A Feminist Perspective on Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Clarification of Boundaries

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In this essay, Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory, as an exemplar of a mainstream rhetorical theory, is juxtaposed with that of Starhawk, as an exemplar of a feminist rhetorical theory, to suggest ways in which the patriarchal bias of many rhetorical theories limits our understanding of rhetoric. The essay begins with a formulation of Starhawk's rhetorical theory, which describes a rhetoric of inherent value and a rhetoric of domination. Starhawk's notions of the context for rhetoric, the nature of the rhetor, and the primary rhetorical forms are identified for each rhetorical system. Starhawk's notions then are contrasted with major rhetorical concepts developed by Burke. The essay concludes with suggestions for boundaries that circumscribe the rhetorical theories of both Burke and Starhawk.

Scholars of rhetoric, because they seek to discover how and to what degree our rhetoric constructs our worlds, are constantly reminded of the truism that theories provide particular perspectives on the data they organize and present. But recognition that a theory is simply one view of a phenomenon is not always translated into an examination of our theories to discover their particular biases. Those theories that have come to us from our discipline's origins in classical Greece and Rome or from theorists on whose work significant aspects of our discipline have been built seem particularly immune to such critical scrutiny. While scholars may quibble with their various features, rarely are the particular perspectives and consequent boundaries identified in such theories.

Efforts to question and challenge the limits of theories are critical to the understanding of rhetoric that our theories are able to generate. Theories possess ideological hegemony, delimiting the territory of study, suggesting what seems natural and reasonable, and thus controlling how we think about an area of study such as rhetoric. A few master theories may come to dominate a discipline without a clear understanding of the ways in which they limit our understanding. Only through

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challenging and questioning the placement of the boundaries of our theories will we be able to understand what kinds of pictures of rhetoric our theories present and to account for rhetorical activity that previously has not fit into existing rhetorical theories.

Feminist scholars are among those who have begun to question and challenge theoretical boundaries. Scholars working from a feminist perspective suggest that most theories of rhetoric are inadequate and misleading because they contain a patriarchal bias—they embody the experiences and concerns of the white male as standard, thereby distorting or omitting the experiences and concerns of women. A primary goal of feminist scholarship is to discover whether existing rhetorical theories account for women’s experiences and perspectives and to construct alternative theories that acknowledge and explain women’s practices in the construction and use of rhetoric. In this essay, we seek to contribute to the feminist project of questioning and revising theories of rhetoric by revealing some of the boundaries that limit our understanding of rhetoric because of the patriarchal bias that characterizes them.

For the purposes of this study, we have chosen Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical theory as an exemplar of mainstream rhetorical theory. We have selected Burke’s theory for use as our illustration because it is a master theory that functions virtually hegemonically in the study of rhetoric. Burke’s “influence and reputation,” Rueckert asserts, are “massive,” an evaluation supported by the many graduate seminars in communication departments devoted to the study of Burke’s theory; the creation of The Kenneth Burke Society, with the newsletters and conferences it generates for the study of his work; and in the labeling of Burke’s works, without a hint of irony, as “the sacred texts.” Burke’s influence on rhetorical scholarship also can be seen in his domination of critical practice. Rueckert reports that there “are probably more usable formulas in Burke than in any other modern critic,” an assertion borne out in the fact that almost 200 critical essays in which Burkean critical methods are employed have been published in communication journals alone.

We have chosen to explore the boundaries that delimit Burke’s theory and that derive from his patriarchal bias by placing Burke’s theory and an alternative rhetorical theory, formulated from a feminist perspective, in dialectical tension. In other words, we are seeking to discover the boundaries of Burke’s theory by using as a lens a very different rhetorical theory, using the one to ferret out what is concealed and revealed, what is highlighted and hidden, in the other. The feminist rhetorical theory we juxtapose to Burke’s is that formulated by Starhawk, a feminist writer; activist; and practitioner of Wicca/Witchcraft, or the Craft, which for her means making “a commitment to the Goddess, to the protection, preservation, nurturing, and fostering of the great powers of life as they emerge in every being.” We have selected Starhawk’s theory as a counterpoint to Burke’s because it clearly embodies a
feminist perspective. It is a system that values and highlights women-centered communicative practices, and its roots lie in "the woman-valuing, matristic, Goddess-centered cultures that underlie the beginnings of civilization."^9

Clearly, Starhawk's theory is not representative of all feminist theories, nor do we believe her theory is superior to others in the contradiction it provides to Burke. Many feminist theories could have been selected in place of Starhawk’s for the purposes of our demonstration—those of, say, Daly,^10 Noddings,^11 or Gilligan. We selected Starhawk’s theory largely because it is a more comprehensive, elaborated system than are, for example, the theories of Gilligan or Noddings. It also addresses the role of men in a non-patriarchal system more explicitly than does Daly’s theory, a concern that allows a more parallel comparison with Burke’s theory, which also purports to be relevant to the rhetorical practices of both genders.

We have chosen Starhawk’s theory over other possible feminist theories for yet another reason: Both Starhawk’s and Burke’s systems acknowledge and, to some degree, even feature the phenomena of witchcraft and magic, providing a means for identification between the two that would be missing from a juxtaposition of Burke’s theory with that of some other feminists. Witchcraft and magic are central for Starhawk, of course, as part of the practice of Witchcraft; similarly, Blankenship has argued that ‘‘magic’ and ‘mystery’ can be considered synoptic terms around (under) which we can place much of Kenneth Burke’s work. . . .”^13 As Burke himself explains, “At first glance we may seem to be straining the conception of rhetoric to the breaking point, when including even a treatise on primitive witchcraft within its range. But look again.”^14 Burke alerts students of rhetoric to “the ingredient of rhetoric lurking in such . . . terms as ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’. . . .”^15

A question likely to be raised by our selection of Starhawk’s theory as our point of entry for a challenge to Burke concerns the difference in stature between the two. Few feminist theorists—including Starhawk—can compete with the prolific output of Burke and with the scope of the theory he has formulated. A privileging of output in our search for a feminist theorist comparable to Burke, however, would require a long wait before our challenge could be mounted. Women simply have not had the opportunities to speak and write that men have had. In addition, the ideas of women have not been treated with the same degree of seriousness as are the ideas of men. Women’s ideas are not typically considered theories; the theory label tends to be given to the work men do but not to the work of women. We suggest, in contrast to such views, that Starhawk and Burke are of comparable stature in their presentation of theories that describe various rhetorical practices in defensible and stimulating ways.

We begin our essay by summarizing the rhetorical theory we have formulated from Starhawk’s works. Our data were her three books, The
Spiral Dance, Dreaming the Dark, and Truth or Dare, and a workshop she conducted in which we participated. Next, we contrast Starhawk’s constructs with major rhetorical concepts developed by Burke—identification, the nature of rhetoric, identification and division, action and motion, hierarchy, mystery, pollution-purification-redemption, and the nature of the human being. We conclude by suggesting some boundaries that delimit both Burke’s and Starhawk’s theories that emerged as a result of the contrast between them.

STARHAWK’S RHETORICAL THEORY

We suggest that Starhawk’s rhetorical theory describes two types of rhetoric or two rhetorical systems—a rhetoric of inherent value and a rhetoric of domination. For each, Starhawk offers a description of the context for the rhetoric, the nature of the rhetor, and the primary rhetorical strategies it features.

Rhetoric of Inherent Value

Starhawk’s rhetoric of inherent value is rooted in a natural, “life-loving culture” that “would recognize the inherent value of each person and of the plant, animal, and elemental life that makes up the earth’s living body.” Such a system, she asserts, “would offer real protection, encourage free expression, and reestablish an ecological balance.”

At the core of Starhawk’s system of inherent value is the notion of the Goddess, the immanent life force within all beings. She represents the divine embodied in nature and human beings: “the cosmos is the living body of the Goddess, in whose being we all partake, who encompasses us and is immanent within us.” In the rhetoric of inherent value, rooted in Starhawk’s conception of the Goddess, interconnection is established as the context for the rhetoric, the nature of the rhetor is described as of immanent value, and three rhetorical strategies are featured—mystery, ritual, and power-with.

Context of Rhetoric: Interconnection. A rhetoric of inherent value occurs within a context of interconnection. In such a context, in which all beings exist in relationship, no “power is entirely separate from our own power, no being is entirely separate from our own being.” This interconnection exists not only among humans but also between humans and the biological and geological life forms of the planet. Perceived separateness from others and from the Goddess, then, is not real and is the result simply of a lack of awareness by individuals of the Goddess within that constitutes the source of connection.

No rhetorical act can be outside of the context of interconnection in that all beings are continually communicating on numerous dimensions and levels. This context of interconnection produces rhetoric that is inevitable, unceasing, and directed, whether intended or not, to multiple and complex audiences. Consequently, the rhetoric produced by one
being affects all others: "The felling of tropical forests disturbs our weather patterns and destroys the songbirds of the North. No less does the torture of a prisoner in El Salvador or the crying of a homeless child in downtown San Francisco disturb our well-being."^24

Nature of the Rhetor: Immanent Value. Starhawk's view of the essential nature of the rhetor derives from her notion of immanent value, the idea that every "being is sacred" and possesses inherent value, one that does not have to be "earned, acquired, or proven; it is inherent in our existence."^25 Great achievements mean nothing within the framework of immanent value, for immanent value is based on confidence in the simple principle that "your life is worth something... You need only be what you are."^26 The type of power that characterizes immanent value is power-from-within. Power-from-within traditionally has been called by terms such as spirit or God, but Starhawk finds the terms Goddess or immanence to describe it more accurately. This power is rooted in the individual's access to the Goddess, an access that empowers and energizes. The root meaning of power, podere, is close to Starhawk's meaning for power-from-within: "to be able."^27 Rhetors need do nothing to establish their credibility in Starhawk's system; rhetors are inherently credible by virtue of their immanent value.

Rhetorical Strategies: Mystery, Power-With, and Ritual. A rhetoric of inherent value is maintained through three primary strategies: mystery, power-with, and ritual. The first, mystery, is constituted both in the unlimited, undefinable, diverse, cosmic Goddess and in her manifestation in ordinary life processes, in "what is most common to us all: blood, breath, heartbeat, the sprouting of seed..."^28 Mystery thus constitutes the paradox of extraordinary and ordinary, unknown and known. Mystery facilitates communication among rhetors by pointing to and using as the content of the rhetoric two mysterious, wondrous sources of commonality—the cosmic, unlimited Goddess within all beings and the concrete, material experiences of daily life. Mystery enables rhetors to see their connection with each other and the ways in which they partake of common substance.

A second means Starhawk suggests for maintaining a rhetoric of inherent value is power-with, or social power, the influence wielded among equals in order to empower them. It is "the power of a strong individual in a group of equals, the power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to..."^29 Power-with is always revocable because it is based on others' willingness to respond. Group members do not automatically adopt or obey the ideas of other members; their ideas are followed out of respect for them as unique people and because their ideas feel right and focus the will of the group. Power-with, then, "affirms, shapes, and guides a collective decision—but it cannot enforce its will on the group or push it in a direction contrary to community desires."^30

A third rhetorical strategy for the maintenance of inherent value is ritual. Ritual is an energy created by a group or individuals that is
used to trigger altered states of awareness..." Rituals are rooted in magic, "the art of changing consciousness at will" or "union with the Goddess Self." Rituals may be used in formal settings such as the fall equinox, Yule, and the full moon; they also may be used in more ordinary settings for the celebration of birthdays or relationship commitments, the creation of a space in which to work, the consecration of a tool, and the sensing of group energy.

Rituals begin with the rhetorical creation of a sacred space, the "casting of a circle," which establishes a temple in the space in which the participants convene. As a result of the casting of the circle, the Goddess is considered to be physically present within the circle and the bodies of the participants; she has been "invoked or awakened." Next, power is raised through various rhetorical forms, designed to generate new insights, including chanting, singing, exchanging gifts, lighting candles, decorating space, guided meditations, exchanging vows, or collective storytelling. At the conclusion of the ritual, food and drink are shared and the participants socialize before "the powers invoked are dismissed, the circle is opened, and a formal return to ordinary consciousness is made."

Rituals maintain inherent value because they create rhetorically a "free space" in which individuals are recognized as equals. Rituals take place in and foster structures of equality in expression and energy in that "each person's face can be seen, each person's voice can be heard and valued."

Rhetoric of Domination

The rhetoric of a life-affirming culture derived from Starhawk's theory is contrasted with a rhetoric of domination—the current state of patriarchy, an unnatural state that oppresses and destroys the inherent value of beings. In patriarchy, the context for rhetorical activity is hierarchy, the rhetors assume a variety of self-hater roles, and four rhetorical activities are featured: compliance, rebellion, withdrawal, and manipulation. A rhetoric of domination also includes a potential strategy for its transformation into a rhetoric of affirmation—empowered action.

Context of Rhetoric: Hierarchy. For Starhawk, the terms, patriarchy, hierarchy, and domination, are synonymous, and all characterize the context for a rhetoric of domination. Critical to the functioning of a patriarchy is a hierarchical structure that controls and oppresses the sacred life of all beings. Hierarchy is rooted in the belief in the need to acquire and maintain separation from and mastery over individuals and nature, a belief manifest in the rhetoric in the notion that "some people are less valuable than others."

Nature of the Rhetor: Self-Hate. Starhawk's view of the rhetor in a rhetoric of domination is closely bound to the hierarchical nature of its context. Patriarchy constantly attacks individuals' sense of self-worth,
concealing the recognition that all persons possess immanent value because they embody the sacred. In a patriarchal system, where the worth of the self is not a given, it must be earned, achieved, or granted.

The devaluation of the rhetor in a system of domination occurs regardless of the nature of the particular hierarchy and the inspirations, teachings, or values on which it is based. "It doesn't matter what guru we follow," Starhawk explains, because the structure of hierarchy itself reinforces the idea that some people are inherently more worthy than others. The "moment anyone's life is subject to rating on a scale of worth," everyone is devalued, for unless each being has an inherent value, no one does.

The disregard and destruction of the self in a system of domination is manifest in self-hater roles: "The self-hater is the inner representation" of a system of domination—"the structure in the psyche that perpetuates domination." Each form of self-hate involves an obsession with particular issues and a particular view of the self and the world. The Conqueror treats the self and others as enemies to be feared, demonized, and destroyed. The Orderer imposes rigid control on the self and the environment and promises that value will be gained if enough control is exerted. The Master of Servants is a caretaking role, but it offers a hierarchical model for sharing and caring, one in which rhetors are dependent on being needed for their sense of value or are dependent on others to meet their needs. The Censor role is one of silence and isolation; rhetors whose self-hate assumes this form do not speak their truths because of their desire to win the approval of others. In the role of the Judge, rhetors judge others and themselves, ascribing or withholding value according to how they measure up to particular standards—standards that perpetuate the positions of superiority and inferiority.

The type of power that characterizes self-hating rhetors is power-over. Power-over derives from a consciousness of estrangement—from a view of "the world as an object, made up of many separate, isolated parts that have no intrinsic life, awareness, or value." It is a power in which beings are "valued not for what they inherently are but only in relation to some outside standard."

Rhetorical Strategies: Compliance, Rebellion, Withdrawal, and Manipulation. A rhetoric of domination is characterized by four primary strategies that "confirm the power of the system... rather than challenge the reality the system has created." Compliance involves acquiescence to the requirements of the system, even to the point of participating in punishment of the self. Rebellion is characterized by refusal and challenge, but the system simply "channels rebellion into modes that it is prepared to control, into acts that harm the rebel, not the system." In withdrawal, individuals' skills, perceptions, and energy are not given to the system, and rhetors are cut off from information and observations vital to their survival. In manipulation, individuals are deluded into feeling in control because they believe they really are not complying
with the system. They still accept the system’s terms, unspoken rules, and values, however, as they deny or conceal their true feelings and perceptions.49

Starhawk suggests that an alternative to the strategies of compliance, rebellion, withdrawal, and manipulation is empowered action, which has the capacity to transform a rhetoric of domination. Empowered action is action “that does not accept the terms of the system”50—that refuses “to be negated by systems of control.”51 Empowered action also is a part of the rhetoric of immanent value, where it functions to affirm that value. In a rhetoric of domination, however, empowered action is used to transform that rhetoric into one of immanent value.

Empowered action involves acts both of resistance and creation—acts that refuse compliance with the destructive rhetoric and those that create alternatives to it. Empowered action in the form of resistance involves a refusal to comply. It is the rhetoric that results from having “a ‘bad attitude,’ one that questions authority.”52 To resist is to speak the unspeakable, which involves breaking the silence, telling the stories of oppression, recreating history, articulating marginalized experiences, and allowing secrets to become common knowledge. At the heart of speaking the unspeakable is the notion of responsibility, of “being responsible to our own power.”53 The person who has the power to change a situation is responsible for it, Starhawk asserts. “If the president could allocate money to AIDS research and doesn’t, he is responsible for thousands of deaths.”54

At the same time that a rhetoric of domination is being resisted, a new rhetoric that challenges power-over must be formulated in the strategy of empowered action. The formulation of this new rhetoric involves the creation of spaces and situations that, by their inherent structure and function, embody a different reality: “We need to envision the society we want to create so that we can embody aspects of it in each act we take to challenge domination.”55 Empowered action, then, creates a vision that serves as a tool to resist domination.

Empowered action occurs in community. Change does not occur in isolation, Starhawk explains; to resist domination, “refuse isolation.” To “connect,” to “build bonds of caring and community,” and to “create structures of support that can nurture us and renew our strength, are powerful acts of resistance.”56 The importance of community for empowered action lies in the power of shared experiences, used as the ground for theory and practice.

STARHAWK’S CHALLENGE TO BURKE’S RHETORICAL THEORY

Many of the constructs that constitute Starhawk’s rhetorical theory suggest very different rhetorical processes and assumptions from those formulated by Kenneth Burke. In this section, we highlight some of the
primary differences between the two theories and suggest the challenge Starhawk's theory offers to Burke's (and many commonly accepted) explanations of rhetoric. Our discussion is organized around those notions of Burke's theory that seem most subjected to challenge by those of Starhawk: the nature of rhetoric, identification and division, action and motion, hierarchy, mystery, the pollution-purification-redemption ritual, and the definition of the human being.

Nature of Rhetoric

Burke defines rhetoric as "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents." The scope he sees for rhetoric is broad: it includes written and spoken discourse and less traditional forms of discourse such as sales promotion, courtship, etiquette, education, and works of art. The defining feature of rhetoric, whatever the form it assumes, is "the art of persuasion, or a study of the means of persuasion available for any given situation." Although Starhawk does not explicitly formulate a definition of rhetoric, hers probably would involve the use of symbols to maintain connection with and to value all beings. Its scope would include all that Burke's definition does but would go beyond it to include communication among all life forms, human or otherwise, in the earth and the larger cosmos.

Starhawk would agree with Burke that, in a rhetoric of domination, rhetoric is used primarily to attempt to change others' perspectives—to persuade. The distinguishing feature of a rhetoric of inherent value, however, is not its persuasive capability but its affirmation of immanent value. Because she sees immanent value as rooted in a basic life force—the Goddess—that underlies and unifies all beings, Starhawk would see rhetoric as synonymous with interconnection. In interconnection, the function of rhetoric cannot be to change viewpoints since all life already is unified and identified. Instead, rhetoric is designed to affirm and bring recognition to what is already shared.

Identification and Division

With his notion of identification, Burke suggests that individuals form their identities in relation to or become consubstantial with various substances—physical objects, occupations, other people, activities, beliefs, values, and the like. Consubstantiality functions as the basis for Burke's notion of communication as persuasion; identification, consubstantiality, and persuasion are synonymous. As he explains, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his." Burke suggests that division motivates individuals to seek identification with others in order to bridge the condition of estrangement inherent in the human condition.
Starhawk's theory incorporates a different view of identification. Burke's notion of identification is replaced with *interconnection*, which is synonymous with her notion of immanent value and the Goddess. Instead of experiencing division through each individual's separate body, Starhawk suggests that humans are interconnected with other humans; the basis of this connection is that all life forms embody the Goddess. Furthermore, life forms, in Starhawk's theory, are not identified with the Goddess but rather constitute the Goddess in various forms. Burke's notion of division, which creates the drive toward identification, does not exist in the rhetorical theory generated by Starhawk's perspective. For her, identification or interconnection is the starting point—the initial and primary condition of life—not a desired end point, to be reached through rhetorical activity.

**Action and Motion**

A key distinction in Burke's rhetorical theory is that between action and motion. The animal, biological aspect of the human being, concerned with bodily processes such as "growth, respiration, digestion, and the like," corresponds to motion, the realm of the non-symbolic. In contrast, the neurological aspect of the human being, the ability to acquire a symbol system, corresponds to the realm of action. Starhawk, in contrast, refuses to separate the human and animal worlds. In her complex and interconnected system, human and animal, individual and earthly energies, are interconnected.

Burke's conditions for action also are challenged by the alternate system provided by Starhawk. He cites two conditions for action: freedom, which includes the requirement of adequate knowledge of an act's consequences, and the purpose or will of the rhetor. An analysis of these requirements from Starhawk's perspective suggests that Burke's conditions cannot be met in a rhetoric of domination. Because the authority embedded in such rhetoric becomes embedded in individuals' psyches, their decisions are not truly free within those systems. Adequate knowledge of an act's consequences is irrelevant in a rhetoric of domination because all acts in such a system produce the same consequences—obedience and self-hate. Since these are not consequences human beings aware of their inherent value willingly would choose, such knowledge does not produce freedom of choice.

Although Starhawk does not separate action and motion and thus has no need for criteria by which to distinguish them, she does posit a criterion by which to distinguish beings that most fully express their co-essence with the Goddess and their immanent value from those that do not: responsibility. Once individuals are aware of their power, available through their connection to the ultimate life force, they are held responsible for using it for transformation of a rhetoric of domination.
Hierarchy

A central feature of Burke's rhetorical system is the notion of hierarchy, the result of the development of the concept of the negative in language. For Burke, a graded, value-charged structure, in terms of which people, acts, objects, and ideas are ranked, is inevitable. Starhawk would agree with Burke that hierarchy is the structure of a rhetoric of domination, but she sees the essential structure of an alternative system of inherent value as a web or a circle. In this structure, power is diffused in an interconnectedness among all human beings, who are viewed as equal because of their immanent value.

Starhawk's theory provides a challenge to Burke's description of the motivating function of hierarchies, as well. Burke suggests that the hierarchic principle motivates individuals to action so that they seek, through rhetoric, to move to ever higher positions on the hierarchy. Starhawk would suggest, in contrast, that hierarchy motivates the adoption of the self-hater roles of the Conqueror, Orderer, Master of Servants, Censor, and Judge. In contrast, circular or web structures foster and affirm immanent value.

The nature of the top or motivating force of the hierarchy also differs in Starhawk's and Burke's theories. For Burke, it is a conception of the ideal or perfection, a notion based on Aristotle's concept of entelechy, whereby each being aims at the perfection natural to its kind. In Starhawk's view, such a description of perfection would fit only a rhetoric of domination that ranks and rates by external criteria. In a rhetoric of inherent value, to be incomplete or inadequate is impossible. All beings already have achieved perfection in that they embody the Goddess and thus have immanent value. A drive for perfection, if there is one, is simply a drive to realize and manifest one's perfection more fully.

Mystery

Mystery, in Burke's rhetorical theory, is closely linked to his notion of hierarchy. Mystery performs two important functions, Burke suggests, in a hierarchical system. It encourages the maintenance and preservation of the hierarchy because it encourages obedience and subjection. Once individuals accept mystery, they "will be better minded to take orders without question from those persons" they consider authorities. Mystery also functions to enable members of a hierarchy to communicate with and persuade each other. It allows for the transcendence of differences among individuals by hiding the differences individuals ordinarily would see among themselves; as mystery cloaks differences, individuals identify with those they see above them on the hierarchy and are able to communicate with them.

Mystery, for Starhawk, is a very different notion from that formulated by Burke. Starhawk sees mystery as powers that are uncharted and untamed—rooted in the unknowable and limitless Goddess—as well
as the experiences of the ordinary and the common in life, including the body, hunger, and nature. Mystery does not hide differences, as it does in Burke's theory; rather, it reveals commonalities by allowing individuals to tap into the life force they all share.

Pollution-Purification-Redemption

A major function Burke sees for rhetoric is its capacity to effect rebirth or a new identity for individuals. This rhetoric of rebirth involves movement through the three stages of pollution, an initial state of guilt or tension; purification, cleansing or catharsis; and redemption, a state of cleanliness in which a new identity—physical, spiritual, or psychological—is achieved.

Guilt, or the initial state of pollution, arises inevitably and in principle from the nature of the hierarchy, according to Burke. Through the capacity of language to construct the negative, various kinds of hierarchical orders are created containing hundreds of commandments. No person is capable of obeying all of the commandments, so failure or disobedience is inevitable; the consequence is guilt. Starhawk would agree with Burke that, in a hierarchical structure, guilt is a consequence; so, too, is self-hate. But because hierarchy is not inevitable for Starhawk, neither is guilt. Instead, the inevitable results of a circular or web-like structure are affirmation of value and responsibility.

Starhawk's and Burke's theories also differ in their treatment of the notion of purification. Two primary means of purification for Burke are victimage, the transference of guilt to someone or something outside of the rhetor, and mortification, self-inflicted punishment designed to slay characteristics, impulses, or aspects of the self. Starhawk's view, in contrast, is that, regardless of the actions individuals use to slough off the pollution of the patriarchy, if those actions are framed in the terms of the patriarchy, they are doomed to achieve a state of self-hate. The self-hater roles constitute mortification—they deny the true self of immanent value. They do not allow the rhetor to reject or transform the system of domination, however, and thus do not produce redemption.

Starhawk's description of an alternative rhetoric suggests that redemption or rebirth is possible only through rhetoric that allows for awakening to one's own immanent value. The redemption that occurs, however, is not a redemption simply of the individual; it occurs in tandem with a redemption or transformation of a rhetoric of domination. The acts taken by individuals to change themselves affect the rhetorical system, and those systemic changes, in which the sacredness of the self begins to be affirmed, then affect the individual. In Starhawk's description of an alternative rhetoric of inherent value, mortification and victimage have no place. Mortification is not possible when the individual self is seen as possessing inherent value and as a manifestation of the Goddess. To punish the self is to punish the Goddess and to
offend the sacred life she represents. To transfer guilt represents a similar kind of delusion. Other beings are the Goddess personified, and to transfer some form of pollution to them is to assign a false quality to the Goddess.

Starhawk’s notion of responsibility also makes the notion of victimage irrelevant in her rhetoric of inherent value. Individuals are responsible for engaging in the acts necessary to restore immanent value to all beings; that burden cannot be transferred elsewhere and, even if it could, its transference would not bring release from responsibility. Further, to suggest that individuals do not have the power necessary to enact their responsibility is to denigrate the Goddess and the power-from-within she represents and to which each individual has access.

Nature of the Human Being

Burke has formulated a definition of the human being that summarizes many of the major concepts of his rhetorical theory:

BEING BODIES THAT LEARN LANGUAGE
THEREBY BECOMING WORLDLINGS
HUMANS ARE THE
SYMBOL-MAKING, SYMBOL-USING, SYMBOL-MISUSING ANIMAL
INVENTOR OF THE NEGATIVE
SEPARATED FROM OUR NATURAL CONDITION
BY INSTRUMENTS OF OUR OWN MAKING
GOADED BY THE SPIRIT OF HIERARCHY
ACQUIRING FOREKNOWLEDGE OF DEATH
AND ROTTEN WITH PERFECTION. 74

Burke’s concepts of action and motion, the negative, hierarchy, perfection, and guilt are summarized in this definition. The invention of the negative is the means through which hierarchies are created. The notion that humans are separated from their natural condition by instruments of their own making points to Burke’s notions of motion and action. Nature is the world of biology, transcended by humans through language and all the tools invented with language; through language, humans enter the world of the symbolic. His definition also includes the notion that individuals drive toward the perfection embodied at the top of the hierarchy.

The major components that can be seen to comprise Starhawk’s rhetorical theory also can be summarized in a definition of the human being that might look something like this:

BEING SELVES WHO PARTAKE OF THE GODDESS
HUMANS ARE
CO-ESSENTIAL WITH THEIR NATURAL CONDITION
OF IMMANENT VALUE AND INTERCONNECTION
USERS OF MYSTERY, RITUAL, AND POWER-WITH
TO MAINTAIN
A RHETORIC OF INHERENT VALUE.
This definition summarizes Starhawk's primary notions of a rhetoric of inherent value. It incorporates her view of humans as embodying the Goddess and features her perspective on the relationship among humans and between humans and other life forms: the natural condition is one that affirms the immanent value and interconnection of all beings. It features mystery, derived both from the Goddess and the natural processes of life; ritual, used to trigger alternate states of awareness; and power-with, or social power, as the means by which a rhetoric of inherent value is maintained.

BOUNDARIES OF BURKE'S RHETORICAL THEORY

Starhawk's feminist rhetorical theory, we discovered, provides alternative perspectives to many of Burke's rhetorical notions. As a result of our juxtaposition of the theories of Starhawk and Burke, we now are able to clarify some of the boundaries of Burke's rhetorical theory that limit—or ought to limit—the scope of its relevance and application.

One such perimeter of Burke's theory is that it describes the processes that characterize a rhetoric of domination—hierarchical, authoritarian systems that employ power-over. Burke's description of rhetoric, then, conforms to and is accurate for hierarchical situations characterized by the striving to get ahead through establishment of power-over. But his theory is limited in scope in that it does not similarly explain another type of rhetoric—a rhetoric of inherent value. Burke's hierarchical rhetoric suggests a second way in which Burke's theory should be recognized as limited. It implicitly assumes a particular kind of rhetor—one who employs a particular kind of power. The rhetor is viewed as someone who seeks power over others by striving to gain higher status on various hierarchies. Burke, in fact, sees the desire to achieve such status as a basic motive for communication.

Starhawk's theory foregrounds yet another boundary in place around Burke's theory—the ethical system it encompasses. In his ethical perspective, humans are not held particularly accountable for their rhetorical activity, for Burke sees rhetoric that creates division simply as a mistake or a misuse of symbols. Burke's notion of victimage, upon which he makes no explicit ethical judgment, offers yet another means of escape from accountability for the rhetor. Such escape is not possible in Starhawk's ethical system, for in her theory, rhetors are responsible for their rhetoric and the consequences it produces. Ethics consists of an inner sense that each act brings about consequences for everyone since all beings are linked in the same social fabric.

A fourth restriction we propose on Burke's theory concerns the epistemology that lies at its base. Burke's theory privileges a particular kind of knowing—abstract, distanced, vicarious, disconnected knowing—the kind of knowing that characterizes an objective stance. Burke's is a rhetoric in which the rhetor engages in rhetorical processes often as
a substitute for experience, formulating ideas for coping strategies or picking up "equipment for living" not by actually experiencing a phenomenon but by reading about it or watching it unfold in the course of a film or a speech. Even the pollution-purification-redemption ritual, from which the rhetor cannot escape, does not seem to serve as a source for knowledge by which the rhetor can be changed. The rhetor continually repeats the experience, regardless of whether anything was learned from previous experiences in the pursuit of hierarchies.

Burke's epistemic stance was revealed for us in the contrast provided by Starhawk's notions of interconnection and ritual. Ritual, a primary rhetorical activity for Starhawk, requires that rhetors—in a constant state of interconnection—work hard to come to know and experience themselves, others, and the earth; it is active and participatory. Attention to and knowledge derived from first-hand, concrete, lived experience characterizes the epistemological stance of a rhetoric of inherent value.

These examples of the patriarchal orientation of Burke's theory suggest perimeters of Burke's theory that should be clarified to make clear its limitations, particularly for women. But to suggest that a juxtaposition of the theories of Starhawk and Burke reveals such limitations of Burke's theory but not of Starhawk's would be both unfair and inaccurate. Just as Starhawk's theory reveals the patriarchal orientation of Burke's theory, so Burke's theory reveals troubling or incomplete aspects of the explanation of rhetorical processes provided by Starhawk.

One such aspect of Starhawk's theory concerns the grand circumference of her theory's boundaries. Burke is careful to distinguish action from motion—and thus the communication of humans from that of other life forms. The rhetorical processes Starhawk describes, however, apply to humans, animals, energy, and all life forms, animate or inanimate; she excludes nothing. The casting of her scope so widely presents a challenge to the rhetor in that Starhawk fails to provide descriptions of the processes that characterize rhetorical exchanges between human beings and rocks, for example, or between rocks and trees. The implications of her theory for human communicators and for humans communicating with, for example, rocks are left unexplored.

The dualism that characterizes Starhawk's theory is problematic for the rhetor, as well. The two distinct systems Starhawk proposes probably are not as distinct as Starhawk suggests; such systems tend to connect and overlap, with rhetors often required to communicate in both systems. But she does not discuss the nature of such communication. Starhawk's dualism poses another problem, as well. Because her theory centers on and is designed to facilitate a rhetoric of inherent value, she offers little assistance to rhetors who seek to communicate with those who may not have a similar commitment to inherent value. She ignores the potential presence of "evil" or "heresy" in her rhetoric of inherent value, failing to suggest strategies for dealing with their presence in such a rhetoric.
Starhawk's theory is limited in yet another way: it does not account for the implications of diversity. It does not address the very real differences of race, class, gender, and rhetorical facility that may separate rhetors and create obstacles to their effective communication—even those rhetors committed to the creation and maintenance of inherent value. All individuals, regardless of the particular characteristics they possess, are supposed to feel connected in Starhawk's theory. But such communication can be very difficult when some physical and material factors, interpreted and made larger through symbolic processes, divide them.

This cursory examination of Starhawk's theory through a Burkean lens suggests some of the perimeters that delimit Starhawk's theory and areas in which Burke's theory provides a more detailed explanation of particular rhetorical processes. The rhetoric Starhawk describes best is a rhetoric that characterizes the communication that takes place in an atmosphere of equality, support, and affirmation. Burke's theory, on the other hand, is more useful than Starhawk's in describing inter-system rhetoric, the rhetoric that seeks to cross boundaries in order to generate identification when none appears to exist.

Our intent, in this essay, is not to denigrate the enormous contribution Kenneth Burke has made to our understanding of the nature and operation of rhetoric. We have used his work as an exemplar of a mainstream rhetorical theory simply to demonstrate that many of our rhetorical theories have a patriarchal terministic screen, one that highlights the masculine communicative experience and encourages a treatment of it as universal.

CONCLUSION

Efforts such as ours to suggest some of the boundaries that delimit rhetorical theories seem to have several benefits for the study of rhetoric. Clarity about boundaries enables rhetorical scholars to listen more easily to diverse voices. When boundaries that delimit theories are not clearly delineated, rhetorical constructs of mainstream theories—especially those of theorists with the stature of a Burke—begin to spread unchecked into our general conceptions of rhetorical theory; we begin to see them as more extensive than they are and perhaps even universal in their application and relevance.

Our efforts to judge theories of rhetoric also are enhanced by clarifying the limits of particular theories. We are better able to judge the claims that theorists make, to check the connections they make between data and claims, to devise appropriate criteria for judging theories, and to evaluate the quality of theories when we are clear about their confines. To whom does this theory apply? Whose rhetoric is being described here? Were the rhetorical experiences of diverse groups taken into account when this theory was developed? When we are able to answer such questions about the scope of our theories, we are able to evaluate them in more sophisticated and useful ways.
Clarity about theoretical scope contributes, as well, to our critical practice; the move from theory to criticism can be problematic when the boundaries that delimit theories have not been made clear. The troublesome nature of this move is particularly evident when the critic discovers that a theoretical concept applied to a text does not fit. In the past, such a mismatch often has been used as the basis for an evaluation of a text as ineffective. It may be ineffective, but an equally plausible interpretation is that a theoretical construct irrelevant to a text is being used to judge that text. Clarity of boundaries around a theory makes clear the uses to which a theory might appropriately and usefully be put in the evaluation of rhetorical acts and artifacts.

Our efforts to question Burke's rhetorical theory from an alternative, feminist explanation underscore the need to do such questioning of other taken-for-granted theories from a variety of alternative perspectives. The difference that a feminist theory makes for the understanding of rhetorical processes suggests that theories built on different racial or ethnic, economic, political, and ethical systems, to name a few, might change our conceptions of rhetoric in equally dramatic ways. Such continued efforts are needed to discover whether our current rhetorical theories describe a wide or narrow range of rhetorical activity and accurately or inaccurately describe the rhetorical processes native to diverse rhetors.

ENDNOTES


4. Rueckert, "Rereading Kenneth Burke" 250.

5. This is the number of critical essays included in the bibliography of works about Burke in Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1991) 378-98.

6. Starhawk adopted a new name to represent her commitment to Goddess spirituality, dropping the name she had been given at birth, Miriam Simos. She explains the origin of the name she selected: "My own name came from a dream about a hawk who turned into a wise old woman and took me under her protection. The star came from the card in the Tarot that symbolizes hope and the deep self. Taking on the name Starhawk for me meant making a commitment to the Goddess and to new levels of my own power-from-within. The name itself became a challenge." Starhawk, Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery (San Francisco: Harper & Row) 121. Starhawk's interest in Witchcraft and ritual began when she was a student at the University of California at Los Angeles during the late 1960s. Her questioning of the forms of power she witnessed as part of the turbulence of this decade led her to explore Witchcraft as a means of creating empowering, life-oriented cultures. She is a member of a coven; a licensed minister of the Covenant of the Goddess; co-founder of the Reclaiming collective, a center for feminist spirituality and counseling; and a non-violence trainer and political activist.

8. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 8.


12. See, for example, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1982).


15. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* 44. Burke also points out that a primary rhetorical function of magic has been to assist “the survival of cultures by promoting social cohesion” and discusses magic as one of the three orders of rationalization, along with religion and science. See Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* 43; and Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (1954; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) 59-66.


18. The names of European-American men frequently are used to label systems of ideas and theoretical frameworks—Aristotelianism, Marxism, Foucaultian, or Burkean theories, for example—but the work done on rhetorical processes by women is not similarly labeled and thus is not conceptualized as theory. There is no [Cheris] Kramaraean theory in the speech communication field, for example. Women’s explanations often are denied the status of the theory label because they are the creations and represent the concerns of individuals who are seen as aberrant from the norm, already included in the norm, or insignificant in comparison to the norm of European-American men. This view was proposed by Cheris Kramarae, “Feminist Theories of Communication,” *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, ed. Erik Barnouw, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 157.


20. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 327.

21. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 314.

22. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 7.


25. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 21.

26. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 115-16.

27. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark* 3.


29. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 10.

30. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 13.


33. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* 204.
34. These rituals and others are described in Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*.
36. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 98.
37. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark* 115.
38. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 162.
40. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 118.
41. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark* 63.
42. These self-hater roles are explained more fully in Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 117-255.
43. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 14.
44. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 9.
45. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 76.
46. For a discussion of Starhawk's notion of compliance, see *Truth or Dare* 77-81.
47. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 83.
48. For a discussion of Starhawk's notion of withdrawal, see *Truth or Dare* 85-87.
49. For a discussion of Starhawk's notion of manipulation, see *Truth or Dare* 87-88.
50. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 75.
51. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 86.
52. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 316.
53. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 193.
54. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 316.
55. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 314.
56. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* 84.
60. For discussions of division, see: Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* 21-22, 130, 150, 211, 326; and Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* 306.
64. Discussions of hierarchy can be found in: Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* 118, 138-41, 265; and Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* 15-16, 89.


73. Burke discusses mortification in *The Rhetoric of Religion* 190, 206.

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