Nineteenth-Century United States
Conduct Book Rhetoric by Women

In 1904 Mary August Jordan, a professor of rhetoric at Smith College, published *Correct Writing and Speaking* with a national company, A. S. Barnes of New York. Looking very much like a rhetoric textbook, this book yet came out in a series called “The Woman’s Home Library.” The contents of this book seem to fall under the category of late nineteenth-century rhetorical theory—advice on composition and speech. But in the mixture of belles-lettres rhetoric, contemporary scientific linguistics, and history of the language from a literary perspective, Jordan also includes passages on what we would now call “etiquette”: polite conversation and letter-writing. Where do these passages come from, and what are they doing in such a book?

Mary Augusta Jordan, first-generation college student, among the first generation of women PhDs, is drawing simultaneously on two traditions, for a new generation of women who follow both. The first is the tradition we are all familiar with, academic rhetoric. Jordan is an enthusiastic consumer and producer of rhetorical theory in the academic tradition. She is interested in how people effectively write and learn how to write, how they use the dictionary, how they learn and reform their language, how they speak, and how they learn to speak on public, formal occasions. She is especially interested in adapting these academic materials from a mainly masculine tradition to women’s use.

But she is also drawing on another tradition of nonacademic rhetoric for women. For a hundred years before Jordan, women in England and the United States had been teaching women how to speak and write in conduct books used for girls’ schools or home schooling. As feminist historian Nancy Armstrong points out, “Conduct books addressed a readership comprising various levels and sources of income and included virtually all people who distinguished themselves from the aristocracy, on the one hand, and from the laboring poor on the other” (100–01), and conduct books for women established “a distinctively feminine discourse” (100). In addition, conduct books, Armstrong is convinced, helped establish the middle class as a group with shared interests by emphasizing gender roles and the domestic ideal of women’s sphere—ideologies that appealed across class and region to common ground (103). This conduct-book,
nonacademic rhetoric answered a demand when, in the early nineteenth century, the family was the main site of education in composition, as Susan Miller has demonstrated (92–95, 125–26). Indeed, Miller argues that conduct literature falls under the domain of rhetoric, for it was often used instead of rhetorical training for groups whose entitlements the privileged classes wished to limit (149–50).

The history of nineteenth-century teaching of rhetoric and development of theory to serve new cultural contexts has generally emphasized men’s education and men’s theory. Since women were not attending college yet in great numbers, how they learned to write and speak is rarely considered. Also not considered is how fragmented and limited was college education for many privileged men.

Following Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s classic study of nineteenth-century United States women’s speech-making, however, in the last decade feminists have taken up Patricia Bizzell’s challenge to be “resisting” readers of the canonical texts of traditional rhetorical history, to “insert . . . women into the traditional history and . . . [set] their work in dialogue with the canon,” and “to look in places not previously studied for work by women that would not have been traditionally considered rhetoric” (51). Catherine Hobbs, Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen, Annette Kolodny, Shirley Logan, Carla Peterson, Joy Rouse, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Lucy Schultz have studied United States women’s rhetoric and the ways that women were taught writing. Susan Miller has analyzed the commonplace book tradition in nineteenth-century United States and concluded that education moved from family surveillance to institutional control only very gradually over the century, that class entitlement more than gender determined who was taught what in home schooling, and that the mother only gradually assumed the position of moral and educational center of the home. In her recent wide-ranging study, Anne Ruggles Gere describes the women’s clubs and women’s self-help and educational reading societies that encouraged women’s literacy and writing practice as well as activism. Conduct book rhetoric grew out of and contributed to this culture of family provision of schooling, continuing education, and women’s clubs. Thus in the last fifteen years, feminists have recovered some of the history of the practice of women’s speech-making and composition. But, with the exception of studies on Gertrude Buck (see JoAnn Campbell), there has been little treatment of women’s authorship of rhetoric and composition theory for women in these textbooks for home schooling.

Beginning with Lydia Sigourney (who was strongly influenced by British moralist and educator, Hannah More), United States conduct books by women theorized women’s cultural roles in writing and speaking and taught women conversation skills and letter-writing. Most earlier conduct books by men warned women against speaking too much, being witty, and gaining too much education. These women writers of conduct books promoted women’s education and
negotiated the gendered constraints of speech and writing with great ingenuity, while not challenging them outright until after 1850.

In *Letters to Young Ladies* (1833) and *Letters to My Pupils* (1850), Lydia Sigourney constructs a sphere of women’s rhetoric—conversation, reading aloud as parlor entertainment, and letter-writing—in the context of a republican ideal of womanhood. Lydia Sigourney (1791–1865) grew up in Connecticut, where she was encouraged to read by her father’s employer, Jerusha Lathrop. Sigourney started a girls’ school with a friend, who withdrew because of illness. A second school was sponsored by a family friend, Daniel Wadsworth, who also helped her publish her first book, *Moral Pieces in Verse and Prose* (1815). She eventually married Charles Sigourney, a widower with three children, but her husband’s hardware business never prospered, so she continued her writing and supported her family. She wrote sentimental poetry, magazine columns, and moral essays. She published over fifty volumes of verse and became the best-known woman poet in the United States. She was an international celebrity, corresponding with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Maria Edgeworth, and being visited by Charles Dickens (Haight). Although conservative on women’s roles, she supported her family by writing, protested unjust treatment of Native Americans, and actively promoted abolition, schools for African-Americans, schools for the deaf, and better treatment of the insane (Scherman).

In her rhetorical theory, Sigourney represents women as industriously self-educated and as teachers. Arguing in her introduction to *Letters to Young Ladies* that it is both beneficial that women be well educated in order to better nurture their children (read “sons”), and also that teaching is “natural” to women (10–12), Sigourney helps to forge a separate spheres gender theory that has far-reaching benefits as well as drawbacks for women in the nineteenth century. The drawbacks we have long understood: a separate spheres concept of gender limits women to domestic influence, unpaid work, and unequal education. The benefits include, however, the possibility of continuous self-education (common for nineteenth-century United States men, as well) and the claim to a major role in passing on the cultural capital of knowledge and values. This last helps to explain how women are often central in nineteenth-century activist causes.

Sigourney’s *Letters to Young Ladies* is a conduct book of essay-like reflections on the education of girls and women: what they need to know in a very particular social context of middle-class United States. Both this book and also her later *Letters to My Pupils* are designed to be used either in a school for girls or in home-schooling, for they set out a curriculum for girls, as well as encouraging them to continuously improve themselves. Sigourney is thus translating the “self-help” ideology of American masculine culture into feminine terms.
What does this mean for rhetoric? The concerns of classical rhetoric find strange bedfellows in the concerns of feminine conduct. In the chapter on “Manners and Accomplishments” in Letters for Young Ladies for example, Sigourney discusses not only etiquette, music, dancing, and the crafts of traditional feminine education but also reading aloud. Women must have training in reading, she argues, because it provides entertainment and pleasure for those in the family she serves—and Sigourney pushes this claim fully into the realm of formal training in elocution, with the goal to be “clearly understood” (114–15). A discussion of handwriting (a traditional part of women’s education by the nineteenth century) leads to a discussion of letter-writing as an art worthy of Cicero and a claim that women have a “natural” gift of “epistolary composition” (116). The chapter on “Books” in Letters for Young Ladies includes discussion of the value of logic (154–55) and the importance of systematic training of the memory (156–60). These are considered not as valuable in themselves, or only as a foundation for the character of the reader, but as part of a larger view of the rhetorical obligations on women: They need something sensible to say. Sigourney suggests grounding such study in all-women reading societies (160) where “partnership in knowledge” will lead to “great increase of intellectual wealth” (161). Here the adaptation of republican ideals to women’s concerns is especially clear: Knowledge is quite literally capital in this nineteenth-century American system, and women may indeed own such capital and draw interest from its circulation.

In chapters on “Conversation” in Letters to Young Ladies, and on “Fitty-Spoken Words” in Letters to My Pupils, Sigourney develops a rhetoric for the spoken discourse of domestic relations that lies outside “public” discourse but not outside the realm of public influence. She borrows from the tradition of women’s treatments of conversation the precept that women’s conversation should be “agreeable” (Ladies 187). She borrows from Hannah More the conception of women’s role in conversation as the good listener (Ladies 192). As in traditional conduct book literature, much of Sigourney’s advice on feminine conversation is couched negatively: Women should not talk too much (Ladies 187), should not talk simply to display themselves (Ladies 191), should not interrupt others (Pupils 46), should not flatter (Ladies 192), should not dissect the characters of other women (Ladies 193–95; Pupils 48), and should avoid frivolous speech (Ladies 198–99). Sigourney extends these strictures, through her mainly male examples, however, to men as well as women: Men, too, should not talk too much; men, too, should listen well. In sentimentalizing and moralizing the art of conversation, Sigourney also universalizes the “feminine” qualities of good conversation and opens room to further extend women’s social power.

Sigourney adds to previous discussions of conversation an analysis of speech between men and women as moral uplift, a move that suggests the bene-
fit of sentimental culture to nineteenth-century women. “The degree of influence,” she warns young women, that “you possess over young men. . . . is exceedingly great” (Ladies 198). With this influence Sigourney wants women to improve everyone’s character: Steer men to “useful” rather than frivolous conversation and knowledge; encourage “habits of industry” and “just economy” (Ladies 198–99). The good conversationalist thus seems very like the good speaker of traditional rhetoric, although she is female: She possesses “disciplined intellect, to think clearly, and to clothe thought with propriety and elegance; knowledge of human nature, to suit subject to character; true politeness, to prevent giving pain; a deep sense of morality, to preserve the dignity of speech; and a spirit of benevolence to neutralize its asperities and sanctify its powers” (Ladies 200–01). To these qualities, in the later Letters to My Pupils, Sigourney adds the republican virtues of simplicity and respect for others (32–33). Cicero and Quintilian would applaud such a speaker. Indeed, the aim of conversation for Sigourney is very close to the aim of Ciceronian rhetoric and Horatian poetry: As speakers in the Roman tradition aim at “utile et dulce,” Sigourney’s speakers “converse both agreeably and usefully” (Pupils 44).

That these qualities of good conversation amount to a sentimental adaptation of traditional rhetoric to new purposes in United States and feminine society may be most clearly seen in Letters to My Pupils. In her summary of the nature of “fitly spoken words,” Sigourney requires her pupils to use “words that give pleasure” (49), “words that convey instruction” (50), and “words that soothe sorrow” (52). “Sympathy” is the virtue of a good speaker that is most characteristic of the nineteenth century in Sigourney’s canon of speakerly virtues (Pupils 52–53). Sigourney thus paradoxically ends her section on “fitly spoken words” with a section on silence: silence in the presence of the sublime, silence to comfort the ill and the grief-stricken, silence in devotion (Pupils 53–55). “Fitly spoken words” for Sigourney include those intensely communicative inner words that are best expressed by outward silence.

In The Young Lady’s Friend (1836) and The Youth’s Letter Writer (1840), Eliza Farrar follows in Sigourney’s footsteps, offering rhetoric to women who tutor children at home or have left school for family responsibilities. Eliza Farrar (1791–1870) grew up in France and England in a Quaker family forced out of the United States and France because of their policy of nonparticipation in war. After 1819 she lived with her grandparents in Bedford, Massachusetts, and in 1828 married John Farrar, professor of mathematics at Harvard University. Her husband published revisionary textbooks on astronomy, electricity, magnetism, and optics, and she published children’s stories and conduct books (Huh). She traveled frequently to Europe and knew everyone, from Admiral Lord Nelson to Red Cross founder Florence Nightingale, from reformer Harriet Martineau to transcendental-
ist Margaret Fuller, from English asylum reformer Sir William Ellis to the Ladies of Llangollen (Lady Eleanor Butler and Hon. Miss Ponsonby). Several years before Margaret Fuller's Conversations (lecture-discussions with a circle of Boston women in Elizabeth Peabody's bookstore), Eliza Farrar helped Delia Bacon set up courses of lectures on history for women, first in Brattle House, then in Farrar's own parlor in Cambridge (Farrar, Recollections, 319–20). Farrar is even more specific about her republican audience than is Sigourney—in The Young Lady's Friend she directly addresses "the daughters of our republic" (40). Both Sigourney and Farrar stress the moral role of women in families and society, and Farrar, like Sigourney, sentimentalizes that role, founding it on the sympathy that binds all society together (208–10, 364, for example).

In the opening to The Young Lady's Friend, Farrar observes, "the influence of mothers is greater than that of fathers in forming the characters of their children" (3) and then sketches the traditional humanist, rhetorical education that lasts a lifetime—but for women, so that they can properly influence their children. Farrar's assertion is reforming not only women's education but also women's role in the family, for as Susan Miller articulated in Assuming the Positions, the father was the greater educational influence in early nineteenth-century home schooling (246–53). The ideal woman for Farrar is the nineteenth-century version of the superwoman: She is an avid reader for moral and educational purposes (and always willing to teach others what she knows); she is a skilled manager of domestic affairs; she is a scientifically trained nurse who also dispenses pastoral care to the sick; she is a talented seamstress and needlewoman; and she is an agreeable and knowledgeable partner in conversation (Young Ladies Friend, especially 39–40).

Under "Evening Parties," Farrar adds to previous conduct book rhetoric a discussion of women's "self-possession" (Young Lady's Friend 363)—a telling term signaling American individualism. In Farrar's discussion "self-possession" turns out to be a feminine equivalent of delivery. She instructs women in the curtsey of greeting, posture and graceful movement, and holding still; and she advises, "Your whole deportment should give the idea that your person, your voice, and your mind are entirely under your own control" (362–63). Here one sees how mainstream rhetorical advice for men becomes radical reform when applied to women: Teaching graceful posture has led Farrar to advocate control over themselves to women. Significantly, Farrar is again reforming current cultural norms, for, as Nancy Armstrong has pointed out, conduct book ideology transformed nineteenth-century bourgeois women into "bearer[s] of moral norms and socializer[s] of men" through teaching "techniques for regulating desire" (129). Here Farrar offers, instead, to elevate women's status by teaching them to seize control of themselves through self-regulation.13
Farrar devotes a whole chapter to conversation. The purposes of conversation, Farrar suggests, should be “innocent recreation” and “intellectual growth” (Young Lady’s Friend 374). But more revealing is her comment that conversation “is the readiest way in which gifted minds exert their influence” (385). Like many female rhetorical theorists before her, Farrar realizes that power operates in private, domestic speech, as well as in public speaking. Like her precursors in conduct book rhetoric, she warns young women against the faults of ridicule and wit at other’s expense (375–76); she also castigates the faults of exaggeration (377–81), irony and joking (381–83), and speaking only to display knowledge (421). Farrar, like Sigourney before her, raises listening to be an important part of the art of conversation (384–85) but requires both partners (not just the female) to listen in turn (386). According to Farrar, the good conversationalist employs method, clarity, and force in speech just as the orator (386). “The art of conversation,” is, however, a communal art, enabling “a company, when a good topic was once started, to keep it up, till it had elicited the powers of the best speakers” (386). Farrar further adds a discussion of delivery in conversation, treating the signals of countenance and body that maintain connection between listener and speaker (387–88).

Near the end of The Young Lady’s Friend, under the topic of “Mental Culture,” Farrar gives advice on the desirability of continuing practice in writing and reading after leaving school. She recommends reading treatises on women’s education and the classics in English and other languages (422–23). That she sees such reading as an alternative to college is suggested by her recommendation that women should undertake a “course of reading” rather than reading to taste (423). Such reading will then substitute for the courses that the men of the family might take in college or the reading that their greater leisure time has allowed them as boys and young men. Writing is central to this kind of continuing education for women in Farrar’s plan: “However irksome may have been the writing of themes at school,” Farrar comments, “you cannot relinquish the frequent exercise of the mind in composition, without neglecting one of the most important means of mental culture” (425). Women should note words they do not know in a notebook so that they can inquire concerning their meaning later (423–24). They should take notes on sermons, lectures, conversations, and passages from books that might serve as topics for practice themes. (This is the classic rhetorical exercise of the paraphrase.)

Farrar hopes that eventually not only biography and foreign travels will interest young women but also “philosophy of language and grammar” and “rhetoric” (Young Lady’s Friend 428–29). For women who want to study rhetoric, she encourages the use of Blair, Kame, Campbell—the standard nineteenth-century texts for men’s college composition and rhetoric (429). Thus in her conduct
book, she is interweaving for a broader audience of women many of the same subjects and skills that are taught in the early nineteenth century to men in college textbooks or home tutoring (and to a few women in female academies).

While Farrar briefly instructs in letter-writing in *The Young Lady's Friend*, under “Female Companionship” (279–83), she devotes a whole book to teaching this art, as well. In *The Youth's Letter Writer; or The Epistolary Art*, Farrar offers a manual of letter-writing that may serve as a school text or a home-schooling guide for letter-writing. In the fashion of reformed education championed by the British Edgeworth family at the end of the eighteenth century, Farrar turns her textbook into a story with morals as well as instruction: A young boy, Henry, spends several months visiting his uncle’s family and so learns the value of letter-writing, since it maintains the bonds and affection between him and his family while he is away. The better letter writer he becomes, the better the bond—thus education in this volume is given a motivation very much in keeping with sentimental culture. “Young men who leave their pleasant homes” the volume tells us, “consider a letter [from family] one of the greatest blessings” (4). In sentimental terms a letter is a gift to loved ones (9). This moralizing of the art of writing thus also pushes this manual over into the category of conduct literature. The virtues writing letters inculcate include exactness in expression (telling the truth) (142), civility and kindness (66–67), simplicity and economy (156–58), as well as sympathy.

In *The Youth's Letter Writer*, Henry receives lessons from his uncle on writing concisely (to get all the events on a page and not waste precious paper); punctuation and paragraphing; spelling; beginnings and endings; folding, sealing, addressing; and making pens and penmanship. The models recommended for letter-writing include Cicero, Benjamin Franklin, and the poet Cowper. Still, the bulk of instruction in this story of children learning how to write letters is conducted through the children’s own writing (10–11). Mr. Price, the uncle, is assisted in these lessons by his eldest daughter, Anna, and when he goes on business, she continues the lessons. Anna helps Henry with openings, finding and developing subjects, and the best way to prepare an audience for bad news. In the book’s final chapter, Farrar democratizes her lessons by having Anna teach the poor boy who helps with chores on their farm how to answer a letter from his parents. Thus Farrar disrupts the exclusionary system of father teaching son to write (analyzed by Miller 246–53) by situating the daughter in the role of best pupil, and by allowing the daughter to teach the farm boy. However, at the same time that education is democratized, the class system is firmly reinforced, not only by the separation of the poor boy from other students but also by an increased emphasis on correctness for the working-class student, as compared to the more humanist instruction in letter-writing for the children of the privileged class (10–11).
In The Potential Woman (1881), Jennie Willing adapts this tradition of conduct book rhetoric for women to more radical ends—preaching and social reform. Jennie Willing (1834–1916) was schooled at home and began teaching when she was fifteen. In 1853 she married William C. Willing, a Methodist preacher, and she herself became a licensed Methodist preacher in 1877 (but all women’s licenses were revoked in 1880). Willing was a Christian socialist and life-long activist, organizing for suffrage, the WCTU (Women’s Christian Temperance Union), foreign missions, and many other causes (Lender). She wrote for missionary newspapers and edited the WCTU journal, the Signal. In 1874 she became a professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan University, and in 1895 she helped found the New York Evangelistic Training School and Settlement House (Agnew). She wrote seventeen books and hundreds of articles on missions, temperance, women’s rights, education for women, theology, raising children, poverty, and women’s role in the church (Brown). Willing’s accessible, conversational style in The Potential Woman is aimed at a broader audience than many nineteenth-century conduct books, as the chapter on “Bread-Winning” implies: This audience includes not only middle-class but also working women (although perhaps only those women who work before marriage)—and as the life and writings of Louisa May Alcott, for example, demonstrate, these classes shared quite fluid boundaries.

In The Potential Woman, Willing appropriates the conduct book as a genre in order to reform rather than maintain social values. As a consequence, it includes chapters on traditional conduct book subjects (such as home-making and nursing)—but expands some subjects, such as conversation (to preaching) and nursing (to scientific health and hygiene practices)—and includes new topics (such as “bread-winning”).

In the chapter on “Talking,” Willing begins with the radical proposition that men and women are equal and that education in speech needs to be reformed to reflect women’s status (11). Willing appends to this claim an analysis of the discriminatory linguistic roles assigned to men and women. “Women,” she observes, “like all who have not had a fair field, have fallen into diplomacy, carrying by favor points that they are not permitted to win by direct argument” (112). With a perceptive, parodic analogy, she critiques the expected role of woman as good listener: Women “say ‘Yes,’ and ‘No,’ and keep up a gentle jingle of the small bells of assent and applause, hoping to gain by pleasing what they are not allowed honorably to claim; their hearts, meanwhile, hungering for the mental food of excellent, ennobling speech” (112). This passage also calls into question the advice on conversation of the preceding fifty years of conduct book rhetoric for women. Women should not be sympathetic, agreeable, mainly good listeners, according to Willing, for it cramps their souls.
In her chapter on talking, then, Willing begins with the role of woman as conversationalist from the tradition of conduct book rhetoric (113) but expands that role considerably. Like Mary Astell and Hannah More, earlier educators who designed rhetoric curricula for girls, Willing argues that because they converse, women must be educated (113–14). She adds to this tradition the insistence that they must be well educated (if only by self-help texts) in grammar and that they must read the classics so that they have something to talk about (116). Reading for Willing also means writing: In the classical and Renaissance tradition, Willing wants her pupils to write down their summaries, selected quotations, and comments in a commonplace book (116). This rhetorical program, however traditional, is immediately Christianized: “to talk well, it is necessary that the motive prompting our speech be right and pure; and we can be sure of that only as it is cleansed by the blood of Christ” (117). “To talk well” is a translation of Quintilian’s rhetorical dictum that only the good speaker speaks well. Quintilian’s words are translated not only from another language but also to another forum—conversation. In addition, Willing’s Christian interpretation has roots in Augustine’s famous transformation of rhetoric in De Doctrina Christiana: For Augustine, as well as for Willing, only the good Christian can be a good speaker. And finally, this program is also feminized: Willing combines these principles from the masculine tradition with instructions from conduct book rhetoric for women not to gossip, but instead to speak so no one is caused pain (117–18).

Willing reminds us that “Christianity could not at once overturn social customs” (120), a rhetorical move that allows her to imply that the main purpose of Christianity was, in fact, to overturn and reform social customs, although not all at once. Willing is thus placing herself and her women who talk in an honored tradition, and she moves on to claim further privileges. Women must not only be educated but must also teach (121). And women who are called should also preach (118–27). The last third of her chapter, in fact, merges the defense of women’s preaching into her chapter on women’s conversation in a conduct book. Thus Willing seizes the conservative form of the conduct book and separates it from the separate spheres theory of women’s rhetoric that had been promoted in that genre. Instead, Willing fully claims for women a private and a public voice. Willing’s book thus demonstrates that these self-help books for women included debate on curriculum and that there is considerable variation of instruction advocated in the conduct book tradition of rhetoric.

In Mary Augusta Jordan’s Correct Writing and Speaking (1904), almost a textbook, we can see the fruition of this rhetorical school, as women enter public forums, but through their informal training in conversation and letter-writing. Mary Augusta Jordan (1855–1941) grew up in Ohio and Washington, DC, re-
ceived an AB in 1876 and an AM in 1878 from Vassar, an honorary doctorate from Smith College in 1910, and a PhD from Syracuse University in 1921. She was a librarian and tutor at Vassar for several years after she graduated and became a professor at Smith College in the English Department in 1884. Jordan was a challenging, opinionated, and charismatic teacher. She asked daily writing and weekly conferences of her students, helped to establish Smith’s curriculum as a women’s college, and favored high standards (helping, for example, to establish Greek in the Vassar curriculum). She edited literary works by Goldsmith, Burke, Emerson, and Milton and published essays on women’s education and a pamphlet against women’s suffrage (Perkins).

Aimed at women at home (in “The Woman’s Home Library” series), Jordan’s Correct Writing and Speaking covers both the topics of masculine college composition and speech and also the topics of conduct book rhetoric for women. “Accuracy and elegance in speaking and writing English are the hallmarks of good breeding” (3), she begins, betraying this union of masculine traditional rhetoric in the first half of the sentence, and conduct book rhetoric for women in the second. The reason for this union is that “women may be said to have come into entirely new duties and new responsibilities” in the area of “public speech” (66). Jordan is quite conscious of creating a new body of knowledge for women, and she even makes fun of Farrar’s earlier work, scornfully combining the titles to advise that “When all the lessons have been done, ... the scholars settle down to a type of social intercourse that has a medium vastly different from the King’s English or the ‘Young Lady’s Epistolary Guide’” (57).

To offer women the equivalent of a college composition and speech course, Jordan covers the history of the standardization of English pronunciation, recent scientific theories of linguistic change, the purposes of literary criticism and literature as a model for one’s own writing and speaking (which leads to a discussion of style), elocution, suggestions for reading in prose and poetry, an examination of the problems of “correct” spelling and handwriting, grammar, and advice on using the dictionary. She generously quotes the English canon (Chaucer, More, Shakespeare, Milton, Johnson, Tennyson).

But Jordan also offers very specialized advice for women that recalls the conduct book tradition. She commiserates with women for their lack of formal training in public speaking (66–68) and recommends rules of thumb for diction (183–89) that lead to a critique of women who allow their children to be raised by a bored nurse (191). Her discussion of handwriting leads her to mention the art of letter-writing, familiar from conduct books for women (204–06). Her suggestions for using the dictionary lead her to a section on conversation (232–37) that includes advice given by Sigourney and Farrar before her. In conversation, Jordan recommends saying what gives pleasure to hearers (236) and “fair
play”—no dominating the conversation, no gushing or exaggerating, no rambling, no enigmatic speech (232–35). When Jordan considers written English for women, she immediately turns to letter-writing (237–41), and like Farrar she defines the letter as “a pious duty, a gift” (238). She recommends exact, clear, explicit language, treating the letter as a conversation and making plentiful use of dictionaries and manuals of grammar while writing letters (238–41).

Throughout, Jordan emphasizes change and collaboration as the basis for written and spoken language—stylistic phrasing, she tells us, is “a medium of exchange in the world of expression,” for “a good expression was too good a thing for ownership” (53). She imagines public speaking is a union of the forces of the speaker and the audience, for “The successful speaker will use his art to enable him to discern the signs of the spiritual forces coming into action in his presence,” and “his aim will be to conserve them, to let as little as possible real energy go to waste” (69).

During the nineteenth century, then, women first appropriate the conduct book for women as a means of teaching each other how to speak and write. Because of the construction of separate spheres of men’s and women’s activities in the nineteenth century, the forms these women concentrate on at first are represented as “feminine”: reading aloud, conversation, letter-writing (see n. 12). But they also situate rhetoric for women in the context of nineteenth-century culture, especially in their republican, sentimental, self-help rationale for middle-class women’s education in rhetoric and composition. Indeed, they use this ideology to claim a larger and larger portion of the arts of rhetoric and composition, so that by mid century, they offer advice about continuing education in reading and composition, and by the end of the century, much of the men’s rhetoric, as well. By century’s end, in Mary Augusta Jordan’s Correct Writing and Speaking, it is hard to tell if we are reading a textbook for a men’s college class or a conduct book for the broader home audience. What seems most different from men’s rhetoric, other than the genres treated, is the consideration of reading and writing as social activities rather than individual activities—although, arguably, Jordan may here be more nostalgic for the earlier family-centered education for both sexes than reformist in promoting a women-oriented education. Still, if we compare the treatment of conversation by Sigourney or Farrar or Jordan to that by nineteenth-century Thomas De Quincey, for example, we can see that the American women emphasize the art of collaboration while the Englishman emphasizes individual performance. The Englishman focuses on competitive conflict, for the conversationalist “cannot display his own powers but through something of a corresponding power in the resistance of his antagonist” (279); “display” (279) of one’s intellect (“raising a continual succession of topics” (273), as in Burke’s “prodigious elasticity of . . . thinking” (270); and “timing,” the good
sense not to appropriate “too large a share of the conversation” (285). As we have seen, the nineteenth-century women theorists give advice on listening, acknowledging the audience, selecting topics to please the audience, being “agreeable.” Women’s rhetorical theory, then, is an important and neglected precursor for one strand of twentieth-century rhetoric and composition studies.

Thus, from now on when we consider the rhetoric of nineteenth-century United States, we need to consider not just academic textbooks but also the other venues for education then, especially conduct book rhetoric, and especially conduct book rhetoric by women. We need to see, as nineteenth-century writers and speakers did, that conversation and letter-writing are rhetorical activities just as much as public speaking and essay-writing. Conduct book rhetoric by women is one important step in the gradual democratization of rhetorical education that continues today.

Notes

1I wish to thank RR reviewers Susan Kates and Susan Miller for their expert aid in revision. In an earlier essay on Jordan, “Textbooks for New Audiences,” I treated her work as a textbook, which it may have been, since Jordan taught at Smith College.

2By rhetoric I mean “art of communication,” including advice on persuasion, public speaking, composition, conversation, and letter-writing. My definition thus stands very close to James Murphy’s recent one: “advice to others about future language use” (188).

3In this essay I consider only United States conduct book rhetoric for women. In nineteenth-century America and Britain, two strands of rhetorical theory addressed women: conduct books and elocution. On US connection to British models, see Donawerth, “Hannah More.” I will treat elocution and parlor entertainment in later publications.

4In a ground-breaking study, Albert Kitzhaber demonstrated that nineteenth-century college rhetoric (for men) reworked and merged the bellettristic rhetoric of Hugh Blair and the psychological rhetoric of George Campbell until social changes made that rhetoric no longer effective; eventually, experiments with combining new psychology and linguistics were overwhelmed by the demand for correctness following the 1892 Harvard Report, and rhetoric became a discipline devoted to mechanics of grammar, paragraphing, and forms of discourse—description, narration, exposition, and argumentation. James Berlin followed Kitzhaber, but divided nineteenth-century US writing instruction into four periods: early classical, Scottish psychological, Romantic (emphasizing Emerson), and current-traditional (emphasizing correctness). Although both mention textbook author Gertrude Buck, Kitzhaber and Berlin set the direction of scholarly exploration of nineteenth-century writing instruction by considering only college composition texts (almost all by men) or writings of famous men (like Emerson). In Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America, Nan Johnson has explored the synthetic nature of American rhetoric, which combines classical, psychological, and epistemological concepts in college composition textbooks; again, since she studies most frequently used textbooks, she actually describes men’s rhetoric; her study of women and nineteenth-century rhetoric will soon be published by Southern Illinois UP.

5This trend of considering college textbooks, and so mainly men’s texts, has continued in otherwise admirable studies by John C. Brereton and Sharon Crowley. Such preselection of materials, however, distorts conclusions. For example, although Brereton includes Luella Clay Carson’s “Com-
pilation of Standard Rules and Regulations Used by the English Department of the University of Oregon” (1898) in his sourcebook (one of only five women out of over fifty entries), he considers her list as a precursor for college handbooks, rather than realizing that women as normal and high school teachers had been compiling such lists for several decades before Carson. For such lists, see, for example, Lockwood; Keeler and Davis. See also Royster and Williams’ critique of histories of composition.

6See also the collections of essays on women’s rhetoric edited by Lunsford; and Wertheimer.

7In her essay on parlor rhetoric and in a recent paper at the 1999 Penn State Rhetoric Conference, Nan Johnson has also explored domestic venues for teaching speech and writing.

8On More’s influence on Sigourney, see Donawerth, “Hannah More, Lydia Sigourney, and the Creation of a Women’s Tradition of Rhetoric.”

9On the requirements of chastity, silence, and obedience from women in conduct books for women by men, see Hull; and Johnson, on “the equation . . . between feminine virtue and rhetorical reserve,” “Reigning” 238. Mary Wollstonecraft’s Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (1787) falls in this tradition.

10See Kolodny; Rouse on Margaret Fuller. See also Eliza Farrar, The Young Ladies’ Friend 258–60, on reading societies for girls.

11The concept of the agreeable in conversation extends back to Madeleine de Scudéry’s writings on salon conversation—see Donawerth, “As Becomes a Rational Woman.” Sigourney qualifies the goal of agreeable in conversation with moral purpose (191). The feminine role of listening is explored by Hannah More; see Donawerth, “Hannah More” 156.

12From the Renaissance on, although conversation was taught to the privileged of both sexes, like letter-writing it was associated with the “feminine” because of the rise of the salon (see Goldsmith; Lougee).

13Hallie Quinn Brown similarly urges her African-American students to seize control of themselves through self-mastery gained through elocution. See Donawerth, “Textbooks” 346.

14On conduct books and epistolary conventions, see also Miller, 222 and 236. In The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness (1870), Florence Hartley also sentimentalizes the art of letter-writing: “Though distance, absence, and circumstances may separate the holiest alliances of friendship, or those who are bound together by the still stronger ties of affection, yet the power of interchanging thoughts, words, feelings, and sentiments, through the medium of letters, adds a sweetness to the pain of separation, renovating to life, and adding to happiness” (139). I am grateful to Nan Johnson for her generous gift to me of a copy of Hartley’s manual.

15On Mary Augusta Jordan’s views of the relationship between language and identity, see Kates.

Works Cited


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