

Review

Of Queen Bees and Queendoms: Fairy Tales, Resilience, and *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*

Ballif, Michelle, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford. *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 342 pages.

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Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one's reach despite adversity—but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity.

—Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*

I have to admit my initial skepticism after reading the opening chapters of *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*. The book, the authors reveal, “was inspired by the desire to spy on the closets—or the personal and professional choices—of the successful women in our field” (viii). While learning about the career paths of thriving scholars was certainly intriguing to me, references to closet-spying, the merits of skirt length, and the “scheming” and “cattiness” of the “senior woman scholar” sent up red flags (12). Dangly earrings vs. pearl-studded posts (viii)? Obnoxious “Queen Bees” (11) and anointed key-keepers of “the Queendom” (119)? I began to wonder if the Wicked Witch and Snow White would appear in the following pages. And yet, while I was initially unsettled by its sometimes superficial conceptions of womanhood, it is through familiar representa-

tions that Ballif, Davis, and Mountford paint an archetypal, almost mythic portrait of the field: upon reflection, I now see that the book's magnetism lies in its predictable narrative thread, and that its traditional depictions of gender maintain its palpable fairy tale appeal. As Bettelheim suggests, while often unduly dismissed as clichéd or puerile, the normativity of fairy tales serves a narrative function: through their familiarity they help readers see themselves in stories of conflict, and thus move them closer to naming their anxieties, facing personal obstacles, and embracing mature and confident identities. Similarly, it is through its focus on the positive outcomes of struggle that *Women's Ways of Making It* distinguishes itself, casting women in rhetoric and composition not simply as tragic or insecure, but as leading scholars with self-possessed professional identities.

Let me make clear, however, that *Women's Ways of Making It* does not ignore the still-present sexism, low status, and labor exploitation that often plague women in the field. Carrying on in the tradition of texts that demonstrate women's marginalization in the academy and culture—including celebrated works such as Enos' *Gender Roles and Faculty Lives in Rhetoric and Composition*, Miller's *Textual Carnivals*, and Schell's *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers*—the book nonetheless distinguishes itself, seeking not to “repeat the careful and convincing work done by others” (4), but to “demonstrate how women have succeeded in spite of [professional] challenges” (3).

Fittingly, then, the book begins by synthesizing these challenges, but then moves quickly to advice on how to thrive in the field. Using a survey instrument reminiscent of Harzog's in *Composition and the Academy*, the authors reveal common themes conveyed by 142 women holding faculty positions in the field: such themes include “dealing with sexism [. . .], maintaining a balance between career and family, struggling for scholarly and/or administrative respect, mentoring junior women, finding one's voice in scholarship, and struggling to say ‘no’ to unrewarded service work” (4). Divided into four parts—“Becoming a Professional,” “Thriving as a Professional,” “And Having a Life, Too,” and “Being a Professional: Profiles of Success”—the final section contains interview chapters documenting the histories of leading women in rhetoric and composition, each of whom reflect on the adversities faced on the road to success.

Graduate students and job seekers will find valuable information in chapters one and two, which offer guidance on managing course work, finding a mentor, finishing the dissertation, and navigating interviews. Geared to readers on the tenure-track and beyond, chapters three and four argue for ways to develop successful tenure and promotion cases and avoid common professional snares, while chapters six and seven offer advice on

how to balance work with personal life. Of particular interest to readers of *WPA*, chapter four, “Succeeding Despite It All: Administration, Politics, and Difficult People,” contains advice on how to contain the “Queen Bee” compositionist—among other menaces—but more importantly, profiles the possibilities and pitfalls of WPA work. The authors report that the vast majority of their survey respondents warn junior faculty against accepting administrative positions. As they extrapolate,

It is no secret that the time and energy required to administer a writing program is time and energy not spent on researching and publishing—often resulting in negative consequences when an untenured WPA is reviewed for tenure and promotion. But what [our research articulates] here is the unspoken challenge faced by writing program administrators: often one is ostensibly hired or appointed as a WPA in order to effect change and innovation; however, the dirty secret is that the powerless (untenured, most likely female) WPA is hired or appointed precisely so that no change could be effected. And damn the earnest woman who tries. (119)

While this revelation is not breaking news to *WPA*'s readership—the dirty secret to which the authors allude is well-documented in collections such as *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration* and *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators*—it nonetheless reinforces the painful double-bind many pre-tenure administrators inhabit. True to the book's intent, however, rather than dwelling on obstacles, the chapter offers practical advice for junior WPAs, arguing that we can secure tenure if we: 1) educate our committees about the intellectual nature of our administrative work; 2) maximize our administrative work by publishing on it; 3) negotiate our administrative roles in relation to our publication expectations; 4) renegotiate those expectations if our administrative workload expands or changes; and 5) get absolutely everything in writing (121–23). By following these guidelines, Ballif, Davis, and Mountford suggest, WPA work can be much more than a burden: it can earn junior faculty the institutional presence that tips the scales of tenure in our favor (119).

Even more intriguing than chapter four, my favorite chapters reveal the Cinderella stories of leading lights in the field, including Patricia Bizzell, Sharon Crowley, Cheryl Glenn, Susan Jarratt, Shirley Wilson Logan, Andrea Lunsford, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Cynthia Selfe, and Lynn Worsham. Incorporating interview methods akin to Belenky et al.'s in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, these chapters engage in part because of their archetypal character, but also for their strikingly candid themes: the rebel daughter who rejects the sexist expectations of her father; the loyal undergraduate

who returns to her alma mater, but is betrayed on the road to tenure; the scholarly giant who narrates the satisfactions of publishing with her spouse, but adds a post-script announcing her unexpected divorce; the young mother whose brother's death compels her not only to pursue a more fulfilling career, but a new life on the opposite side of the continent. A little Disney-esque? Perhaps. Still, these true-life tales do more than shed light on the proverbial chimney-sweeping before (or despite) the pumpkin coach's arrival: they reveal the public perseverance and private principles of the interviewees. My favorite quote comes from Dr. Tell-It-Like-It-Is, Sharon Crowley, who stands out as the book's renegade protagonist. When asked what she would do to support a colleague being discriminated against, Crowley deadpans. "[I would] console her, make sure she's okay, and then I would go beat the shit out of whoever was doing the discriminating" (231). Not your traditional glass-slippered princess, this Cinderella's got the punch of Rocky Balboa.

Another way the interview chapters move beyond the normative is in how they reveal the diverse habits of well-published writers. As the authors note, writing-productivity experts suggest that the most prolific scholars write in brief, daily intervals, knowing "that long, exhausting practice sessions [. . .] persist beyond the point of diminishing returns" (112). Once again bucking the norm, however, Crowley describes her tendency to write in "pushes," that is, three-to-four day marathons in which she composes around the clock (226). Although Worsham reports a less epic regimen, she too devotes full days to writing (310), while Glenn and Jarratt often only find time to write during summer and holiday breaks (241; 256). Moral of the story? Just as the writing process differs from person to person, leading scholars have diverse writing routines. As a junior professor balancing administration with research, I am reassured to see that the book maps many paths to publishing success.

Because of this and other heartening aspects of the book, the strengths of *Women's Ways of Making It* clearly outweigh the weaknesses. Aside from its sometimes distracting gender archetypes, most shortcomings result from necessary limitations in scope and method. One can hardly fault the authors, for instance, for limiting their definition of success to tenured women working in PhD-granting institutions; such a definition, reductive as it is, remains the gold standard. The authors also shouldn't apologize for embracing an empirical design, as many of the strengths of their work would be diminished by a strictly quantitative or analytic methodology. Still, there are places in the book where I would have appreciated more analysis of their qualitative premises. A case in point is the notion that women in the field make less than men. While the authors point to Enos' 1996 study to sub-

stantiate this claim, I was surprised they did not re-examine how the wage gap may have narrowed over time, or how—given the ever-worsening job market in literature—composition specialists of all genders tend to negotiate as good or better wages than their English department peers. Other questions the study suggests but doesn't answer: How much are women who have made it actually making, and what strategies did some use to negotiate spousal hires? (Four of nine interviewees bargained for partner packages.) Less than genteel questions, to be sure, and ones privacy would dictate answered anonymously. Given the intended audience of the book, however, such questions were not beyond the asking.

That said, the answers to closed-ended questions may have undermined the therapeutic integrity of *Women's Ways of Making It*. After all, the restorative value of the book, like any good fairy tale, does not lie in its direct instruction, but through its ability to inspire resilience—and hope for the future. As Bettelheim concurs, “the fairy tale is therapeutic because the [reader] finds [her] *own* solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about [her] and [her] inner conflicts at this moment in [her] life” (25). As rhetoric and composition moves out of its figurative childhood and toward disciplinary maturity, perhaps such narratives are fitting—and to be celebrated. To be sure, the stories of adversity and triumph catalogued in *Women's Ways of Making It* are to be taken seriously not just for their proverbial pearls of wisdom, but for the confidence they inspire in readers. A professional happily-ever-after, after all, is within women's reach.

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