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Lydia M. McDermott, *Liminal Bodies, Reproductive Health, and Feminist Rhetoric*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016; 175 pp. ISBN: 9781498513395. \$80.00 hardcover.

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Liminal Bodies, Reproductive Health, and Feminist Rhetoric presents composition professor Lydia McDermott's "sonogram" methodology of rhetorical listening (10), an exercise that discloses feminine voices muted or unjustly disciplined within texts ostensibly written on women's behalf. The texts examined (or sonogrammed) by McDermott range from eighteenth century pregnancy manuals to speeches by Favorinus the ancient sophist, who is described from antiquity as a hermaphrodite. Part of McDermott's purpose in sonogramming is to critique modern and contemporary feminists. She objects to the feminist trend of perpetuating and answering a "disability" rhetoric about women, or of demonstrating that women can overcome a "negative trope" characterized by feminine weakness and unreason (131). Such canonical methods of overcoming, on McDermott's account, include self-presentation as the "supercrip," the disabled person who "overcomes or compensates for a disability with some other ability" (4). In McDermott's case, she declines to advance her motherhood (in a graduate student essay, reprinted in the book's introduction) as compensation for her stretch-marks (the subject of that essay; pp. 3-4). She proposes instead to "question the system that marks human difference in

terms of value and deficit” (131), and to reinterpret human difference as “generative” and as “potential for self-actualization and social change” (126).

One change that McDermott envisions (and particularly as a rhetorician) is for the culture to start hearing feminine voices — seeing their owners, actually, for the *eidolons* that they are — and to expose unjust male *eidoi* (plural of *eidos*) in the rhetorical world (6-7). Hence her sonogrammic method, which like ultrasound technology, makes ‘visible’ that which is ‘heard’. *Eidos* means form, one of the most important concepts for Plato and the Socratics, a paradigm structure of health, wisdom, sound discourse, and order (cf. 6ff). *Eidolons*, on the other hand, are according to McDermott “images that [seem] to possess form, but [do] not . . .” (7). No character assumed to be or resemble an *eidolon* would furnish wisdom or security; to the contrary, the Socratic dialecticians count as formless the speech of the sophistic rhetorician (cf. 8ff), and McDermott demonstrates how the ancients came to associate such sophistry with the feminine (see chapter 1 and below). Thus there is no simple formula for describing sonogram rhetoric. McDermott explicitly “seek[s] *eidolons*” (7), and to find the formless, the projected, and the self-actualized, she listens by echoing the words of a speaker-writer back to the speaker-writer, revealing like a sonogram what lies between some possibly too-familiar *eidoi*. The best audiences for *Liminal Bodies* are those interested in the rhetoric surrounding feminine health, either as scholars of health, of composition, of health policy, or as novice male readers to feminism seeking a civil but implicating tutorial.

Chapter 1 begins a chronological summary of feminine-disability rhetoric, *via* the ancients. McDermott analyzes Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* to reveal the Socratic opinion that sound discourse resembles a well-formed body. She infers such bodies to be exclusively male, after considering Diotima’s remark in the *Symposium* that male dialogue generates a

wisdom more valuable than physical offspring (27-28). McDermott likewise references Plato's *Timaeus* to highlight ancient belief in the "wandering womb" that was assumed to cause feminine hysteria (29). She metaphorizes ancient depictions of the womanly body to the sophistic rhetoric derided by the Socratics, but points out that ancient man nevertheless seeks to appropriate woman's generative power (32). One salient example of the latter transpires, on McDermott's account, in the myth of Zeus swallowing a pregnant Metis and birthing Athena through his skull.

According to some versions of the Metis myth, Metis continues to live inside Zeus's body, advising him as a voice that only he can hear (35). In chapter 2, McDermott compares Metis to her Roman counterpart, Echo, whom McDermott calls a "displaced voice without a form" (41). McDermott reveals the power of Echo, and of McDermott's own sonogrammic method, in a remarkable, two-page, contrived dialogue between Echo and male philosopher-rhetoricians of antiquity. By repeating only the endings of male-spoken phrases, Echo discloses "an undercurrent of fear" among the men, particularly a fear "of women's voices and bodies" (44). McDermott all but acknowledges the dialogue to be selective listening of passages taken out of context, but she nevertheless declares the dialogue "a disruptive argument" that establishes a new "genre" of communication (44). As I interpret McDermott, the selective listening is neither banal nor fortuitous so long as it is read as a distinctly feminine Echo "resisting the antecedent genre" of classical men (44). I wonder if men similarly possess a faculty of echolocation for listening to feminists; I shall return to this question.

Chapter 3 details additional sonograms, this time of Favorinus the hermaphroditic sophist. McDermott calls him "a crack through which the feminine enters classical rhetoric" (72), but I elsewhere read McDermott as wanting to avoid merely locating the feminine within a

male hegemony, lest she reinforce and justify the hegemony (72-73). She endorses instead the advice of Raymie McKerrow, to “write rhetoric into the history of women” (73). In this vein, McDermott argues that masculinity was a trait possessed more along a continuum than as a binary in the classical world, such that Favorinus both speaks as a feminine person and demonstrates how to create a vocalic body (60). In one speech that McDermott sonograms, Favorinus addresses an audience in Corinth on the occasion of the city’s removing his statue (reason unknown). Favorinus seizes the occasion to rhetorically recreate the missing statue of himself as a “friend” (71) and even as a “son” (72). From Favorinus’s artful, mid-speech denunciation of Prometheus (who “created man from clay” (74)), however, McDermott draws an alternative conclusion about the statue. Because Favorinus both denounces Prometheus and recreates the statue as a vocalic body, McDermott likens Favorinus to Pandora, the feminine voice created to punish Prometheus. According to McDermott, Favorinus “creates” a “woman” in the immaterial statue, and so makes himself into another Echo (74-75), who “cannot be destroyed” (72).

The creation of vocalic bodies recurs in chapter 4, where McDermott sonograms a manual for midwifery composed by one Mrs. Wright in the year 1798. The vocalic body generated by Mrs. Wright is the male midwife, a figure new to the birthing scene who threatens to appropriate a female profession and to discipline women with the knowledge they lack (90). McDermott reveals an audience not only of “country-women” ambivalent about men in the birthing room and anxious to prevent fetal abnormalities, but also a “secret audience” of male doctors who may scrutinize the manual to Mrs. Wright’s disenfranchisement (93). Chapter 5 similarly investigates a late-1700’s anatomical figure-book that according to McDermott dissociates women from the fetuses they carry, and so attempts to neutralize women’s generative

power (106). Moving into the modern era, chapter 6 examines feminists such as Alice B. Stockham, who employ eugenic rhetoric. McDermott contends that eugenic themes, while increasing women's "influence and power," nevertheless demand "self-discipline" (125), and subsume the alleged benefits accruing to women to "the betterment of the species" (129). She concludes the book with another glimpse at post-pregnancy bodies, praising various social media sites that proffer "affirming" advice that "is not disciplinary"; i.e. the advice to "*feel good*" about your motherly body (153).

As intimated above, my only criticism of the book is that sonogram listening seems too easily directable against McDermott's own project. For example, here is one, small snippet of the dialogue between Echo (whose statements are fictions contrived by McDermott) and the actual quotations of ancient men (McDermott's source footnotes omitted):

Socrates: "A person with [a eunuch's] body, in war [. . .] gives courage to his enemies, and fills his friends [. . .] with fear."

Sophocles: "Silence gives grace to woman —"

Echo: Fear . . . woman. (43)

In reply, I wonder if the Gadfly (not necessarily Socrates) can sonogram McDermott's own text as follows:

McDermott: I got an IUD for the first time recently, after the third child. [. . .] The experience felt a bit like a science fiction film. [. . .] My uterus was projected on a big plasma-screen TV in front of me so I could watch the little metal T find its place in me. [. . .] Looking at the T in the little room of my womb, I felt empty. The only times I've had ultrasounds, there were babies to see in there. [. . .] I don't want another baby, but the ultrasound was disappointing.

[. . .]

The male in my workshop reacted to my essay similarly: where was the baby? [. . .] Why focus on a female body outside the object status it is allowed to occupy in Western culture? (4-5)

Gadfly: Fictionalized children . . . disappoint. I felt empty outside of my object status.

McDermott: I seek invisible bodies and echoes of bodies subsumed. (10)

[. . .]

[U]ltrasound technology used as a routine aspect of prenatal care [is] meant to discipline the female reproductive body. (15)

Gadfly: I subsume . . . babies to see. I feel empty. The little metal T . . . is
Western discipline.

Here the Gadfly discourages contraceptive practice, by giving colorful, forlorn testimony. Such is surely not McDermott's purpose in the introduction. So how has the Gadfly stepped out of bounds? Is the Gadfly insufficiently sophisticated to perform sonograms; failing, in McDermott's words, at "making the weaker argument the stronger" (55, 72)? On the contrary, it seems that (a) 'women are disciplined by contraception' *is* weaker than (b) 'relatively few women are disciplined by contraception'. Nor do only men endorse (a). Hence McDermott should demarcate further rules for sonogramming, hopefully in a sequel to her marvelous book.

Contributor Information

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