

A Response to Rebekah Hoy

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In her essay “Simultaneous Grammars of Domination,” Rebekah Hoy conducts a rhetorical investigation of Alfonsina Storni’s “Tú me quieres blanca” using analytical methods derived from feminist critical theory. Hoy examines how Storni is able to provide a voice of agency and validation for Latina women by utilizing the dominant cultural rhetoric specific to this community to reconstitute the role of its marginalized women. Adopting a feminist approach creates the potential for a broad range of focus; however, drawing on the work of Sonja K. Foss, Hoy specifies that she will use a “womanist critical perspective,” which acknowledges that gender and race are significant factors to consider in examining the “oppression of women of color” (73). Hoy’s decision to translate a text whose original conception and distribution were intended for the Spanish-speaking community adds a new dimension to the linguistic and rhetorical considerations of this text. Not only must Hoy consider the contextual factors and social dynamics surrounding the creation of Storni’s work but, as she readily acknowledges, she must contend with the subjective and often insufficient nature of individually translated words in communicating original meaning.

Conforming to the normative demands of feminist textual analysis, Hoy’s essay focuses on the “the ways in which gender and behavioral norms are constructed through language, as well as the ways in which these constructions may be challenged and overthrown” (79). It is significant that Hoy clarifies that her interpretation of this text is aimed at achieving the ends of a feminist rhetorical study. Hoy thus isolates her focus, choosing not to grapple with the potential complications of examining alternative interpretations of the text outside of their relevancy to her feminist analysis. This decision also limits the potential for counterargument and objections based on other theoretical models or methods of rhetorical study. Hoy not only conducts a thorough and insightful investigation of the text, but supplies the reader with biographical information about Storni that further contributes to the depth and complexity of her argument. Few would argue that Hoy fails to accomplish her goals as clearly defined in the introduction of the text, but perhaps her rhetorical investigation would have been equally insightful—if not more so—if she had chosen to analyze the text independently, apart from the methodology of feminist criticism.

In his article “Against Readings,” Mark Edmundson describes a “reading” as the critical analysis of a text based on a particular school of thought. He elaborates that a reading can be understood as “the application of an analytical vocabulary” that is primarily used “to describe and to judge a work of literary art” (1). Edmundson essentially argues that when a critic approaches a text with the intention of conducting a reading, he/she places limitations on his/her own ability to appreciate and fully experience that text. Hoy provides an exceptional feminist analysis of Storni’s poem; however, her goal of conducting a distinctly feminist rhetorical analysis appears to take precedence over the actual text she is investigating. She clearly states that “the text is useful in a

feminist rhetorical application,” suggesting that her focus is more on applying the methodology of feminist criticism in order to prove how this text is distinctly feminist than on examining the text as a unique and original work (79).

Hoy’s decision to conduct a feminist reading is particularly significant considering that her analysis is based on her English translation of an originally Spanish text. As previously mentioned, Hoy takes great care to acknowledge and discuss the difficulties of communicating original or intended meaning from a text that has been translated. Not only are issues such as connotative meaning and cultural allusions important to consider when determining the accuracy of translation, but also how Hoy’s feminist reading of the text may have unintentionally influenced her translation and subsequent investigation. She provides an example of the subjective nature of text translation in the Spanish word *blanca*. Speculating on the possible interpretations of this word, she suggests that in a literal sense *blanca* could be loosely translated and understood in the English language as white or the notion of “whiteness.” However, if considered metaphorically, the term could reflect “a possible lack of agency” or “a blank canvas not reflecting autonomy,” which according to Storni can be understood as a veiled or indirect reference to the oppression of women within the Latino community (74). The second translation proves problematic, as Hoy clearly states the significance she draws from this word is largely connected to “the purposes of our study” (75). This statement leaves some ambiguity as to whether Hoy’s translation is relevant as a general consideration of the text or only as a feminist reading. It ultimately raises the question: Can the meaning of a work in fact be accurately determined in direct relation to the critic’s intent or purpose in examining that work?

One of the general aims of Hoy’s essay is to exemplify how Storni’s text is a distinctly feminist work; however, classifying the poem as “feminist” places it within the limitations of this particular theory. As Hoy points out, Storni’s poem “anticipated other major feminist theory by at least four decades,” which not only acknowledges the progressive and original nature of her work but shows that Storni was in no way influenced by feminist theory because it simply did not exist (73). Drawing parallels between feminism and Storni’s poem, or even conducting a feminist analysis, is certainly a relevant application of Storni’s text; however, labeling her work as “a feminist poem” is not. Storni’s work should be evaluated and analyzed as a text in its own right, not as part of a larger theoretical model. Edmundson states that to conduct a reading is “to submit one text to the terms of another; to allow one text to interrogate another” (4). The word “submit” implies a notion of inferiority or deference. Storni’s text should not be molded to fit into the framework or limitations of feminist theory but examined as an independent body of knowledge.

Hoy’s decision to conduct a feminist analysis of Storni’s poem is not surprising, considering the influential and expansive nature of feminist critical theory and the gender consciousness so apparent in Storni’s text. Nonetheless, I believe that examining the poem outside of the limitations of this theoretical model would reveal new depth and insight in Storni’s work, however difficult this may prove to be. Scholars familiar with literary or rhetorical works pertaining to gender or sexuality have in a sense been conditioned to recognize the qualities or characteristics of a “feminist text.” Hoy chooses an ideal text through which to conduct a feminist rhetorical investigation and competently applies the methodology of this analytical model. The question Hoy and the reader must now seek to answer is, How is this poem rhetorically and individually significant apart from its distinction as a feminist text?

The possible approaches to analyzing and investigating this or any text are admittedly inexhaustible. In a personal attempt to answer the question posed above, I tried to analyze Storni's poem without conducting a "reading" or applying the methodology of a critical theory. I found it was nearly impossible to avoid unconsciously drawing upon portions of theories or critical frameworks to which I have been exposed. However, making a conscious effort to recognize and identify the influence of these theoretical models allowed me to see how deeply I was affected by them and to attempt to move beyond their realm of influence. No one is capable of understanding or analyzing a text without being inevitably influenced by their personal exposure to previous works and methodologies. But perhaps instead of allowing these past experiences to drive or determine the way we approach new works, we should make a conscious effort to breach the ideological boundaries of these experiences and follow Mark Edmundson's advice in seeking the individual and unique value of a text.

In attempting to conduct such a reading, it is necessary to understand that a text is not a singular entity or representative of one concept or idea but multifaceted, representing a conglomeration of ideas, perspectives, and concepts. No singular approach will suffice in exploring and negotiating the complexities of a text; but perhaps in seeking to understand the text as representative of multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives, we as readers and critics will not be limited by the boundaries of a "reading." As scholars, it may be necessary to recognize and sometimes apply the methodology of a particular school of thought, but it is also important to understand how moving outside of these readings can contribute to the exploration of a text. We can understand Storni's poem as exhibiting characteristics of a feminist text but also recognize its value as a representation of a specific culture, as a representation of an outsider's perception of the gender relations in a specific community, as a representation of a female's writing in the early 1900s. These are just a few factors and attributes of the poem to consider, some of which Hoy mentions in her essay and some that she does not. It is not necessary to attempt to examine all aspects of a text, but focusing too specifically on one consideration can cause us to miss new or unique insights the text has to offer and hinder our ability to develop new approaches to analyzing and understanding a rhetorical work.

Works Cited

- Edmundson, Mark. "Against Readings." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 55.33 (2009): 1–6. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 11 Jan. 2010.
- Hoy, Rebekah. "Simultaneous Grammars of Domination: A Feminist Rhetorical Study of Alfonsina Storni's 'Tú me quieres blanca.'" *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 6 (2009): 78–82. Print.