Suzanne Bordelon:

A Feminist Legacy: The Rhetoric and Pedagogy of Gertrude Buck

(Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms Series, ed. Cheryl Glenn and Shirley Wilson Logan)

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Suzanne Bordelon's *A Feminist Legacy: The Rhetoric and Pedagogy of Gertrude Buck* offers readers a rich analysis of its subject's multifaceted accomplishments as a rhetorical theorist, teacher, academic administrator, political activist, and community organizer. Drawing upon extensive archival research, Bordelon aligns Buck's social conceptions of rhetoric and non-agonistic principles of argumentation with the theories of progressive educators and the traditions of white, middle-class women activists at the turn of the twentieth century. Detailed portraits of Buck's work in the classroom and on campus, within the suffrage movement, and with the Poughkeepsie Community Theatre reveal the powerful synergy of theory and practice in this remarkable woman's life. The book is comprised of an introduction and six chapters, and it includes over a dozen photographs of Buck, her family, and the women with whom she lived and worked.

For historians of rhetoric in the United States, Gertrude Buck (1871-1922) is one of most well-known women rhetoricians from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Published in 1996, JoAnn Campbell's *Toward a Feminist Rhetoric: The Writing of Gertrude Buck* makes available selections from many of Buck's important texts, including articles she published in *Educational Review*, *Modern Language Notes*, and *School Review*; excerpts from her full-length books on rhetoric and pedagogy; a selection of her plays and poems; and departmental reports and letters that she produced as part of her work in overseeing courses in writing and rhetoric in the English Department at Vassar College.[1] Scholars who have analyzed particular aspects of Buck's work – her treatment of metaphor, her organic theories of language, her psychological understanding of the composing process – have, as Bordelon observes, focused largely on how her work anticipates developments in rhetoric and the teaching of writing in the later decades of the twentieth century (p. 4).[2]

[1] JoAnn Campbell (ed.), *Toward a Feminist Rhetoric: The Writing of Gertrude Buck* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). Buck's work has also been reprinted in John C. Brereton (ed.), *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (eds.), *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Presss, 2001); and Jane Donawerth (ed.), *Rhetorical Theory by Women before 1900: An Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littefield, 2002).

[2] E.g., Barbara G. Vivian, "Gertrude Buck on Metaphor: Twentieth-Century Concepts in a Late Nineteenth-Century Dissertation", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 24:3-4 (1994), pp. 96-104; and Gerald P. Mulderig, "Gertrude Buck's Rhetorical Theory and Modern Composition Teaching", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 14:3-4 (1984), pp. 95-104.

A Feminist Legacy is, though, the first book-length analysis of Buck's place within histories of rhetorical theory and education, and Bordelon sets forth in her introduction (pp. 1-12) that her primary goals are to situate Buck's "ideas within the context of Progressive America and white, middle-class women's activism" and "to consider her broader political and social involvements and the dialectic between these activities and her approach to argumentation and pedagogy" (p. 2). Bordelon's introduction then positions *A Feminist Legacy* in relation to ongoing scholarly conversations. To be sure, Bordelon seeks to participate, along with scholars such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Katherine H. Adams, Karyn L. Hollis, Susan Kates, Nan Johnson, and others, in the work of regendering rhetorical history, a project that involves both recovering the work of women whose contributions have been excluded from history and investigating the forces – social, cultural, political, and economic, etc. – that have lead to their exclusion. Bordelon also purports to further historiographic conversations among feminist rhetoricians by being transparent about her methodologies and her archival work (p. 8) – a goal she achieves by devoting a paragraph to her three trips to Vassar, describing the other libraries whose resources were available to her, dividing her "Works Cited" into primary and secondary sources, and including box and folder numbers for archival documents.

Chapter One, "Buck's 'Social' View of Ethics and Rhetoric" (pp. 13-40), offers a brief biography of Buck (pp. 16-18) and then begins the process of clearly elucidating Buck's intertwined views on ethics and rhetoric. For Buck, moral reasoning proceeded not along Kantian lines, which demanded adherence to objective, impartial principles, but was instead predicated on an understanding of relationships and an acknowledgement of emotions. Ethical behavior thus involves an understanding of one's self as social and interdependent, and Buck viewed rhetoric as the "means by which people could develop equality in their relationships" (p. 20). Eschewing widely accepted theories of faculty psychology and associationalism, both of which lead to more mechanical instruction in writing with a focus on grammar and memorization, Buck embraced "functionalist psychology, which meant studying the mind or consciousness as a part of nature, focusing on how it helped the human organism live in its environment" (p. 22). The second half of the chapter (pp. 27-39) explains how these theories affected Buck's pedagogical work at Vassar College. In required courses on expository and argumentative writing and in textbooks she authored – *A Course in Expository Writing* (1899), with Elisabeth Woodbridge, and *A Course in Argumentative Writing* (1899) – Buck emphasized an inductive approach to learning, encouraged students to attend carefully to their own processes of perception, and allowed them to write for real audience on subjects of their own choosing. As might be expected, such an approach to teaching writing was time intensive, and Vassar's English teachers devoted hours each week to "interviews" with their students (pp. 37-38).

In her second chapter, "Progressive Education, Feminism, and the Detroit Normal Training School" (pp. 41-71), Bordelon continues her explanation of Buck's contributions to rhetorical theory, especially in connection with broader trends in progressive education at the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing upon the work of educational historian Lawrence A. Cremin, Bordelon outlines how teachers, researchers, and policymakers of the late nineteenth century began to challenge traditional methods of schooling that emphasized the rote learning of established facts and socializing children to take their places within established social structures.[3] Progressive educators,

[3] Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Knopf, 1961).

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including John Dewey, instead placed the child/learner and her/his intellectual energy at the center of the educational process. Rather than training students to subordinate their interests to authority, teachers need to help students coordinate their interests with the interests of others. Bordelon traces Buck's place within this educational movement through an analysis of *Organic Education: A Manual for Teachers in Primary and Secondary Grades*, which Buck coauthored in 1897 with Harriet M. Scott, the principal of Detroit Normal Training School and sister of Buck's mentor at the University of Michigan, Fred Newton Scott. Bordelon is right to note that women's work in normal schools and other non-elite institutions has for too long been overlooked, and the collaboration of Buck and Scott is a particularly advantageous site for exploring Buck's relationship to Progressive Era educational theories. Their text reflects their alignment with the 'culture epoch' theory that understood an individual's intellectual and moral growth as a sort fast-forward recapitulation of the history of civilization: from the primitive barbarism of ancient non-western peoples (infancy) to the supposedly enlightened cultures of Europe and America (adulthood) (pp. 50-53). They also, however, emphasized the importance of observing and responding to the individual's particular interests, and their pedagogical agenda focused on achieving Dewey's goal of "developing 'social individuals,' or individuals possessing a deeper understanding of the interconnected nature of society" who would "use this knowledge to improve society" (p. 43). This commitment to deepening social relationships and helping students understand themselves as part of a larger, organic whole, which is evident in Buck's work with Scott can, as Bordelon illustrates, also be tracked through Buck's dissertation study – *The Metaphor: A Study in the Psychology of Rhetoric* (1899) –and in articles including "The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory" (1900) and "Recent Tendencies in the Teaching of English Composition" (1901). It is in "The Present Status" that Buck rejected sophistic rhetoric with its agonistic focus on a rhetor's ability to persuade, or even manipulate, her/his audience. Instead, Buck favored a neo-Platonic perspective that viewed speakers and listeners as partners reasoning together to achieve an understanding of truth (pp. 67-70).

These first two chapters of *A Feminist Legacy* present complex rhetorical and educational theories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with grace and ease, and Bordelon makes it possible for readers to appreciate the most salient themes that emerge in Buck's body of work. The next three chapters offer more concrete portraits of how Buck enacted her rhetorical commitments through her efforts in three specific areas: her administrative partnership with Laura J. Wylie as they collaborated in their leadership of Vassar College's English Department; her involvement in the suffrage movement; and her efforts to establish the Poughkeepsie Community Theatre. In these chapters, Bordelon fully realizes her goal of considering Buck's "broader political and social involvements and the dialectic between these activities and her approach to argumentation and pedagogy" (p. 2).

Chapter Three, "The 'Advance' toward Democratic Administration" (pp. 72-92), opens with a brief biography of Wylie (pp. 74-76), with whom Buck shared her home, her life, and even her death. As Bordelon observes, Wylie's will stipulated that her ashes be interred in Buck's grave (p. 24). The chapter then turns to Wylie's essay, "What Can Be Done About It?" (1918), a response to a letter published in the *Atlantic Monthly* decrying the poor quality of essays produced by college students and the Sisyphean task facing teachers who would seek to help them improve their writing. Wylie's essay points out that poor writing often results from students facing 'unreal' writing tasks that have little connection to their own lives or interests and that overworked teachers often focus on superficial matters of style, instead of delving deeply into the substance of a student's work. Providing each student with opportunities to develop her/his own abilities and to become a pro-

ductive community member, though, works against the purported interests of American business and the pressures schools face to produce skilled workers as quickly and cheaply as possible (pp. 76-79). These tensions between pedagogical and pecuniary interests were ones that Wylie and Buck confronted as they collaboratively administered the English Department at Vassar. Bordelon then reconstructs Wylie's conception of the history of academic administration of Vassar – from the college's beginnings as familial enclave isolated from the wider community to a more bureaucratic institution with academic departments, whose chairs were considered managers, to the establishment of the first joint committee which allowed multiple constituencies to have input on key decisions facing the college. While Wylie celebrated the ways in which the college as a whole evolved toward an institution committed to principles of shared governance, she and Buck enacted longstanding practices of democratic, feminist leadership in the English Department (pp. 79-84). According to Bordelon, the studies of literature and rhetoric were not viewed as separate projects, and departmental reports were often collaboratively authored, with all members of the department having an opportunity to respond throughout the drafting process (p. 86). Perhaps most importantly, Wylie repeatedly pressed the college administration to recognize the labor-intensive nature of teaching English, and she argued that unless faculty members had the time and energy to participate in departmental decision-making, the idea of a democratic administration was moot (pp. 84-90). For Bordelon, Wylie and Buck's collaborative approach to academic leadership embodies the wider trends of white, middle-class women's activism in the Progressive Era and reflected the rhetorical commitments outlined in Buck's textbooks and other writings.

Chapter Four, "The Suffrage Movement and Buck's Approach to Argument and Debate" (pp. 93-122), similarly traces how nuances in Buck's rhetorical commitments can be limned through an exploration of her participation in the suffrage movement. Bordelon sets the stage by describing Vassar President James Monroe Taylor's commitment to creating an educational atmosphere for young women that was free of 'propaganda' and his decisions to prohibit suffrage speakers on campus and to forbid students from forming a suffrage club. While Buck and Wylie were both active participants in suffrage activities in the wider community, Bordelon speculates that "perhaps out of respect for Taylor and his policy, Buck did not seem to pursue actively suffrage issues on campus" (p. 100). *A Course in Argumentative Writing*, though, offered important preparation to young women, including those at Vassar, so that they could participate in public debates and assume an active role in civic life. Buck emphasized that "students should learn argumentation inductively from experience and practice rather than starting deductively from principles of formal logic"; that "the subject for argumentation should mirror the student's interests"; and "the connection between the logical structure of argumentation and its substructure [should be] based in psychology" (pp. 103-104). Similarly, *A Handbook of Argumentation and Debating* (1906), which Buck coauthored with Kristine Mann, encourages young women to debate issues of public importance, including suffrage. In this handbook, Buck and Mann offer exercises and resources that required debaters to engage fully with diverse opinions on a topic and reconsider their own longstanding assumptions, rather than simply to marshal logically compelling arguments to defeat an opponent. Bordelon's analyses and arguments here present one of the strongest challenges that has been mounted against Robert J. Connors' controversial argument that as women gained access to

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higher education in the nineteenth century, the focus of rhetorical educational shifted from oratory and civic debate to more private or personal forms of writing that served a variety of purposes.[4]

In Chapter Five, "The Little Theater Movement and Buck's Democratized View of Drama" (pp. 123-152), Bordelon explores Buck's important work in bringing her ideas about rhetoric and social activism to the study and production of drama and her commitment to community organizing. During the 1915-16 academic year, Buck took a leave of absence from Vassar and participated in George Pierce Baker's "47 Workshop" for playwrights. The following year she instituted a similar workshop at Vassar, and in 1920, she helped to organize the Poughkeepsie Community Theatre in an effort to bridge the divide between town and gown (p. 129). Part of the wider Little Theater Movement in which many white, middle-class women were involved at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Poughkeepsie Community Theatre sought to tap into the transformative power of drama and its potential to unite diverse constituencies in the production of art that expressed/explored a shared vision of community life. For Bordelon, Buck's involvement with the Poughkeepsie Community Theatre embodies her commitments to a social individualism and to an increasingly inclusive view of civic life in a democracy.

The final chapter ("Socially Conscious Women Teaching Writing", pp. 153-191) of *A Feminist Legacy* moves beyond Buck and examines the achievements of two students, Mary Yost and Helen Lockwood, who benefited from the tutelage of both Buck and Wylie. Yost, Vassar Class of 1904, began teaching at her alma mater in 1907. In 1913, she spent a year on fellowship at the University of Michigan, and then returned to Vassar to teach and write her dissertation, which she completed in 1917. She left Vassar for Stanford University in 1921, where she served as Dean of Women and Associate Professor of English until she retired in 1946 (pp. 155-157). Helen Lockwood, Vassar Class of 1912, began her teaching career in secondary schools and at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. She earned her doctorate degree from Columbia University and taught for two years at Wellesley College before returning to Vassar's English Department in 1927. She retired from Vassar in 1956 (pp. 172-174). According to Bordelon, both these women carried forward the work of Buck, Wylie, Scott, and other women educators who preceded them. Yost used Buck's textbooks in her two-semester elective course on argumentation and shared her commitment to argument "as a community-building endeavor, one that helped to create identification and understanding between the speaker and the audience" (p. 157). But while Buck focused on the psychological substructure of an argument's logic, Yost felt argumentation should be studied from a sociological perspective and understood as communication between members of a social group (pp. 157-162). Yost's communicative focus lead her to emphasize function over form in the classroom: an argument was deemed successful when it promoted cooperation and advanced the mutual interests of the group, rather than if logical fallacies were present or a rhetor complied with the conventions of a particular mode of discourse (pp. 165-166). Like Buck, Lockwood developed courses that pushed her students to view argumentation as a collaborative reasoning process. In her course on The Contemporary Press and Public Discussion, Lockwood asked students to compose briefs in which they were "to consider thoughtfully perspectives different from their own and to suspend their judgments before determining their positions" (p. 185). For Bordelon, Lockwood's briefs represented her attempt to "reconceptualize traditional approaches to argument, to move away from an emphasis on winning toward a more dialogic, inquiry-based process" (p. 185).

[4] Robert J. Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

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Implicit in the organization of Bordelon's very fine study is that Yost and Lockwood may represent Gertrude Buck's most significant feminist legacy, that is, the ways in which she empowered her students to revisit, refine, and revise her theories of rhetoric and pedagogical practices for their own purposes and to become mentors themselves for future generations of women. One of Bordelon's most significant feminist legacies may be the ways in which her study of Buck inspires historians of rhetoric to continue regendering received traditions. Bordelon's astute decision to emphasize Buck's intellectual collaborations with women like Harriet M. Scott, her professional and personal partnership with Laura Wylie, and her impact on women like Yost and Lockwood brings forward still more women who have yet to receive the full attention they deserve from scholars. While one might wish for more in-depth coverage of these women throughout Bordelon's work, the fact that they are introduced here will no doubt spur other scholars forward in the ongoing work of (re)constructing still more complex histories of rhetoric.

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