually. It also helps to have serendipity on your side, but that, of course, is not something one can arrange purposefully, although I am convinced one can be open to the possibility. In what follows, I briefly sketch the origin of my research project and describe what it meant to walk in the footsteps of a historical subject.

"History nearly always begins as a simple curiosity about how we got here."
 — Robert Connors

I became interested in Dr. Mary Bennett Ritter's life and work more than a decade ago when the archivist at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography (SIO) in La Jolla suggested I read her autobiography, *More Than Gold In California*.² In this well-written, lively volume, Dr. Ritter describes the California scenery (which I came to know and love during my twelve years of living in California), her family's migration to California during the gold rush years, her quest for a medical education, her experience of running her own medical practice in Berkeley, her collaboration with other women physicians, her support of women students at the University of California, and her contributions to the founding years of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. After finishing the book, I was intrigued: What motivated this unusual woman? How was she able to move into the male-dominated world of medicine (being one of only two female students in her medical class)? What sparked her activism on behalf of women? How did she use persuasive and other rhetorical strategies to bring about the changes she fought for so relentlessly (e.g. she helped implement many public policies, such as minimum health and safety standards for boarding houses and sanitation guidelines for local dairies)? Thus I began my research to better understand the life, work, and rhetorical agency of Dr. Ritter.

The archival materials I work with are limited (and some were lost during Dr. Ritter's life time, a fact she recorded with regret in one of her diaries) and scattered across various archives because they are filed with her correspondents (such as Phoebe Apperson Hearst, Ellen Browning Scripps, and William E. Ritter), all of whom have collections in their own rights (whereas Dr. Ritter does not). It is interesting to observe that a single decision made by archivists — whose papers are worth collecting under his or her own name — can greatly influence accessibility and coherence of materials as well as the recognition accorded to an individual's achievements and contributions to public life. As far as I can tell, the only reason that any of Dr. Ritter's papers survive is the fact that she eventually married William Ritter, the first director of SIO. Yet she lived an interesting life in her own right, one worth restoring to the public record. The goal of my project is to recover the contributions made by Dr. Ritter to public life, medical history, and women's history by republishing her autobiography and several articles which detail her strategies for advocating social change.

"Archival reading is ... a kind of directed ramble, something like an August mushroom hunt."

Susan Romano, co-editor
Assistant Professor of
English
Department of English
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131
sromano@unm.edu

Iveta Cruse, production

Carrie Meadows, layout
and design

Valeria Ferraro, web
curator

Please contact us with
questions, suggestions,
calls
for papers, conference
announcements, or any
other
news of possible interest
to Coalition members.
Internships and
administrative support for
Peitho are funded by the
University of California,
Irvine;
Stanford University; and
the University of New
Mexico, Albuquerque.

www.unm.edu/~cwshrc



Top

Peitho Revisited

The logo inaugurated in
this issue was inspired by
an image of Peitho fleeing
the seduction of Leda
appearing on the Apulian
red figure vase, c. 350-
340 BCE (J. Paul Getty
Museum). Peitho, Greek
goddess of persuasion,
merges her verbal power
with the threat of
seduction. In classical
literatures, Peitho is
connected with Aphrodite
Pandemos and with

— Robert Connors

My "mushroom hunt" began as soon as I arrived in Berkeley. Upon checking in at the Bancroft Hotel (which I had chosen for its convenient location at the edge of campus and its reasonable rates), I was surprised — and very delighted — to discover that the hotel's sitting room featured a small, black and white (albeit grainy) picture and brief mention of Dr. Mary Bennett Ritter as part of a plaque commemorating the centennial celebration of the Prytanean Society, the University of California honors society for women of which Sr. Ritter was a founding member. It turned out that the hotel had been the former women's club. Reading through several volumes of the Prytanean Oral History in the archives the next day, I learned that several early club meetings had taken place right here, in this very space, where the hotel now serves biscotti and brandy in the early evening. Staying at the Bancroft Hotel certainly was a serendipitous choice and brought history back to life.

Upon discovering Dr. Ritter's portrait, I asked the hotel proprietor about the plaque, its origin, and information about the Prytanean Society. He handed me a phone number. This number led to an interesting phone call tree, whereby each member of the Prytanean Society I contacted suggested another one with whom I might want to speak. During my stay in Berkeley, I spoke with five different women, each of whom had new nuggets of information for me. I learned about a speech given at the centennial celebration of the Prytanean Society which mentions Dr. Ritter prominently, and I was able to receive a printed copy of the remarks from the speaker. I learned about an article featuring the Prytanean Society's history published in the *Chronicle of the University of California*, a journal devoted to the history of UC, in which Dr. Ritter was featured. I learned about the Prytanean Society's fundraising efforts on behalf of the first university infirmary (and Dr. Ritter's involvement) and their continued support of medical facilities on campus. One Prytanean member suggested I check out the new Tang Center which houses the University Health Services. There on an early morning ramble, I located a conference room named in honor of Dr. Ritter and other Prytanean Society members. I would have neither suspected nor located this piece of living history without my "mushroom hunt" in Berkeley.

Once in the archives, I decided that my first order of business was to read through the Prytanean Oral History volumes, so that I would better understand the background of the women I had contacted. This choice was a good one; I got a clearer sense of university life for women students during the turn of the last century, the period during which Dr. Ritter worked closely with students. My gaze thus shifted to the time period when Dr. Ritter lived and worked in Berkeley. This new focus was helpful, particularly since the manuscripts I tackled next, the correspondence between Phoebe Hearst and Dr. Ritter, dealt with university life. Some UC women demanded changes in student life and the curriculum during the 1890's, and they solicited Dr. Ritter's help in implementing them (e.g., women students asked for greater access to the gymnasium, which required medical exams, which Dr. Ritter provided gratis, and they proposed setting up cooperative housing "clubs" to reduce costs and improve living conditions, for which Dr. Ritter helped raise funds in addition to soliciting Phoebe Hearst's support).

The simple fact of being there, in Berkeley, walking across campus many times, jogging on the local trails, joining a campus tour, reading street and building names — all these activities made it much easier for me to

Athena, goddess of the polis. Thus Peitho crosses from a feminized world of seduction into the public life of communities. We prize her ability to move across categories not easily violated in Western thought: religious and secular, male and female, seduction and reason, order and disorder, public in its several senses. A digital version is available at www.theoi.com. Used with permission.



announcements

The Fifth Biennial Feminism(s) & Rhetoric(s) Conference

October 6 - 8, 2005

Michigan Technological
University,
Houghton, Michigan

[Proposals due April 1,
2005](#)



Membership

Officially founded in 1993, The Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition is a learned society devoted to supporting women scholars committed to research in the history of rhetoric and composition. Additionally, we work to

decipher the hand-written correspondence and diary entries which prominently featured local places and events. Suddenly I understood what it had meant when a fire swept down Strawberry Canyon (I was able to decipher the name of the location and to comprehend the vastness of the disaster which had struck Berkeley) and I could picture the events organized by women students, such as a fundraiser held in the "Faculty Glade" (a eucalyptus tree grove on campus which doubled as amphitheatre on special occasions), social gatherings in the Hearst Women's Gymnasium (which was financed by Phoebe Hearst and rebuilt by her son after it was destroyed by fire), or recitals held in the Greek Theatre (a big performance space which happened to celebrate its 100 year history during my visit and was featured in a library exhibit, complete with pictures of women's performances). History came to life as I walked the streets of Berkeley.

Back in the archives, I had the great pleasure of meeting a man with whom I had corresponded for the last two years in preparation for my trip to Berkeley. he had been kind enough to look up sources, arrange for the microfilming and mailing of some material, notify me of library hours and closings, and understand the scope of my project. Now that I had arrived in person, he greeted me as an old friend and made sure I got the assistance I needed. For instance, when I inquired about photos and pictures of Dr. Ritter, he walked me over to the card catalogue (yes, the real physical thing still exists in the Bancroft Library) where original photos and portraits were catalogued (not all of them online yet); this search yielded a large charcoal portrait of Dr. Ritter I had not known about. I also learned that asking the archive staff about additional materials, sources, or suggestions was very helpful; their online search skills and knowledge of archival holdings were immense.

One time, when I asked about a special issue of the journal, the *Chronicle of the University of California*, I was told that the journal editor's office, where I might be able to purchase a copy of the special issue, was several flights up in the same building. I met the journal editor and had a long, informative conversation about women's history at UC. I learned about Lacy Sprague, the first official Dean of Women at UC who followed closely on the heels of Dr. Ritter; about another book on UC women's roles as educators, school teachers, and curriculum developers (a copy of which I received gratis from the editor); and about the next issues planned for the journal, which included a personal invitation to contribute an article about Dr. Ritter. Climbing up that set of stairs that afternoon set me on a trail of materials I would not have expected, nor been able to pursue virtually.

Reading the special issue of the *Chronicle* later that evening led me to further references, which I could look up the next morning in the archives; for instance, I became acquainted with the early editions of the *UC Registrar*, an early version of today's course catalogue, which list instructors, courses, and requirements. Here I could verify the years in which Dr. Ritter had served as the official medical examiner for women students and note changes in the curriculum, some of which were brought about by Dr. Ritter's work.

Feminist archival research demands that we not only find lost women of the past but also become conscious of our positionality in relation to their positionality."

— Jane Donawerth and Lisa Zimmerelli

I became aware of my own "positionality" when I came across an interview (part of the Prytanean oral history) conducted in the 1960s with a woman

build and sustain a network of scholars interested in the role of women in rhetoric and composition. The network serves both as a forum for discussion of related issues and as a vehicle for mentoring newcomers to the field. If you would like join us, please fill out the [on-line application](#). All Coalition members receive Peitho regularly and stay abreast our work via email.



Top

who attended UC Berkeley in the 1910s. I was struck by how both interviewer and interviewee reflected the cultural values of their times when they discussed the topic of smoking among woman: the older woman recalled the taboo about women smokers (only in private spaces); the younger woman spoke about how common it was to see women smoking in public places (during the 1960s). As the reader of the oral history in 2004, I could not help but observe how in the new millennium, smoking is neither very common nor very public among men or women. ³This change in smoking habits, etiquette, and public policy during a one hundred-year period served as a vivid reminder for me that cultural norms change quickly and will always filter the researcher's interpretation of archival materials.

In "X-files in the Archives" Susan Miller notes that the premise, questions, or hypothesis with which we start our research will ultimately determine what leads we pursue, what details we notice, and what claims we make about a person, historical phenomenon, or rhetorical problem. In setting out to do my archival research, I was first and foremost interested in finding out more about Dr. Ritter's work, life, and accomplishments, but I also have to admit that I was fascinated by the things I first noticed when reading Dr. Ritter's autobiography — her determination to succeed, her "I-shall-keep-going-until-I-drop" attitude, and her feminist activism. At the same time I try to resist too romantic a notion of this particular historical figure. I kept asking, "What here Dr. Ritter's blind spots, prejudices, and preconceptions? What are mine? What were her racial, religious, and class politics? What are mine? How are these dynamics reflected in my reading of material and rendering of her life story?" As Janet Eldred and Peter Mortensen reminds us, archival research is, to some degree, always a nostalgic enterprise, a fact we need to acknowledge in our work. Elizabeth Rohan further notes that we tend to select subjects we admire or with whom we identify over subjects we dislike or despise, and she recounts the ambivalence she experienced when studying a historical figure whose missionary goals were at odds with her own values.

One special challenge facing scholars working with historical materials, then, is how to create a space in which they can be respectful as well as critical of historical figures. That is, how do scholars present research subjects with respect and dignity when they may disagree with their values, attitudes, and actions? Anne Ruggles Gere cautions that historical figures — those who can no longer speak back — depend on the researcher's ethical treatment of their work. They have left behind many kinds of written artifacts, but it is the researcher's job to put these documents into a meaningful context. During her archival work on women's clubs, Gere "realized that these now dead and defenseless women depended upon [her] ethical choices in textualizing their interior lives" (214). Making appropriate ethical choices in representing Dr. Ritter's life is one of my most serious challenges.

"Perhaps it is that intensity and a return to childhood present-opening — the joyful moment of happy surprise — that makes me and others who work in the archives recall this process with a dreamy look."

— Susan Miller



Top

I have two more stories of serendipity to add to this narrative — "joyful moments of happy surprise." Upon returning from my trip and catching up with e-mail, I received a message with the heading "Mary Bennett Ritter." I assumed it was someone from the Bancroft Library following up on my many photocopy requests. But no, it was a message — out of the blue — from a great great niece of Dr. Ritter's. During that very week in which I

was walking in the footsteps of my subject in Berkeley, she had done a Google search on Mary Bennett Ritter and found that I had given a talk at one of the Feminisms and Rhetorics conferences. She told me that she had read "Aunt Mary's" autobiography and wanted to know about my scholarly interest in her relative. She is too young to remember Dr. Ritter herself, but promised to look for any letters or photos her grandparents might have left behind. Speaking of bringing history back to life, I cannot think of a more vivid example than this. It serves as a powerful reminder of Jacqueline Jones Royster's important point that as scholars, we have an ethical responsibility to members of the community we study, and in the case of historical subjects, to their descendants who have a right to the respectful and dignified treatment of their ancestors (272-78).

"The shortest route to discovery is lunch with an expert and telephone conversations with everyone you know in the field."
— Jane Donawerth and Lisa Zimmerelli

Connecting with other scholars interested in Dr. Ritter herself or the time period during which she lived has been very important for me. Such connections have been made possible through papers I have discovered at the CCCC and Feminisms and Rhetorics conferences, through listings on my college website and through informal networks. In addition, I have asked the archivists met to share my interest (and e-mail address) with other scholars who might visit the archives; I find that networking and exchanging information about a common topic invigorates my work and leads to further insights. As I began composing these reflections on archival work — and here is my last story of serendipity — I received another unexpected email — this one from a scholar who is planning to write a biography of Dr. Ritter's husband; we have already begun to exchange our archival leads and plans for future work.

Works Cited

Connors, Robert J. "Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology." *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*. Ed. Gesa E. Kirsch and Patricia Sullivan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992. 15-36.

Donawerth, Jane, and Lisa Zimmerelli. "Dialoguing with *Rhetorica*" *Peitho: Newsletter of the Coalition of Woman Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*. 8.1 (Fall 2003): 4-6.

Eldred, Janet, Cary, and Peter Mortensen. "Linking Reminiscence and 'Reality': Digital Possibilities in the Study of Nineteenth Century U.S. Women's Rhetoric." Rhetoric Society of America, Austin, TX. May 31, 2004.

Gere, Anne Ruggles, "Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 53(2001): 203-23.

Miller, Susan. "X-Files in the Archive." *Peitho: Newsletter of the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*. 8.1 (Fall 2003): 1-4.

Rohan, Elizabeth. "Sisters of a Common Cause: Evangelical Rhetoric in Two Turns of the Century Female Authored Periodicals." Rhetoric Society of America, Austin Tx. May 30, 2004.

Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social*



Top

Change Among African-American Woman. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh P, 2000.

Footnotes

1 I would like to thank my colleagues Maureen Goldman, Charles Hadlock, and Bruce Herzberg for encouraging me to pursue this research and Bentley College for funding travel to several archives. I also would like to thank Deborah Day for introducing me to Dr. Ritter's autobiography, and David Kessler for providing me with many archival leads.

2 My first trip to the SIO archives came out of curiosity about another woman, Ellen Browning Scripps, a major philanthropist in San Diego. Unable to find a biography of Ms. Scripps in local bookstores, I made my way to the SIO archives, where I met the archivist who shares an interest in women's lives and history and brought Dr. Mary Bennett Ritter to my attention.

3 Massachusetts, the state in which I reside, recently passed a state-wide smoking ban for all public places.

book review

The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment, and Abolition.
Jacqueline Bacon Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), xiv + 291 pp.

Review by Shevaun E. Watson
University of South Carolina

Recovering the History of the Other Abolitionists

In the introduction to her acclaimed study, *Traces of a Stream*, Jacqueline Jones Royster "call[s] for other ways of reading" to continue the work of uncovering and understanding more of the rhetorical history of African American women. Other scholars have joined her in pronouncing the need for innovative, nuanced, and meaningful historical research on the persuasive practices of women and blacks in America. Jacqueline Bacon answers this call in *The Humblest May Stand Forth*, by compiling and analyzing the rhetoric of a multitude of African American and female abolitionists. Her comprehensive and comparative study of antislavery activists often overlooked in the history of abolition illustrates the ways in which these important rhetoricians negotiated limitations placed upon their rhetorical authority, extended the domain of abolitionist discourse, and developed complex rhetorical strategies within antebellum conceptions of gender and race. The book as a whole makes a laudable contribution to nineteenth-century rhetoric studies broadly speaking, while the segments on black and white women's "antislavery persuasion" should be of particular interest and value to scholars of women and rhetoric.

Building on the work of historians who have, over the past several decades, recovered the work of less known abolitionists, Bacon broadens the archival scope of this movement further still, drawing upon a vast array of primary sources to establish the existence of a complex network of influence and resistance among all abolitionists, black and white, male and female. Bacon uses speeches, sermons, tracts, editorials, articles, letters, autobiographical accounts, domestic manuals, and society reports not only to glean rhetorical strategies, but also to understand the racialized and



Top

gendered notions of nineteenth-century Americans. In this regard, she carefully contextualizes the rhetoric so that readers can, to the greatest extent possible, "encounter these abolitionists speaking for themselves" (7). A key component of this context, Bacon argues, is the ideology of racial uplift: "Scholars have often separated the self-help rhetoric of antebellum African American leaders from abolitionist texts... An alternative history of the abolition movement... must resist this false dilemma and explore how self-help rhetoric can function as strong, even militant abolitionist persuasion" (24).

Bacon challenges traditional chronological boundaries of the movement by including the groundbreaking work of antislavery activists in the 1820s. Though "many African American abolitionists did not publicly argue for immediate abolition prior to the 1830s," Bacon contends, this early activism "did not merely mirror white antislavery activity and deserves to be studied in its own right" (16). Such a position will hopefully encourage other researchers to consider even earlier eras and texts, such as pre-Revolutionary slave petitions for freedom. While some of the information in this study is available elsewhere — readers will surely recognize several of the figures and issues addressed — the force of Bacon's work is both her compilation of alternative abolitionist rhetoric into one definitive resource and her astute analysis of their diverse texts.

In her discussion of African American male abolitionists, Bacon recounts whites' attempts to circumscribe blacks' rhetorical authority. The development of black-run organizations and publications created a vital forum for self-representation and rhetorical agency for Samuel Cornish, John Russwurm, David Walker, William Whipper, William Watkins, Charles Lenox Remond, and Frederick Douglass, among others. Using muted group theory — "an approach to language developed to understand the communication of those whose discourse is often silenced" — Bacon begins to elaborate her ideas about how marginalized rhetors come to be heard. She illustrates in meticulous detail the various ways in which these men employed the rhetorics of revolution, racial uplift, Christian equality, and signifying to critique white racism and create solidarity among free blacks and slaves.



Top

White women confronted their own difficulties as activists in the abolition movement. Bacon demonstrates that, just as African American men exploited white society's exclusionary and hypocritical beliefs for their own rhetorical advantage, these women appropriated and refashioned traditional notions of femininity to work to end slavery. Moreover, Bacon asserts, these abolitionists used their racial privilege to insert themselves into the male dominated debate whenever possible. Catharine Beecher, Lydia Marie Child, the Grimké sisters, and Lucretia Mott are among the women Bacon describes as marshaling the rhetorical power of "True Womanhood," sympathy, domesticity, sexual difference, and Biblical authority to challenge at once rhetorical constraints for women and racial oppression of blacks. Bacon skillfully reanimates common interpretation of nineteenth-century white women by placing their work within the specific context of marginalized abolitionists, a position shared meaningfully and precariously with African American men and women.

Bacon's comparative analysis culminates and coalisces in the unique concerns and strategies of black female abolitionists. Confronting the dual forces of racism and sexism, these activists drew upon the rhetoric of both black men and white women to craft their own interventions into abolition debates. Sarah Douglass, Maria Stewart, Frances Ellen Watkinds, Sojourner



Top

Truth, Harriet Jacobs and others made the rhetorics of self-help, "True Womanhood," sisterhood, signifying, and liberatory Christianity their very own. In this chapter, Bacon deftly illustrates the layered complexities of persuasive practices among African American women themselves, and between these women and their counterparts in the movement. Perhaps most important, Bacon suggests that precisely because of their doubly vexed position in antebellum society, black women contributed to abolition in ways that were unavailable to others. "As [these women] speak and write," Bacon concludes, "they do more than claim the potential of language to grant agency to the oppressed and insert new voices, experiences, and perspectives into American discourse. They also significantly *transform* that discourse, infusing it with new meanings and fashioning it into a tool of resistance to oppression" (218).

The final segment of the study traces the myriad rhetorical transformations of these various marginalized abolitionists to the work of late nineteenth- and twentieth- century African American rhetors. The antebellum activists created and worked within a social, political, and rhetorical network of influence. Bacon demonstrates how this network, in turn, deeply shaped the perspectives and practices of more contemporary reform-minded rhetoricians. With this genealogy of influence in mind, including Ida B. Wells, Archibald Grimké, Malcom X, and Audre Lorde, Bacon looks forward from her history to remind us that the legacy of the "other" abolitionists is much greater than the end of slavery.



Top

