The Persuasion of “These Poor Informal Women”: The Problem of Rhetorical Training in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Measure for Measure*

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*I do perceive*
These poor informal women are no more
But instruments of some more mightier member
That sets them on.

--*Measure for Measure* (5.1.235-38)

Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency.

--Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*

One way to explore how early modern women engaged rhetoric is to seek out scant openings, opportunities, and exceptions that allowed for the presence of a feminine voice. Such a project uncovers the occasional defiant protestation, but more often, we encounter subtler, more discreet strategies and traces of agency sustainable within otherwise repressive structures. The early modern era is characterized as a time of broad changes in education, including attitudes toward rhetorical training. Some suggest that rather than being a time of women’s silence, the Renaissance presented women the opportunity to borrow from classical models and build their own rhetorical tradition (Donawerth 257). Others suggest that rhetorical training and performance took so many forms during the era that securing a unitary definition of the term “rhetoric” is unlikely (Bizzell and Herzberg 474), and, similarly, that the art of rhetoric enjoyed a looser interpretation, having evolved into something that was recognized as a part of everyday life, both “formal and public,

*EIRC* 33.1 (Summer 2007): 83-108
and informal and private” (Rebhorn 284). For some, such observations intimate a possibly more inclusive model of rhetorical education and practice, something that may have been ripe to emerge, if never broadly realized. Theoretical models of humanist learning indeed promised to be more egalitarian, and many privileged women received home schooling in the arts, modern languages, and music. However, Latin studies and formal rhetorical training were denied to all but a handful. In addition, the more public or openly defiant a woman’s speech, the more readily it is taken as evidence of corruption in the woman’s moral character, in particular, in her shrewishness or sexual wantonness. To explore how early modern women may have attempted to engage a changing rhetorical tradition, we must take into consideration these restrictions they faced, and in particular, their paramount rhetorical challenge, to construct a favorable ethos, or proof of their “good character” as speakers, when the act of speaking itself often branded women morally suspect.

In order to be persuasive to audiences, an early modern woman had to strike a careful compromise between the agency she assumed as a speaker and traditional roles which mandate that she remain silent. This rhetorical constraint contrasts sharply with the range of means available to the educated man of high social rank, whose privileged position and social mobility grant him a certain linguistic mobility to vary his rhetorical stances, something that is reinforced early on in boyhood lessons rich in rhetorical role-play. It could be argued that the technic quality of the privileged man’s training in rhetoric, based in rigorous, yet often playful training in tropes, schemes, and predefined topics, contrasts with the atechnic expectations of a woman’s persuasion: When she speaks, she reaffirms her position and reveals her true character, whether as submissive subject and loyal wife, or obstreperous shrew. The few examples we do encounter of women addressing public audiences center largely on reinforcing the good character of women, while at the same time, allaying fears about the prospect of women assuming positions of power. For example, even Elizabeth I sometimes sought to reassure anxious subjects by emphasizing less threatening, more traditional “family values,” and skillfully drawing from familial roles and the private realm to authorize herself to the public (Levin and Sullivan 277).

These complex and sometimes malleable links between gender, role-playing, and rhetorical persuasion have been explored and theorized in many contexts over the last few decades. Theorizing from feminist and queer perspectives investigates how understandings of gender and sex are propagated through acts of mimesis. Questions of female gender, according to Karen Newman, become questions of “the female dramatizable,”