



## A Question of Sex: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Differences That Matter

Robin E. Jensen

**To cite this article:** Robin E. Jensen (2016) A Question of Sex: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Differences That Matter, Quarterly Journal of Speech, 102:3, 307-311, DOI: [10.1080/00335630.2016.1192247](https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2016.1192247)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2016.1192247>



Published online: 14 Jun 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 17



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## BOOK REVIEWS

Bradford Vivian, Editor

**A Question of Sex: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Differences That Matter**, by Kristan Poirot, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2014, 184 pp., \$80.00 (cloth), \$23.95 (paper).

Kristan Poirot's *A Question of Sex: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Differences that Matter* offers a much-needed intervention into existing accounts of U.S. feminist history. Poirot analyzes key points of stasis in the history of U.S. feminist movements, focusing specifically on discursive moments that have engaged issues of race and racism, reproductive health and rights, and sexuality. Beyond her compelling use of and advocacy for a rhetorical sensibility, what sets Poirot's book apart from existing feminist history accounts is that she attends to points of difference and identification that have been put forth by U.S. feminist activists as "mattering." Poirot argues that questions of sex (such as what sex is, how sex should be identified and differentiated, where sex comes from and exists) are the stasis points that reveal what does, in fact, matter in particular discourses, as well as across discourses. The five case studies that she puts forth throughout the course of the book demonstrate how questions about sex have been (and remain) alternately central to the shaping of various U.S. feminist activism and nonetheless undertheorized in terms of their political and lived implications.

Poirot begins her book with a preface in which she lays out the evolution of her personal feminist commitments. Her approach does not so much reflect standpoint theory as it illustrates the position that she invites readers to adopt as they consider U.S. feminist activism in terms of insider attempts to name and stabilize sex. Her inquiry as a whole is framed in light of the "scholarly sex revolution" beginning in the 1990s that involved a proliferation of theories that "shifted the debate from the *facts of sex* to *questions of gender* and its relationship to the production of sex and sexual difference" (2). Poirot names rhetorical studies as one of a number of subfields and disciplines that joined the revolution by relinquishing considerations of sex in favor of gender. The downside of this revolution and the positioning of rhetorical studies therein is that U.S. feminist activists themselves have long functioned and made key decisions about their identities based upon *both* gender- and sex-based distinctions. In fact, the differences that feminists have upheld as mattering through their discourses and actions are as likely as not to involve appeals to sex-specific anatomy, albeit generally in ways that redefine corresponding mainstream appeals. Thus, for scholars to focus exclusively on issues of gender as socially and discursively constructed is to foster, first, a disconnection between scholarship and feminist practice and, second, a misrepresentation of how U.S. feminist movements have defined themselves and promoted separation and identification. Ultimately, Poirot argues that feminists' tendency to follow up their questions about sex and gender with attempts to fix these concepts in secure ways is problematic on multiple levels; however, she also asserts that the flaws of past feminist identifications remain both unaddressed and unalleviated when scholars refuse to consider the differentiations that have been employed therein.

In order to provide historical evidence for her claims, Poirot poses a series of "questionable engagements" wherein she lays out key variables involved in specific moments of feminist

controversy and identification. She does so prior to examining how sex—in its “*intra-activity*” with gender—was defined by feminists in those circumstances (6, 16). Throughout this process, she models a commitment to identifying and deciphering context through the association of discursive and material forces, demonstrating repeatedly that rhetorical practice animates and responds to material conditions. In this respect, Poirot offers clear illustrations of how the lived conditions of sex and gendered bodies are hailed through a variety of “rhetorical gestures” and thereby constituted as “sex” (5), just as she also demonstrates that constitutive discourses can and do produce material, lived consequences.

Poirot dedicates her first chapter to deciphering “what possibilities emerge when feminism’s compulsion to identify sex is itself put into question?” (17). She develops this inquiry by considering how and why women’s rights activists and feminists employed different accounts of Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” in the years that followed. Poirot maintains that the question ascribed to Truth speaks more to whether or not a black, escaped slave fit into predetermined categories about gender rather than whether or not those categories should exist in the first place. Thus, as a wide variety of scholars and activists have taken it upon themselves to answer this question in the affirmative, they have both disregarded their own complicity in an unjust system and re-inscribed the very criteria that has kept “woman” stabilized as an inferior subject. To purport that Truth is a woman, Poirot argues, is to over-emphasize her sex-specific anatomy and to overlook the fact that her context did not situate her as such. The difference that mattered, in this case, was the supposed fact of sex, a point that Poirot reiterates by noting that Truth was supposedly asked by her audiences to bare her breasts to prove that she was, in fact, a woman. As scholars past and present answer the question put forth and employ Truth’s persona to further their own agendas, Poirot maintains that they, too, engage in her “symbolic disrobing” (35). In the end, Poirot champions Donna Haraway’s call for a “feminist humanity” that displaces identifiers “as the grounds for connection” (38), but not without also critiquing Haraway’s ultimate move to identify Truth in predetermined ways. What Poirot’s readers are left with, in this chapter, is a call like that of Barbara Biesecker’s to reject the impulse to employ and uphold accepted categories of sex by *not* answering—and thus suspending—the question itself.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter two also speaks to issues of race and racism within U.S. women’s rights activism. This chapter offers a rich rhetorical history of ideas and demonstrates that predecessors to modern-day feminist movements appealed not just to the importance of sex-specific anatomical differences (as they did when employing Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech) but also, in some cases, to socially constructed differences. Focusing specifically on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the early woman suffrage movement, Poirot analyzes Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s public discourses from 1848 to 1870, which prominently and notoriously featured arguments favoring “educated suffrage” over universal male suffrage (55). Rather than maintaining that Stanton was either a clear racist or that she was simply responding to an overwhelmingly racist rhetorical culture, as a number of other scholars have done, Poirot deconstructs the differences that mattered for Stanton by contextualizing her appeals within a liberal Enlightenment idiom of difference. This idiom involved subscription to an ideal of inherent and natural rights for all, but it mediated that ideal with theories of biological foundationalism that purported corporeal differences related to sex and race. Poirot demonstrates that Stanton rejected the moral appeals of the idiom—although not its liberal humanism—to argue that extracorporeal differences related to rationality and garnered from education should delineate the voting constituency. This line of reasoning led her to contend not that race or sex determined ability and therefore limited rights but that education constituted any one person as more deserving of the vote than another. Given that many white women had garnered educational access at this point, Stanton contended that they should have

the vote rather than black men who had largely not garnered such access. In this way, Poirot demonstrates Stanton's assertion that what mattered was not differences of the body but differences of sociology which ultimately shaped the mind. She premised her racism—and put forth her women's rights advocacy—not on biological distinctions but on the “historically contingent social circumstances of human subjects” (56). In this respect, she set herself and the movement she represented apart from dominant lines of reasoning that valued bodily difference by championing appeals to constructed, extracorporeal disparities. From this perspective, Stanton's appeals were not inherently racist, but Poirot finds that, given the circumstances in which they were enlisted, they played out in racist ways.

Chapter three takes up the book's second theme, women's reproductive health, and shifts the focus from early or “first-wave” women's rights rhetoric to “second-wave” feminist rhetoric. More specifically, Poirot studies discourses emerging from the women's health movement of the 1970s, which advocated for focused health care controlled by women and, for this reason, prioritized sex-specific anatomical differences associated with reproduction. Situating these discourses within the broader women's liberation movement and its emergence as something of a backlash against Freudian psychoanalysis, Poirot offers a close reading of two texts produced by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers (FFWHC): *A New View of a Woman's Body* and *How to Stay Out of the Gynecologist's Office*. Her analysis makes clear the extent to which these texts specifically, and second-wave feminist discourses more generally, depended upon visual cues to define sex differences. By featuring literally hundreds of images of women in the process of exploring their own anatomy in the company of other women, these texts—Poirot argues—were designed to teach women how to see and understand sex as mattering in different ways. Indeed, she demonstrates that through strategies of rhetorical amplification related to proliferation, enumeration, and diversification, readers were invited to disavow predominant, medicalized representations of female-sexed anatomy as “passive and pathologized” for a “new view” characterized by complexity, agency, and health (72, 75). But while these texts offered readers a unique and decidedly more expansive way in which to understand sex-as-material, Poirot argues that the books, in the end, proscribed a stable circumscription for sex that failed to keep the question of sex suspended in ways that would allow for sustained change.

The book's final chapters engage Poirot's third theme, sexuality, while also clarifying accounts of race and reproductive health in U.S. feminist rhetoric. Chapter four examines the liberal-radical feminist split over lesbian sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s, and demonstrates that some U.S. feminist activists have also defined sex in terms of how sex-specific anatomy is employed. Like chapter three, this chapter reiterates Poirot's initial point that, although feminist activists may have sometimes left the question of sex open, more often they have advocated for (new) delineations of sex as fixed and, in this way, played into the same oppressive systems that they set out to destabilize. When Betty Friedan characterized lesbians within the feminist movement as a “lavender menace” in 1969, she engaged in what Poirot identifies as “strategies of containment” to mark liberal feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women as functioning largely within mainstream norms and expectations (95). Poirot analyzes both mainstream and feminist news coverage of this discourse to demonstrate that Friedan's containment strategies backfired. She finds that mainstream coverage only began associating feminism consistently with what Friedan called “man-hating” lesbians when Friedan and other liberal feminists tried to distance themselves from lesbians. Furthermore, Friedan's appeals inspired radical feminists to create additional rifts within the larger movement and differentiate between woman-identified women (authentic) and man-identified women (inauthentic). The difference that mattered, in this framing and Friedan's, was an individual's sexuality. That this differentiation only served to

reiterate traditional understandings of women as separate from men and as keepers of the home becomes evident in Poirot's account of radical feminist's appeals to the "home" as the place where women enact their (in)authenticity. Woman-identified women, they argued, would not allow men and the hierarchy that they upheld into their private residences, while man-identified women would. Poirot demonstrates that, through these appeals, "the social order of the sexed system is preserved" as women's identity and their sex is reflexively contained by the metaphor of domesticity (108).

Chapter five speaks to twenty-first-century SlutWalks, a phenomenon that began in 2011 after a Canadian police officer instructed women to avoid dressing like "sluts" as a means to protect themselves from sexual assault. Participating "sluts" and "allies" march through the streets dressed however they see fit, many performing their sexuality in ways that have traditionally been marked as a sign of promiscuity. SlutWalks, according to Poirot, are situated at the intersection of postfeminism, neoliberalism, and third-wave feminism. They celebrate individual choice, consumerism, and sexual display, and their critics argue that they encourage participants to adopt and reinforce the identities prescribed them by a long-instated patriarchal-capitalist hierarchy. Poirot contends that SlutWalks, as they are covered by various media, "necessarily circulate through memories of feminism" (112). More specifically, she argues that today's feminists—SlutWalkers or no—define themselves largely in terms of their difference from past movement instantiations. They have also worked, in some cases, to promote more inclusive explications of sex. Many SlutWalks, for instance, shape their organizing discourse so as to indicate that all sex and gender identifications (woman, man, transgender, intersex, queer) are welcome. In this context, Poirot argues that "woman" becomes less of a difference that matters, a point that tends to get lost in media coverage where the focus rarely shifts from the term "slut" itself and its historically loaded female specificity. Poirot's point, in this case, is that feminism(s) today continue to struggle over points of difference and identification, especially because historical counterpoints of contemporary feminism(s) are almost universally simplified in terms of what has "mattered" for them. She wonders, in the end, whether there is "a feminist legacy of identity commitments that insists on sex's questionability and facticity simultaneously" (86). Although readers might feel compelled to answer her query, likely in the negative, Poirot's argument for the value of suspending these sorts of questions and thereby bypassing the search for a fixed answer is an important rejoinder and helpful guide.

Although this book has much to offer all scholars of rhetoric and public address, *A Question of Sex* will be of particular interest to those invested in feminist theory, gender studies, and rhetorical history. From a pedagogical perspective, Poirot wonderfully illustrates how a rhetorical orientation equips scholars with specific tools for deciphering the definitional grounding at the foundation of long-running debates. And although the introduction to the book might give the impression that all formations of U.S. feminism are to be grouped together indiscriminately in the subsequent pages, Poirot proves that assumption wrong by employing her case studies in ways that subtly yet expertly lay out the ideas and ideologies that coalesced to inform liberal, radical, first-wave, second-wave, third-wave, and postfeminism. For this reason, *A Question of Sex* would make a very useful addition to courses dedicated to feminist rhetoric or the history of ideas. Moreover, Poirot's attention to inter- and intramovement tensions related to race, reproductive health, and sexuality resonate with a number of pressing contemporary controversies and would thus provide elegant ways to inspire classroom discussion. *A Question of Sex* is not only a theoretically and historically rich contribution to rhetorical feminist scholarship but also functions as an effective mechanism for reminding students in many disciplines of the value in suspending—rather than answering—the question.

**Note**

1. Barbara Biesecker, "Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25 (1992): 140–61.

Robin E. Jensen  
*University of Utah*

 jensenrobine@gmail.com

© 2016 Robin E. Jensen

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2016.1192247>

**The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency**, edited by Justin S. Vaughn and Jennifer R. Mercieca, College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2014, 266 pp., \$50.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

During his first inaugural address, President Barack Obama captured the overarching theme from both his campaign and the problems the country faced. "In this winter of our hardship," he proclaimed, "let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end."<sup>1</sup> With the Great Recession in full swing domestically and two unpopular wars being waged internationally, the president faced a rhetorical and political conundrum. Obama was elected under the mantle of needing a hero to lead the nation out of crisis, but being a hero in the campaign is not the same as being a hero in office. In *The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*, Justin S. Vaughn and Jennifer R. Mercieca bring together a collection of twelve chapters to explore the "expectations gap" and the "burden of the presidency" that Obama had to manage when taking office (2).

Originating from a 2010 conference, the volume is typical of other edited books focusing on a single president, typically found in political science and recently in communication. Each chapter examines a different issue Obama faced, including foreign policy, political deliberation, media coverage, among others. In doing so, the chapters analyze how the president responded to the "expectations" and "burdens" surrounding these topics. Previous volumes on presidential rhetoric, including those focused on a single president such as George W. Bush and those connected by a specific theoretical angle such as crisis rhetoric, have left this aspect of presidential leadership largely unexamined. The editors' collection provides an important theoretical contribution to presidential rhetoric by analyzing how "institutional burdens," "contextual burdens," and "personal burdens" constrain the president from meeting the expectations set by the public, the media, and other individuals.

The theoretical value of understanding the burdens placed on the presidency is obvious when one considers the rhetorical situation that undergirds the transition from the campaigning phase to the governing phase. Earlier work on presidential rhetoric has partially addressed this question. For example, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, in their groundbreaking book *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*, outline the rhetorical expectations of various speech genres, such as inaugurals, state of the unions, campaign addresses, and others, in order understand how their form inhibits certain rhetorical goals. What Vaughn and Mercieca add to the field of communication is not a theoretical reflection on how various situations enable the president to accomplish lofty goals; instead, their work answers a simple yet thoughtprovoking question: what makes a president's job difficult and how do presidents attempt to overcome that burden? Although the volume does not fully