

Faculty Research Grant Closing Report

Jeff Rhyne, English, Summer 2004

Project Title: Ventriloquizing the Feminine: Catharine Beecher's Public Speeches and Ideal Womanhood

The Faculty Research Grant allowed me to make significant progress in advancing my research agenda. Instead of having to teach summer school to earn summer salary, I used the time to locate and obtain primary archival resources, to research 19th century American women's history, and to complete a first draft of this project which will eventually be a chapter in the manuscript on which I am working. The grant providing me the time to perform this research was necessary because the work represented a widening of the scope of that book project in order to propose it in the next year as a book publication.

Because the aim of "Ventriloquizing the Feminine" was to analyze descriptions of Ms. Beecher as a speaker, rather than the texts of her speeches, I had to narrow down the places and dates when she made public appearances in order to determine which newspapers and which time windows to search. First, I was able to obtain Ms. Beecher's journals, diaries, and letters from two separate special collections of Beecher family papers. From reading these and as well as published biographies, I then spent time obtaining microfilm copies of newspapers from the cities to which she traveled for her advocacy of improving the educational system for women. These searches through a number of local 19th century newspapers for two week periods surrounding her public appearances were the most time-consuming aspect of the project. It was also the most rewarding because I learned about the process of doing historical, archival work. Although I was unable to find detailed accounts of how she acted or spoke (most were brief accounts stating that she appeared), I did locate a few useful news items describing the dynamic of her decision to have men deliver her speeches for her, AND I discovered a number of descriptions of popular female actors who did perform publicly. This find is important in establishing a context for understanding attitudes toward women who made public speeches and/or appearances during the 1830s and 1840s.

Because my understanding of 19th century American women's history was limited, I also had to review the historiography of the field. I was initially uncertain about how I would contextualize this chapter, but my review of the literature about American women's history and my discoveries of primary sources relating to other women's public appearances has helped me to move forward confidently grounding my analysis of Beecher in historical and cultural contexts.

Although there are as yet no publications resulting from my research, I expect to complete a second draft of the work by the beginning of the spring semester, to include it in book proposals I send out in summer 2005, and to present an abridged version of the work at the American Studies Association conference in October 2005, in Washington, D.C. I thank the Research and Development Committee for their support of my research agenda.