Chapter Nine

Women and the Latin Rhetorical Tradition

In The Dialogic Imagination, Mikhail Bakhtin notes that through much of Western history there has been a kind of linguistic dialectic between centripetal and centrifugal forces: the former tending toward a unitary “Cartesian,” “official” language; the latter toward diffused regional dialects and vernaculars. Underlying this linguistic struggle were imperialistic political movements—beginning with the Romans and continuing with the establishment of the modern nation-states—and regional resistances to them.

Throughout the Middle Ages and until the early modern period Latin was the language of the official culture. Vernaculars were unofficial, oral languages used in regional, rural, and domestic environments. Latin was employed in official institutions, such as the Church and the university. Walter J. Ong has noted that by the eighth century, c.e.,

Learned Latin, which moved only in artificially controlled channels through the male world of the schools, was no longer anyone’s mother tongue, in a quite literal sense. Although from the sixth or eighth century to the nineteenth Latin was spoken by millions of persons, it was never used by mothers cooing to their children. There was no Latin baby-talk or nursery language.2

Because they were barred from “the male world of the schools,” women were in short denied access to the language of official culture for a very long time. Indeed, Ong points out that until the nineteenth century learning
Latin meant entrance into the male-educated elite. Latin had become a “sex-linked language, a kind of badge of masculine identity” (250).

Under these circumstances learning Latin took on the characteristics of a puberty rite, a *rite de passage* or initiation rite; it involved isolation from the family, the achievement of identity in a totally male group (the school), the learning of a body of relatively abstract tribal lore inaccessible to those outside the group. . . . The Latin world was a man’s world. (251)

Women’s exclusion from the language of official culture does much to explain why so few of them were writing during this period. Until serious written literature was being composed in the vernaculars (that is, until the fourteenth century) women were simply denied access to the modes of literary production. The gradual weakening of the Latin rhetorical influence was a major reason that women began to write.

The framed-novelle and the novel (along with the romance) were the first forms in Western prose fiction that did not require training in classical rhetoric. Ong theorizes that the characteristic conversational style of the novel is one of women’s main contributions to the genre, deriving from their historical location in the unofficial world of oral, vernacular traditions. “Into the nineteenth century,” Ong notes,

...most literary style throughout the west was formed by academic rhetoric . . . with one notable exception: the literary style of female authors. Of the females who became published authors, as many did from the 1600s on, almost none had any such training. . . . Women writers were no doubt influenced by works they had read emanating from the Latin-based, academic, rhetorical tradition, but they themselves normally expressed themselves in a different, far less oratorical voice, which had a great deal to do with the rise of the novel.

Ong goes on to suggest that “a great gap in our understanding of the influence of women on literary genre and style could be bridged or closed through attention to the orality-literacy-print shift. . . . Certainly, non-rhetorical styles congenial to women writers helped make the novel what it is: more like a conversation than a platform performance” (159–60).

Women’s struggle with and eventual repudiation of the Latin rhetorical tradition is an important but overlooked chapter in the history of the emergence of novelistic discourse. Paratactic syntax; the use of the plain style in prose (and its spin-off, the familiar “dashaway” epistolary mode); and the ironic use of indirect discourse or reported speech—the most important constituent elements of a prosaic stylistics—were all pioneered by and identified with early modern women writers.