

Free Futility or Restricted Effectiveness?

Both Christine de Pisan and Margaret Fell found themselves in circumstances in which their rhetoric was restricted, De Pisan from political speech and Fell from religious speech. Both de Pisan and Fell also relied on the Bible for the primary source of their rhetoric or at least for their primary source for citations in support of their rhetoric. But the women differ strikingly in their response to their circumstances and the way in which they allow their circumstances to produce their rhetoric.

De Pisan and Fell differ in their attitude towards their circumstances. In de Pisan, there is hardly an inkling of a desire to change circumstances. She placidly and resignedly accepts the station that she has been allotted. Fell, however, seemingly burns with a desire to change her circumstances. The status quo is not acceptable; it must be changed. One might easily admire Fell for her passion.

De Pisan and Fell therefore differ in their arguments concerning their circumstances. De Pisan, to put it simply, has none. She merely prescribes rules for women to use their rhetoric to work behind the scenes and does not attempt to get them a role on center stage. Fell's arguments, on the other hand, are lengthy and complex in favor of a change in her situation. Here too, one might easily admire Fell for her skill and diligence in argumentation.

The primary difference, however, between de Pisan and Fell is their effectiveness. De Pisan exudes cool competence. She may accept her limitations without struggle, but she was doubtless effective within those limitations. Fell, on the other hand, seems to be naught but sound and fury accomplishing nothing. One may justly admire Fell, but if rhetoric is about effectiveness, de Pisan accomplishes her purpose.