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*Constituted by Agency:
The Discourse and Practice of Rhetorical
Criticism*

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The schemas of perception, assumptions, rationales, definitions, rules, values, and ideological commitments of a discipline are made visible by analysis of the structure for knowledge of that discipline; this structure has been called a variety of names, including *paradigm* (Kuhn, 1970), *discursive formation* (Foucault, 1970, 1972), *world view*, and *conceptual framework*. My goal here is to identify this structure for the discipline of rhetorical criticism—to discover what and how we know about rhetorical criticism through an investigation of its conceptual framework. My purpose is not to demonstrate that our current framework is in error or unproductive but rather to make visible the framework that governs our thought and practice. If we can recognize that this structure is not natural, we may create, if we choose, alternative frameworks.

The text I used in my effort to glean the characteristics of the conceptual framework of rhetorical criticism included major essays and books written about rhetorical criticism since 1915, when the *Quarterly Journal of Speaking* first was published. I relied largely, however, on material appearing in the last twenty or so years, in which the most discourse about the theory and philosophy of rhetorical criticism has been produced.

I did not have to go far to discover a tool to use to unpack our framework for knowledge, for the discipline of rhetorical criticism itself offers critical methods designed to discover a rhetor's world view or how that rhetor structures the world. I chose Kenneth Burke's (1969) pentad, a content-analytic tool designed to discover how a rhetor labels the structure and outstanding ingredients in, and thus names, a situation. Once we are able to see how a rhetor perceives the world, of course, we

also are able to see what the appropriate and available actions and practices are from that perspective. Applied to the discourse of rhetorical criticism, a pentadic analysis should suggest, then, how that discourse is structured and how its structure shapes our critical practices.

I plan to proceed in this essay in much the same way that any pentadic analysis is conducted. In describing their situations, rhetors use the five basic elements of a drama—act, agent, agency, purpose, and scene. I will begin by identifying these terms in the discourse of rhetorical criticism. In the second step of a pentadic analysis, the relationships among the five terms are analyzed through an application of ratios. Ratios encourage the critic to look at how one term affects or determines the nature of another term in the pentad, with a goal of discovering the term that seems to control the nature of all or most of the other terms. This featured term constitutes motive for the rhetor's construction of the situation. In the second section of the essay, I will argue that agency is the featured term and will discuss the consequences for rhetorical criticism of viewing this term as the dominant one. Next, I will point to some alternative conceptual frameworks that result from the featuring of terms other than agency. Finally, I will suggest that the issues about which rhetorical critics argue concern which terms ought to be featured and how they ought to be defined in our discourse about criticism.

Terms of the Discourse of Rhetorical Criticism

While different conceptual frameworks have been operative at various times through our history, I see the current framework as being conceptualized in the terms of the pentad in this way:

The *act* is what takes place. In the discourse of rhetorical criticism, the act is the production of a critical essay.

The *agent* is the person who performs the act—the rhetorical critic. The critic produces and brings to fruition the critical essay.

The *agency* is the means or instruments used to perform the act. I have chosen to confine my conception of agency to critical methods or approaches. The agency is the specific tools of inquiry that critics use to analyze their data—the neo-Aristotelian, generic, metaphor, and cluster methods, for example, and the virtually infinite number of methods that critics may invent to answer the questions they ask about their data.

The *purpose* is the reason the agent performs the act. The purpose of

rhetorical criticism is to explain how some aspect of rhetoric operates and thus to make a contribution to rhetorical theory. The critic who is attempting to contribute to rhetorical theory does not view an artifact for its own qualities alone but instead moves beyond the particularities of the artifact under study in an effort to discover what that artifact suggests about symbolic processes in general (Becker, 1971, p. 41; Campbell, 1974, pp. 11–14; Croft, 1968, p. 114; Ehninger et al., 1971, p. 208; Gregg, 1985, pp. 42–43).

I acknowledge that my selection of purpose is not consistent with the purpose of a body of rhetorical-critical essays that have focused on the history of rhetorical events in order to improve the historical record. I have chosen not to include this purpose because I have placed my emphasis on current critical practice, which seems to have as purpose, if our journals are an accurate indication, contribution to theory.

The *scene* is the situation or context in which the act occurs. I have defined as the scene for the discourse of rhetorical criticism the academic environment in which the writing, presentation, and dissemination of criticism occurs. Academic journals and conventions are obvious components of our scene, but it also includes the history of rhetorical criticism; the texts of criticism—essays about rhetorical criticism and those in which criticism is practiced; the language of criticism; and the content of the discipline of speech communication, which itself influences the possibilities for the practice of rhetorical criticism (Arnold, 1971, p. 196; Minnick, 1970, p. 109; Said, 1983, pp. 13–14).

Agency as Featured Term

I have described the conceptual framework of rhetorical criticism as one in which the act is the production of a critical essay; the agency is critical methods; the agent is the critic; the purpose is to contribute to rhetorical theory; and the scene is an academic context characterized by a particular body of texts, history, language, and disciplinary content. Not all of these elements receive equal emphasis in the discourse of rhetorical criticism. I believe that what we know in the area of rhetorical criticism has come largely from a featuring of agency or method; our knowledge about criticism and the beliefs we hold about it are methodologically derived. I do not mean that a *particular* method such as genre criticism has organized our thinking but rather that our emphasis on

critical procedures of any kind has created a particular conception of criticism for us. In Barnet Baskerville's (1971) words, criticism has been characterized by "our tremendous preoccupation with and proliferation of critical *methods*. Like the old lady who wept with joy every time she heard 'that blessed word "Mesopotamia", we derive keen sensory pleasure from uttering that blessed word 'methodology'" (p. 116).

Method has been of central concern to rhetorical critics from the beginnings of our discipline, even when we had not yet developed formal methods. Early scholars sought to create a separate field of speech communication by identifying a method or methods for rhetorical criticism; usually, they adopted these methods from disciplines such as English and history. Herbert Wichelns's "The Literary Criticism of Oratory" (1925) had a major influence on the direction of rhetorical criticism largely because it featured a method for critics to use. He listed the topics that should be covered in the analysis of a speech, which then were developed by critics into neo-Aristotelianism and canonized, in particular, in Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird's *Speech Criticism* in 1948.

The neo-Aristotelian method came under attack by critics as a "stiff, unimaginative approach" (Sillars, 1964, p. 277) that led to "cookie-cutter" (Brockriede, 1971, p. 129) and "frequently stereotyped, occasionally banal" criticism (Clark, 1957, p. 84). It has been replaced by methodological pluralism, now the norm in our discourse: "The present variety of approaches to critical method demonstrates a healthy liberalism, eclecticism, and sense of experimentation" (Larson, 1976, p. 295). With attacks on neo-Aristotelianism as our primary critical method, we might suppose that agency or method would diminish in importance in the discourse and practice of rhetorical criticism. But a variety of critical approaches has not led to a shift from the discipline's focus on method. An examination of the ratios or relationships among the terms of the discourse about rhetorical criticism suggests that agency continues to be the controlling term for the four other elements.

The *agency-act* ratio, which encourages an examination of how method affects the production of criticism, suggests that a centering of our work on method constrains how we create and present criticism. Jon Ericson (1968) noted this kind of relationship between agency and act when he asserted "that any design for criticism will modify the result of the critical act. That is to say, any critical method may be potentially

complex in itself, but it is, nevertheless, a simplification whose very structure influences the critic's end result" (p. 175).

Let me suggest just a few ways in which the critical process has been influenced by a featuring of agency or method. Our criticism tends to be analytic because our methods are ones that disassemble an artifact; we do much less of "returning the addresses to whole experiences" (Thonssen, 1968, p. 186). Our methodological focus has encouraged us to illustrate the forms of our methods rather than to engage in a creative exploration of our data. The result is that after "a while, the strictly rhetorical conclusions of one thesis tend to become remarkably similar to those of another using the same rhetorical categories, no matter how different the speaker or speeches may have been" (Croft, 1968, p. 112). Or, we may be encouraged to spend so much time describing and defending our method that we devote very little attention to an actual analysis of our data. Boring criticism can result, as well, from a featuring of agency or method. The plodding application of the various categories of a method does not always make interesting reading. Certainly, critical essays can be insightful, exciting, and energizing—and many are, despite our discipline's emphasis on agency. I simply am suggesting that insight, excitement, and energy are more difficult to achieve when agency controls the process of criticism.

The featuring of method over other terms in rhetorical criticism has implications not only for act but for purpose—as illustrated in exploration of the *agency-purpose* ratio. Criticism often is not conceptualized or taught as a tool for inquiry that can answer a research question; instead, it is viewed as a method that is itself the end. The natural order of criticism is for the critic to decide what research question is guiding the inquiry and then to select or create a method that, when applied to some data, enables the critic to answer the question. Much of our criticism, however, has been a reversal of this process. The method is selected and the research question—if one is formulated at all—is derived from the method. Even if a contribution to theory is named as a result of the answering of a research question, little is usually done with that contribution, simply because its importance is overshadowed by the emphasis on method.

One consequence of the *agency-purpose* ratio is labeled "conceptual anomie" by Roderick Hart (1985); it is "the failure to build the necessary bridge between one rhetorical investigation and another" (p. 9). He explains: "Many authors seem incapable of specifying what conceptual

move next needs to be made in a chain of research" (p. 10). Again, this seems to be the result of an emphasis on agency at the expense of purpose.

But the most significant result of the emphasis on agency has been the limiting of rhetorical explorations to the confines of existing rhetorical theories. We explicate "existing theories of rhetoric. They become creeds to which the critic renders obedience," as Linnea Ratcliff (1971) describes their effect (p. 133). When method is featured, the theory building that results from a critical study tends to stay confined to the boundaries within which the method was developed and functions. A critic who applies the fantasy-theme method of criticism, for example, is not likely, at the conclusion of the study, to develop a theory that significantly alters or differs from Ernest Bormann's (1972, 1982, 1983, 1985) symbolic-convergence theory, the method's conceptual starting point. Our critical products are an elaboration and extension of our current theories, and we are not likely to develop what Kenneth Gergen (1982) calls *generative theory*, theory that has "*the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions to foster reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted,' and thereby to generate fresh alternatives*" (p. 109).

An *agency-agent* ratio suggests that a focus on method has created critics with particular characteristics—some enhance our criticism; others do not. Rewarded are such critical behaviors as coding, classification, illustration, and use of technical jargon rather than the creating of alternative ways to think and talk about constructs or the generation of new starting points for the practice of criticism. I am reminded here of a doctoral student I once advised who loved to play with ideas and who often took them in unlikely directions in his thinking and writing about rhetoric. My colleagues, on the whole, were unappreciative of this proclivity—I suspect for precisely the reason I am describing here. Good critics are those who can adjust their thinking and writing to fit the structure and form required by our methods.

The *agency-scene* ratio suggests that our focus on method confines our criticism to a particular setting or context—in this case, an intellectual, academic one. Technical jargon, the making of minuscule distinctions among categories, and—if it shows off a method—analysis of sometimes trivial topics are made to seem relevant and appropriate by a focus on method. As a result, our criticism is likely to be of interest only to our colleagues in speech communication departments and, even then, only to those who work in our area of specialization.

Featuring of Alternative Terms

While my examples of how agency frames what we know in rhetorical criticism have been more negative than positive, my point is not to argue that agency is not an appropriate term to feature. Any emphasis has both positive and negative consequences for criticism, and I suspect that agency or method serves us no better or worse than other terms we might choose to feature. My goal here is simply to suggest that just as our choice to focus on method develops our criticism in certain directions, our choice to feature a different term would produce a different kind of criticism. In the next section, I will speculate on the nature of the different kinds of criticism that might result were we to feature terms other than agency.

Purpose as Featured Term

Purpose comes the closest to rivaling agency as the featured term in our current discourse about and practice of rhetorical criticism. The call for an emphasis on purpose is exemplified by Baskerville's (1971) suggestion "that we devote some attention to the question of *why* we are doing what we are doing" (p. 123). He elaborates: It "is more important to ask *why* than *how*. Why are we doing what we are doing? What is the *purpose* of all this feverish activity? What is our criticism for? What good is it?" (p. 117). Ralph Eubanks (1970) makes the point, as well: "What's the *ultimate purpose* of rhetorical criticism? Or—put in slightly different terms—What's the *bedrock reason* for having trained rhetorical critics?" (p. 108).

The effect of making purpose the featured term on rhetorical criticism is easily demonstrated in an examination of the purpose-act ratio, suggesting that our critical methods follow our purpose. "Organic or situational" criticism (Campbell, 1972, p. 13) that relies not on predetermined methods but lets the data themselves suggest their "own analytic categories" (Brockriede, 1971, p. 128) is more likely to allow a method to develop that enables the critic to make a contribution to rhetorical theory.

But in some instances, the link between purpose and method can be made even more explicit. When critics sought the relationship between

recurring situations and the rhetoric developed in response to them, their purpose suggested the method of generic criticism (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Feminist criticism developed in much the same way. Its purposes are to re-examine traditional rhetorical theories to discover whether and how they incorporate a consideration of gender and to use that process to improve women's lives. A method of criticism that involves an examination of how gender is conceptualized in a rhetorical act and how it can be changed resulted from these purposes (Foss, 1989, pp. 151-160).

A purpose-agency ratio can continue to alter rhetorical criticism, as well, in that our goal in criticism affects the nature of our critical methods. If we believe that contributing to rhetorical theory means producing understanding of a particular phenomenon (Gronbeck, 1985, p. 11), our methods would be different from those we would use if we see a contribution to rhetorical theory as making generalizations about rhetorical processes (Black, 1978, p. 137). If our contribution is to be a set of "restable hypotheses which, when verified, will have the status of scientific laws" (Bowers, 1968, p. 127) that could be subjected to experimental verification or rejection" (Hart, 1976, p. 77), our critical methods must allow us to produce such hypotheses. Even with a shared purpose of contribution to rhetorical theory, then, critics can understand such a contribution differently, and different methods may be required to accomplish that contribution.

Criticism today is increasingly guided by a featuring of purpose over agency, then, and critical methods are being developed to fit research questions that are asked in order to make contributions to rhetorical theory. More emphasis on purpose, however, would produce greater changes in our critical practice according to the form we expect a contribution to rhetorical theory to assume.

Agent as Featured Term

The centrality of the critic in the critical process—a featuring of agent—has been recognized, to some extent, in the discourse of rhetorical criticism. Ratcliff (1971), in fact, suggests a shift in focus from agency to agent in her statement urging us to be less concerned with "What method of criticism did the critic use?" and more interested in "Who was the critic?" (p. 134). As Richard Gregg (1985) points out, a view of agent or critic as central is consistent with one of the truisms of our

field: "Those of us in communication studies have been saying for some years that meanings are in people, not in messages, though we have not always fully appreciated the implications of the statement" (p. 50). To develop the implications of this statement would affect our criticism in a number of ways.

An agent-agency ratio provides an example. How we conceptualize or define the critic affects the nature of the means we use to practice criticism; new definitions of the critic would require new kinds of agencies for our criticism. The critic has been defined as "*an expert commentator*" with "exceptional understanding" who "makes assertions . . . about the way things are" (Rosenfield, 1968, p. 52). The critic "has earned the right to pass judgment on the productions [of others]. . . . All applicants will not qualify" (Baskerville, 1971, p. 124). The kind of knowledge the critic possesses is not available to everyone, nor is everyone entitled to receive it, as Martin Medhurst (1987) suggests: Critics must "learn the difference between significant works and those of less significance; between authors with something to say and those who merely say something; between audiences who can hear and assimilate the critical lessons and those who having ears, hear not" (pp. 20-21).

In these definitions, the critic is special and in possession of expertise others do not have, expertise derived largely from training in the models and methods of rhetorical criticism. Among the implications of these definitions of the critic is the notion that knowledge of formal rhetorical models is required to produce criticism. Other implications are that certain kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing are superior to others and that experts who have inside knowledge announce it to others.

But an alternative description of the agent would alter radically the agencies or methods of rhetorical criticism that are available. What we study, how we study it, and how we choose to present our findings would be redefined. Our new critic might discover that "insignificant" works are very significant in the lives of the audience for criticism and would choose to study those works as data. Those who do not have "something to say" may be seen simply as those whose critical approaches have not been allowed voice because their approaches differ from the forms and styles used by those who are considered experts. Likewise, audiences who "hear not" the critical lessons of the expert may be those who choose to listen to themselves or to those with qualifications different from those of the expert critic. Critics, in this view, more likely would be students in the process of criticism, along with the so-called nonexperts or nonspe-

cialists in their audiences, learning about and from other ways of conducting criticism. Because these critics would view themselves as experts only at using one kind of vocabulary and engaging in one way of thinking about criticism, they would recognize their own blindnesses and make the effort to investigate and try out diverse critical agencies. Methods created to deal with judgments from intuition, emotional responses, or ideological purposes, for example, might be generated.

A featuring of agent in an agent-act ratio in a consideration of subjectivity suggests another way in which rhetorical criticism would be reconceptualized. We acknowledge the critic as a subjective human being whose experiences and values necessarily affect the criticism produced: "the critic is not an inanimate object, like a prism, with only the capacity for passive reflection. The critic's humanity is necessarily inherent in his work. His critical act is constituted of and by his choices and judgments" (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 224). This subjectivity, we also agree, does not invalidate our judgments, as Barbara Larson (1976) explains: "[S]ubjectivity and selection is [*sic*] characteristic of all human perception, analysis, and judgment, and do not necessarily render illegitimate or invalid percepts subjectively arrived at" (p. 296).

But the subjectivity of the critic is downplayed in the discourse about rhetorical criticism because we do not feature the agent or critic in that discourse. We may not do so because we are uncomfortable with subjectivity, for how can criticism be rigorous or legitimate or scientific or any number of good things if it is rooted in individual experience and bias? We recognize, with Medhurst (1987), that "strict objectivity is a theoretical impossibility in any language-based discipline" (p. 11), but we choose not to act on the full implications of that statement. We bring to the fore terms other than agent in an apparent effort to mitigate the critic's subjectivity. We choose to feature act, for example, as Medhurst does when he urges "precision of observation and care of presentation" (p. 11) or as Thonssen, Baird, and Braden (1970) do when they urge the critic to display a "dispassionate, objective attitude toward the object of investigation . . . impersonality of treatment, a detachment, . . ." (p. 22). We may feature agency or method as an antidote to subjectivity, exemplified in Lawrence Rosenfield's (1968) description of some critical methods that purport to place "the spectator outside the critical equation" and "imply that the critic should strive to produce an analysis of the essential nature of the phenomenon apart from any idiosyncrasies in his personal responses" (p. 61).

But what if the critic's subjectivity were not seen as dysfunctional and the subjective agent were featured in discourse about rhetorical criticism? Again, we would create a very different kind of rhetorical criticism. Standards of critical adequacy would deal not with countering the subjectivity and personal bias of the critic but with celebrating, affirming, and fully utilizing them to generate critical insights. The characteristics of the critic—sex, age, status, ethnicity, past experiences, values, and commitments—would be incorporated explicitly in critical products. We would not be disturbed by essays such as Thomas Benson's "Another Shooting in Newtown" (1981), in which he reported on his involvement in the production of television commercials for a congressional candidate. The essay raised "to the level of textual analysis matters conventionally relegated to personal correspondence or 'corridor talk,' matters such as the ethnographer's own moods and their effects upon the cultural discourse that is 'the text; . . ." (Mechling & Mechling, 1987, p. 20).

Agent has been downplayed in the discourse and practice of rhetorical criticism. Were it to be featured, we would find various alternative conceptions of rhetorical criticism, including greater diversity in methods, more nearly equal participation by critic and audience in the creation of rhetorical knowledge, and a reconsideration of the role of subjectivity in criticism.

Scene as Featured Term

Selection of scene as the principal stimulus suggests that our critical processes and products are largely dependent for their character on the context or scene in which they are produced. Although some critics use their critical skills to develop speeches and campaigns in various public contexts, the scene is largely the academic environment in which criticism is written and presented. The ratio of scene to purpose, for example, illustrates how criticism changes when scene is the featured term. It encourages us to see our contributions to rhetorical theory as confined by the academic setting and history in which our criticism occurs. If scene is determining, any contribution to rhetorical theory is preselected within the boundaries of that scene or system. The development of radically different theories or major alterations in our theories is difficult or virtually impossible unless we carefully examine our scenic boundaries and

deliberately try to escape them. The form and substance of any theory we might develop must accord with the theoretical statements regarded as appropriate in that scene.

The work of Michel Foucault (1970, 1972), among others, suggests yet another effect that a featuring of scene would have on the discourse and practice of rhetorical criticism; in this case, the relationship is captured in a scene-agent ratio. Most of our discourse assumes an autonomous, freely choosing agent at the heart of criticism. The critic—just like the rhetor who is the subject of the study—is seen as having freedom of choice to select from a wide variety of options to develop the critical essay (Foss, 1983, pp. 286–287). A focus on the scene as deterministic, however, suggests that the critic's freedom is sharply curtailed, for the critic's action takes place in a scene of structures and practices in which only certain options are allowed (Mechling & Mechling, 1987, pp. 16–17). Consideration of how the scene determines the nature of the critic would lead us to question not only the notion of freedom of choice but also the related roles of intentionality and subjectivity as they function in rhetorical criticism.

Were we to choose to feature scene in rhetorical criticism, our criticism would be of a different nature. Our theory building would have the potential to expand in very different directions were scenic boundaries questioned, and the freedom of choice we have accorded the critic would become problematic.

Act as Featured Term

A featuring of the act of criticism itself can enable us to envision new directions for rhetorical criticism simply by broadening our range of choices in defining the act. One common way to view the act is as argument. Wayne Brockriede's (1974) statement that "*useful* rhetorical criticism, whatever else it may be, must function as an argument" (p. 165) is representative, as is Rosenfield's (1968) assertion that "criticism is most sensibly conceived of as a special form of reason-giving discourse" (p. 50).

When the critical act is seen as argument, its effects can be seen in a pairing of act with agency; the methods seen as appropriate are agencies that accord with the process of argument. They tend to encourage us, for example, to choose as our data rhetorical phenomena that can be dealt with in the structure of an argument, where our warrants and claims can be

labeled and discussed easily. Discursive data such as speeches and essays are clearly appropriate, then, because insights about them can be translated easily into our traditional, verbal argumentative form. Nondiscursive data such as architecture are less appropriate; we are hard put even to identify the claims and warrants that a building makes to a viewer.

But suppose we define the critical act primarily as art, a conception not unfamiliar to the discourse of criticism. Fisher (1969), for example, argues that students "of rhetoric, adopting this view, should not only be able to make their criticisms fine argumentative statements but artistic ones as well" (p. 109). Criticism, he asserts, "assumes an art" (p. 105). Baskerville (1971) also has suggested that a "critic, reflecting upon a work of fine art occasionally manages to create a work of fine art" (p. 123). Works of art are characterized by originality and creativity; a focus on the act as art, then, would suggest methods that highlight these qualities. In Herbert Simons's (1978) terms, we would see methods characterized by greater use of "muddleheaded anecdotalism," where symbols have multiple referents. Other methods and forms of presentation that embody aesthetic and literary principles would be encouraged, including dialogues, narratives with character and plot development, and even visual forms of expression.

Our standards for critical adequacy for judging critical products also would change if the critical act were defined as art and featured in rhetorical criticism. Works of art are not judged by the standards by which we usually judge rhetorical criticism—how well the critic argues or whether the essay is coherent, for example (Foss, 1983, pp. 288–294). Instead, our standards might include the nature of the insight produced, the emotion generated, the effect on the lives of the people in the audience, or the technical craftsmanship or skill demonstrated in the presentation. Such standards would leave behind many traditional conceptions of what good criticism is, but they also might lead to criticism that functions more as art does—to provoke and stimulate. Not only whether we choose to feature art but also how we define that act, then, has consequences for the discourse and practice of rhetorical criticism.

Controversies over the Conceptual Framework

The issues about which rhetorical critics argue and the most urgent questions confronting us derive, in large part, from how we have chosen

to describe rhetorical criticism. A few examples will illustrate that our liveliest controversies are, in fact, clashes over aspects of the conceptual framework of rhetorical criticism.

One kind of issue about which we argue concerns which pentadic term to assign to a given rhetorical construct—act, agency, agent, purpose, or scene. The controversy surrounding the purpose of scholarship in public address is rooted in disagreement about the proper label to assign to the data. Public-address critics and rhetorical historians often believe their task is to describe “specific rhetors addressing specific rhetorical problems in specific rhetorical circumstances” (Hart, 1985, p. 4); theory construction is perceived as having little or no role to play in such studies. Hart summarizes this controversy succinctly:

All too often one finds specific persons and events occupying the left side of the colon in the titles of public address studies rather than being subsumed (on the right side of the colon) to the intellectual trends for which they stand as evidence. Some among us are still too committed, for example, to writing definitive rhetorical histories of individual presidencies instead of exploring the institutional regularities of the office itself. (p. 5)

The controversy Hart describes concerns the most appropriate pentadic label for an aspect of the critical process. Should the data with which the critic deals—the speeches of a president, for example—be labeled the purpose? In this case, the purpose is to understand that particular rhetoric or to use the rhetoric to improve the historical record. Or should the data be labeled the agency, a view in which the data are seen as the means to achieving the purpose of making a contribution to rhetorical theory?

A second category of issues about which we argue concerns the proper definition of a pentadic element—how best to label the act or the agent, for example. The current discussion about ideological or social criticism illustrates this type of controversy. In social criticism, the critic uses criticism as a vehicle to encourage public discussion about trends in the society, to evaluate a particular way of thinking and acting, or to suggest how society should be (Corcoran, 1984; McGee, 1975, 1978; Wander, 1983, 1984; Wander & Jenkins, 1972). But others argue that societal change is not the most useful definition of purpose in rhetorical criticism because criticism undertaken to comment on a particular issue, situation, or policy tends not to be “enduring; its importance and its functions are immediate and ephemeral” (Campbell, 1974, p. 11). Once

the historical situation has been forgotten or the rhetor is no longer the center of the public's attention, social criticism is irrelevant. Those who hold this view then propose a definition of the purpose of criticism as contributing to rhetorical theory.

A third type of issue over which rhetorical critics argue concerns which term should be the controlling one in the discourse about and practice of rhetorical criticism. The controversy over the appropriateness and legitimacy of feminist criticism is an example of this kind of issue. Feminist criticism, in which the conceptualization of gender in an artifact is analyzed in order to de-construct and change conceptions of gender, is often met with hostility, defensiveness, or amusement. It strikes many students, associate editors, and editors as inappropriately political or ideological. They cannot understand how feminist critics can argue that this method of criticism “may be considered as or more central to the analysis of rhetoric than almost any other method of criticism. Its focus is on a fundamental element of human life—gender—and it is dramatically changing the form and content of knowledge about rhetoric” (Foss, 1989, p. 151).

This controversy over feminist criticism can be understood as a conflict about what should be the featured term in the discourse of rhetorical criticism. Feminist critics believe that term should be agent. From their perspective, who the critic is, the sex and gender of that critic, the gender screen through which the critic responds to an artifact, and the critic's personal commitment to creating a better world for women are the most important elements of the critical process; these, of course, are concerns of agent. Those who object to or are suspicious of feminist criticism may choose any of the other terms as controlling; the point is that agent is *not* the term they select as the one that ought to be featured in the discourse about and practice of rhetorical criticism.

These few samples of controversies have illustrated, I hope, how many of the issues about which we argue are rooted in the kind of conceptual framework we see as desirable for rhetorical criticism. These issues should be of concern, for our framework guides all aspects of our critical practice and constrains the insights produced by rhetorical criticism. I deliberately have avoided suggesting the way I believe some of these controversies should be resolved or the term(s) that should control rhetorical criticism because benefits accrue whatever term receives our emphasis. My intent has been simply to make problematic the major elements of our discourse and practice so that

we can decide whether that is how we want them to be. As a result of that knowledge, we then can decide thoughtfully and purposefully, that a particular way of describing rhetorical criticism will produce the most insightful criticism or that greater diversity in our conception and practice of criticism is desirable.

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