

TEXTUAL RHETORICS AND TEXTUAL CARNIVALS: SUSAN MILLER AND THE “SUBJECTS” OF RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

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In the slow shift from current-traditional to process-centered models of writing, rhetoric and composition as a field has developed an impressive set of teaching methods to help students become more confident and capable writers. The implications of these methods for the identity of writing teachers, however, have not been fully explored. Writing teachers at all levels find themselves unsure about their identities and affiliations; they struggle to balance their relationships and professional commitments to traditional literature departments, to the ancient discipline of rhetoric, to the relatively new field of composition research, and to current theoretical languages and critical practices. No matter where particular writing teachers are housed or how their positions are described, the political and intellectual position of “composition specialist” is an ambiguous and slippery one—and creates yet another level of difficulty for the overworked writing teacher. In addition to “normal”

teaching and administrative duties and the demands of research and scholarship, writing teachers face misunderstanding and confusion about what it means to be a composition professional.

Susan Miller's two books, the second written on the heels of the first, address these realities and conflicts. According to one of Miller's favorite images, composition is characterized by "blurred identities"—the blurrings that result when a composition teacher is expected to work out the confusing relationships between composition and literature, between written composition and oral rhetoric, between theory and practice, between the goal of "literacy" and the uncertainty over what that goal means or entails.

Miller's intention is to move two "subjects"—both *writing* and *writers*—into the center of rhetorical and composition theory. With characteristic linguistic play, Miller uses the term "subject" to represent both *what* we study in the field of rhetoric and composition—our topics of investigation—and *for whom* we study it—those "subjects" who are implicated in those topics. Swinging back and forth on the hinge of subject, Miller helps us to imagine new identities for writers and teachers, and her work addresses explicitly the theoretical gaps in the field of rhetoric and composition without ignoring the political climates in which we work. The two books together—*Rescuing the Subject: A Critical Introduction to Rhetoric and the Writer* (1989) and *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition* (1991)—establish Miller's ongoing poststructuralist project: first, to reread dominant histories of rhetoric and writing instruction; secondly, to argue for a theory of textuality; and finally, to illustrate how attention to textual practices would result in a fundamental revision of the subjects—in both senses—of rhetoric and composition.

Miller begins by challenging "[o]ur silent, habitual connections to oral rhetoric"—the subtle predominance of oral rhetorical models that still drive studies of written discourse (38). In looking toward classical rhetoric for some authority, rhetoric and composition has assumed a simple transference between the rhetorical situations of speaking and writing when they are not, in fact, the same. Miller does not limit these distinctions to obvious "situational" differences but demonstrates the complexities and technologies of writing which can no longer contain the classical ideal of "the good man speaking well." To formulate theories of *written* discourse requires concrete attention to texts and the role of the writer. Miller's textual rhetoric attempts to theorize the struggle of writers as they

produce explicitly written texts, interwoven with the texts of others and layered with multiple meanings.

By examining sites of textual production—the social and historical locations on which writers negotiate meaning and establish certain identities—Miller is able to focus on the ways that composition studies, as one textual site, constructed certain discourses: “textual rhetoric also provides a way to look at the disciplines of textual studies” (49). The theoretical space Miller clears in the first book—attention to textuality—enables her in the second book to study the ways that composition established its own discourses and subjects. And from that space, Miller does not hesitate to question some of composition’s nearest and dearest assumptions, namely process theory. Like the process theorists before her—Janet Emig ridiculed the five-paragraph theme by invoking professional writers—Miller dares to suggest that even the most current and widely-accepted practices might be either inadequate or flawed. Composition theorists and researchers could have made other choices as they began to construct an identity for the field: process theory was, in fact, neither inevitable nor “natural,” but instead a politically viable route to credibility. Composition has looked to hard research as well as to a venerable rhetorical tradition for its identity, but Miller reveals the blurriness these sources create for writing, writers, and teachers of writing. Miller reveals these blurrings not to clear them or wipe them clean, but to suggest a new site for composition studies, a space where these blurrings are precisely our subject(s).

I.

In *Rescuing the Subject*, Miller begins with the “high”—the traditional histories of rhetoric that composition scholars have long looked to for theories of composing as well as for intellectual authority (see North, 63-65). With this starting point, it is not surprising that she notes in the introduction Knoblauch and Brannon’s *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, the 1984 polemical rejection of classical rhetoric (a.k.a., the argument that won’t go away). Miller agrees that we need to “reevaluate the place of classical theories in contemporary teaching,” but she intends to do this by “rereading the history of rhetoric and its related fields in light of our chief concern, the act of writing” and the identity of writers (1-2). Acts and identities mark Miller’s dual in-

terests in textual production (the acts of writing) and subjectivity (the identities that those writing acts require or create).

Because writing intersects with other intellectual domains concerned with textuality—philosophy, literary studies, and history—a rhetorical theory culled solely from an oral tradition is necessarily limited and misleading. Thus, Miller turns to the history of literacy as a source for establishing a textual rhetoric, one that will dis/replace classical rhetoric by distinguishing writers from speakers and authors.

To construct a new theoretical subject of writing, Miller does not look to models of subjectivity already inscribed in philosophy or literature, but to the history of *literacy*: how changing technologies for writing constructed the category “writer.” Miller searches for “sites for the written subject” through a series of differing literacies—ancient primary literacy, textual literacy in the Middle Ages, and secondary Renaissance literacy. This historical work challenges, in particular, the unquestioned acceptance of the category “speaker” to talk about writing, and offers a textual rhetoric as an alternative.

A textual rhetoric includes the significance of the writer—distinct from both speakers and authors—and the importance of textuality: “the concatenation of texts that have accumulated and formed discourse communities over time” (16). Textuality is broader than “meaning” because it has to do with the material and social conditions for the production and dissemination of texts. Often called intertextuality, it is “the recursive interplay among groups of texts” (7), an approach which accounts for “the multiple influences at work on meaning” and “the inter-reference among texts” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1229). Accounting for textuality helps to theorize an active writer, “whose control of language is admittedly only provisional, but who is not a mere token in a language game” (20).

The writing subject has become a mere token by being trapped in three historical discourses: oral rhetoric, which has limited the subject to the role of “speaker”; humanist traditions, invested in the individual; and some poststructuralist theories, which would have the subject disappear altogether. To prevent writers from becoming the theoretical and intellectual abstraction of much current theory, Miller favors a theory of *agency* (Paul Smith), in which writers would have “mobility” (19) and some power to make (rhetorical) choices.

Simply by virtue of “coming first,” orality has shaped and determined rhetoric’s boundaries, and *Rescuing the Subject* is perhaps most valuable in moving composition studies beyond the point where “oral rhetoric has become . . . a static, reified totem” (38). In Miller’s terms, the acts and identities of writers are very different from the acts and identities of speakers, and her textual rhetoric seeks to acknowledge these differences as well as “the actual conditions for contemporary reading and writing [which] cannot be explained by oral rhetorical assumptions” (39). In addition, unlike most treatments of (oral) rhetorical history or theory, Miller subverts chronology by structuring *Rescuing* thematically and recursively—a strategy which models the textuality and layeredness of her theoretical discussion. She does move through familiar rhetorical territory—readings of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*—but a non-chronological approach allows her to work from pairings of “configurations” and “confrontations” of writing. Philosophy confronts writing; then writing confronts rhetoric. The educational result of these configurations and confrontations is the field of rhetoric and composition.

It is no accident, in light of Miller’s interest in the interconnectedness of textuality and subjectivity, that she concludes *Rescuing* with attention to Mina Shaughnessy and her work with basic writers. Basic writing is a particularly notable site where composition studies has constructed a characteristic subjectivity for student writers; Miller’s attention to Shaughnessy and subjectivity anticipates the second book, where the politics of writing and writing instruction move into the forefront of Miller’s concerns. Shaughnessy’s work with the texts of basic writers provides “a model for contemporary writing” that illustrates “exactly how distinct a textual world is” (164): “Her basic writer became, I would suggest, an active emblem for contemporary writing and for all of its writers’ entries into unfamiliar textual worlds” (165). The open admissions students who are the subjects of *Errors and Expectations* can remind us of how we take for granted our “basic experiences with the linguistic world” (165); their “tortured prose” defamiliarizes writing for us, making us painfully aware of its complexities, and how much we need to find “a comprehensive theory that accounts for it” (165). Because basic writers are the lowest members of an already low site academically, they provide a way in to Miller’s dominant interest in the politics of composition, one she was clear about as early as 1977, when she reviewed *Errors and Expecta-*

tions for *College Composition and Communication*: “The political aspects of teaching Basic Writing are implicit in this book, but what should be emphasized is a politics of knowledge—the power to be gained for students when we know, rather than rave about, the process of learning to write” (94). Miller focused her project years ago: getting past the promotion of process to discover its implicit theories of writing, writers, and textuality.

II.

The more recent text, *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, is a “story” of composition—a blatantly fictional study (1). Miller hopes her narrative will substitute for the prevailing myth of composition studies, one that stages the triumph of process theory over current-traditional pedagogy, resulting in writing programs where students are free to find their unique voices. Miller explodes this comforting myth, and her analysis packs a number of powerful insights: “the purposes and practices for the composition course, which are amply documented, indicate that it was set up to be a national course in silence” (55).

Her use of Stallybrass and White (*The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*) and their revisionist-Bakhtinian study of transgression is a fascinating approach to rereading composition studies. In an extended analogy, composition becomes a carnival, a site representing the “low,” where not just marginal but transgressive acts and discourses take place, violating boundaries and overturning traditional hierarchies. Stallybrass and White point out that the politics of hierarchy inversion is a “ritual strategy on the part of subordinate groups” (4), and carnival has become an category which highlights how “what is socially peripheral is frequently symbolically central” (emphasis in Stallybrass and White, 5). Miller applies their materialist criticism to do a compelling reading of composition studies which turns the world of writing instruction upside down. Like the ferris wheel image on the book jacket, readers are asked to spin traditional categories and assumptions on their heads; established composition becomes The Great American Theme Park.

Miller’s emphasis on textuality is evident in *Textual Carnivals*, where she ranges up and down a colorful midway of texts—from Gerda Lerner’s *Creation of Patriarchy* to Albert Kitzhaber’s *Themes, Theories, and Therapy* and Paul Fussell’s *Class*. Among the diverse

texts, though, closest to “carnival” status are the survey of composition professionals Miller conducted and the university catalogues she examined. Miller acknowledges—as she should in light of her objections to social science methodologies—that she designed and conducted a national survey in order to test her own interpretations. However, without the pretense of objectivity, Miller tries to “unite text and subtext” (205). The full report is marginalized in an appendix, but pieces of the survey are interspersed throughout the text, bordered in boxes, interjecting illuminating and sometimes disturbing commentary on composition’s status. These boxes represent composition perhaps even more vividly than Miller intended; they are truly voices from the margins—literally, physically separate from the main theoretical text. Miller also examines several university catalogue descriptions of English over a period of years to demonstrate “the extent to which public forms of writing were institutionalized by new departments of English in their early decades, [and] the developing image of one universal freshman-level composition course” (66-67). In keeping with her attention to “the low,” Miller finds much of composition’s identity written in rarely-examined or non-traditional sources.

Miller’s attention to history—as strong here as in the previous book—illustrates that “discretely taught writing” is in many ways a novelty and “necessary equipment for [American] citizenship” (32). Important to much of her argument is composition’s “essential attachment to literary studies” (19), especially in its borrowing of student subjectivity. When literature is taught for its own sake, from a perspective of universalism (she argues this through Terry Eagleton), it reproduces the notion that literature students or English majors are “‘above’ or ‘beyond’ technology, industrialism, the proletariat, and a host of mundane concerns” (91). Thus, the subjectivity implied by these formulations is “for its own sake” as well, and the subject matter is about “nothing in particular” (90-92). Another connection between composition and literature can be found in the idea of paradigm: literary studies found its “paradigm” in New Criticism, which “stabilized a field that originally was a loosely connected set of untheorized practices” (115). Neither the “neoclassical” (e.g., Corbett) nor the “naturalistic” (e.g., Berlin) histories of composition we now have examines “why and how composition and literature remain supralogically entwined” (47); thus, Miller focuses on this lapse:

The university of the [writing] course, its continuations of early administrative structures, persistent silence about its results as apart from its stated goals, and its hidden unities all extend the subjectivity of literature in the current practices of composition. (92)

In addition to harboring literary views of writing and writing subjects, composition's *choice* to center its work on freshman writing (75) has contributed to the infantilization of the student subject (102). Composition practices in this first-year course, from the five-paragraph theme to the placement or exit exam, imagine students "as children whose Victorian innocence retains a tainted need for 'civilizing' . . . as only tentative participants in consequential learning about writing" (196). Miller argues that we treat students as failed authors, never as actually responsible for what they write.

Probably most striking to readers will be Miller's critiques of process theory and the widely-heralded paradigm shift from product to process; she doesn't hesitate to question these givens in contemporary composition. She admits the political advantages that process theory and the paradigm have resulted in (i.e., smaller classes), but she also points out that their uses have been aimed more at the *profession* than at the "subjectivity required by process teaching" (104). She also dares to ask the unaskable question: about whether process theory *really* results in a quality of differences (106).

Miller claims that a paradigm shift has " 'not quite' " occurred: "Viewed from both historical and theoretical contexts, . . . process theory has not yet provided an accurate or even a very historically different theory of contemporary writing" (108). Composition has tried, of course, to construct a theory through the use of research methodologies borrowed in large part from the social sciences. When composition first began to engage in "hard" research, such "borrowing" engendered considerable debate. Most commentators were concerned that composition be thorough, accurate, precise, and well-informed. The authors of *Research in Written Composition* (1963), for example, blasted would-be researchers for general sloppiness and lack of replication: "Too many [investigators] seem bent more on obtaining an advanced degree or another publication than on making a genuine contribution to knowledge, and a fair measure of the blame goes to the faculty adviser or journal

editor who permits or publishes such irresponsible work” (Braddock, et al., 5). Braddock and North and others who have chastised composition researchers have been concerned with conducting empirical research *well*; Miller questions whether we should be doing it *at all*. Process research has

assured that the field will be identified with foreign methodological languages whose origins are uncertain and whose purposes and desires are consequently suspect. Close reading, Shaughnessy’s method, was given over for statistical and other empirical designs whose credibility within the academic homes supporting this research was nil. (117)

Miller admits her own bias toward interpretation (120), and she goes on to “suggest research methods that use data from analyses of actual social situations, privileging mechanisms, discursive practices, and verifiable outcomes from writing” (120). She does not, however, indicate precisely what these research methods might be, if they can be “borrowed,” or if an increasingly well-established methodology such as ethnography is acceptable.

True to her admiration of Shaughnessy, Miller believes that composition should never have ventured into the “foreign lands” of replication and designs anyway, but should have stayed home and concentrated on close readings. Composition would be better off if it did more with interpretive theory, the “what we know best” approach through literary criticism. By turning to a process paradigm, composition “reinforced its separateness” from literary studies, thereby reestablishing “antagonism and estrangement” (117). If it had developed interpretive methods for studying writing, perhaps composition would not be suffering from such stigma and self-alienation.

III.

Some composition professionals in traditional English departments, still fighting for composition’s sanction, may feel that Miller is too hard on composition, disloyal to a still-struggling community, or that her critique “goes too far.” True, Miller slams process theory, the paradigm, and social science research methods in one fell swoop—the very images that have identified and focused composition studies since the sixties. And it is worth asking how sharp dismissal of the very foundations that have earned composition

greater authority in English serve the project of improving composition's status. However, like Lester Faigley in "Judging Writing, Judging Selves," Miller turns necessary attention to the ways in which our practices—such as placement exams or narrative essays—reinforce notions of individualism, values of capitalism, and structures of exclusion that do not fit under the tent of the transgressive carnival.

This brings up, though, a question I had throughout *Textual Carnivals*, and I cannot pinpoint Miller's stand on this: is carnival—with the transgression it encourages—her goal for composition studies, or is it a state composition should be trying to overcome? I cannot tell if Miller thinks the position of the low, for example, is "bad" and that we should be working to move to the high. In arguing that composition studies has not done enough to alter the basic high/low structures that sustain its place in the low, Miller assumes that the high position is better or at least more powerful. Theoretical consistency would require, I want to argue, that composition take advantage of its position in the low because of the transgressive potential of that site. Miller might productively have argued—at least more explicitly—the epistemological advantages of being on the margins or the thrill of being transgressive.

While work does need to be done to rescue those teachers who are exploited by the composition factory of most institutions (via the Wyoming Resolution), the margins are often an epistemologically advantageous position (though whether that translates to politically advantageous may be another question). As feminist scholars have argued—and Miller is a formidable feminist scholar in her own right—being outside the centers of power allows a view into the institutional workings that keep production and reproduction moving in tandem. Cultural theorist bell hooks explains that the margin is "a profound edge" that is not a safe place but a site necessary for resistance (149). And sociologist Patricia Hill Collins shows how an "outsider within" status provides "a special standpoint" on self and institutions. Those who are "in touch with their marginality in academic settings" can tap this standpoint (35). Miller, in fact, would not be able to make her keen observations about composition and its relationship to literature if she had not spent her career as a composition specialist rather than, say, a Milton scholar. In other words, Miller's own occupation of a low site grants her the experience and authority to make these observations and critiques. What other kinds of

theories and practices does a “low” position make possible? Robert Brooke’s study, “Underlife and Writing Instruction,” comes immediately to mind as an example of what can be seen by examining life on the margins.

Her use of “subject” in the first title and “carnival” in her second indicate Miller’s ease with poststructuralist theory and its attention to subjectivity, hierarchical relationships, and “sites”—an ease readers may or may not share. To even begin the first book, readers must fill in the major premise that the subject, in fact, needs to be rescued. As Sharon Crowley puts it in her review of a similarly theoretical text, writing teachers may not have the “luxury” of reading theory; thus, Miller’s books are not likely to be read by “the low” in composition because most writing teachers are “too damn busy” (Crowley). A further obstacle to many readers, or at least this one, is Miller’s prose; in both texts, the density and garbled syntax which mark her writing quickly became tedious and frustrating. Allow me one glaring example from *Rescuing the Subject*:

Although theories in literary studies and philosophy have been, as becomes clear, ambivalent about this divorce, exploring this theoretical background and its pointers toward our current position in regard to the writing subject and the possible results of the written text makes it clear that rescuing the fast-declining speaking subject calls for a new textual rhetoric. (10)

Encountering this sentence so early in *Rescuing*, I found it difficult to go on. By the second book, however, Miller seems more sensitive to readers: *Textual Carnivals* includes helpful summaries of preceding sections before she moves along in her argument—a readerly strategy missing in the first book.

It is also important to point out that sophisticated books like these are not likely to be written by the low, either. Although she is, of course, a member of composition as a low site in the academic hierarchy, Miller’s own subject position within the profession is what allows her to be so productive and prolific; and in all her attention to the high/low hierarchy, she does not acknowledge her own privileged position as a full professor who receives leaves, fellowships, and NEH grants to write. She does acknowledge support for her projects in the traditional manner (the Acknowledgements pages), but a self-examination of her own posi-

tion would be one way of furthering her arguments about subjectivity in composition. This is not meant as a whiny criticism by one of the “sad women in the basement”: it is an effort, instead, to request of Miller the same kind of theoretical attention to herself as writer—including the social conditions for her acts of writing—that she wants the field to concentrate on.

IV.

Of the two, I find *Textual Carnivals* a more interesting work—one that will appeal to a wider readership and should promote lively discussion, for it contains the seeds of potentially explosive issues about composition’s “place.” Writing program administrators (WPAs) will find her chapter on “The Institution and Composition” particularly interesting (as well as the survey), and I would be interested in a WPA’s reaction to this characterization of his or her duties:

In actuality, a composition program may require no more than ordering large numbers of textbooks through a bookstore, facilitating the selection of these books and of course plans among colleagues, and evaluating nonfaculty teachers in a pro forma way. (160)

Here and in other spots, I find slippage between Miller’s desire to attend to the low and her reversion to old stereotypes. This slippage, in fact, might illustrate a troubling relationship between the two books: why a “story” for composition but a “critical introduction” for rhetoric? Why such explicit political attention to composition but a more “theoretical” approach to rhetoric? This is not to say that politics is missing in the first book, or theory missing from the second. Textual history and her focus on the writer, in particular, tie the two books together, but she may also reinforce the assumption that rhetoric, the site of the “high,” is the theoretical discipline, and composition, the site of the “low,” is merely a practical field best represented by a dizzying ferris wheel.

Most importantly, Miller’s work provides a model for further political analysis of all the texts we produce and the acts, as well as the consequences, of their production. I think composition professionals, in part because they occupy the low site, are becoming increasingly willing to attend to these consequences, to be more responsible for theories and practices: Miller’s work insists on such

responsibility. With Miller, we must as a field be willing to dig through all the ideological and institutional layers to discover how our entrenched practices affect students as well as teachers. While her books may not be for everyone in the carnival, they are theoretically sophisticated, intellectually challenging, and thoroughly provocative. She raises more issues than she solves, but this is no criticism. Miller's contribution is not only to rhetorical theory and/or composition studies, but to textual theory and cultural studies, to the interdisciplinary attention to and concern with subjectivity in discourse and to the cultural and institutional hierarchies embedded in our language practices.

Reading Miller gives me work to do. Despite my occasional doubts or frustrations, these two texts are packed with ideas and implications for theoretical work in the field. And I think her two books model the kind of studies the field should now be producing: those that are self-reflexive (Phelps), intertextual or layered, and interdisciplinary, with explicit attention to the multiple, often conflicting, textual practices we engage in. *Textual Carnivals*, in particular, along with the recent Heinemann collection, *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, might mark a turning point in composition studies, or rather, in the study of composition studies. Perhaps the best sign of our improved status is the appearance of works which challenge our largest assumptions. To "come of age," as Miller's two books so powerfully demonstrate, composition studies needs to turn ideological critique upon its own purposes and practices.

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