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When we qualify writers into sub-categories such as women writers, ethnic writers, etc., we inadvertently classify them as sub-writers. We separate the literature produced by these writers into sub-genres (i.e. women’s literature, African-American literature, etc.), as though these texts are not literature in the same way that texts produced by cis-gendered white males are literature. This can mean that existing schools of critical thought are insufficient modes of analysis for these texts. In particular standard critical theories can offer incomplete, and, from a contemporary perspective, stigmatized understanding of the literary work that women produced during the American Renaissance. Even feminist theory subjects women’s texts to a fractured scope of critical inquiry. Linda M. Grasso, in her examination of antebellum women’s literature, introduces what she terms the “anger paradigm” as a critical lens through which to understand the texts, and claims that this new lens “liberates scholars’ dependence on variable classifications such as sentimental, domestic, exploratory or local color,”¹ that it not only avoids the divisive pitfalls of feminist theory but that it provides a method of valuing the socio-political power that women writers wield.

¹ Grasso, p. 16.
The anger paradigm weaves together elements of feminist, psychoanalytic, sociological, philosophical and linguistic criticism in an attempt to create a fuller, more unified critical approach. Grasso recognizes that women’s anger has long been devalued, but establishes that “feminist revolutionaries liberated anger from pejorative connotations by disassociating it from fear, destruction and masculinity and reassociating it with courage, growth and sisterhood.”2 Indeed, the redefinition of anger and the reclamation of women’s right to hold and utilize the emotion form the foundation of this critical lens. Grasso’s claim that “anger can be an organizing principle of American women’s literary history when it is employed as a mode of inquiry”3 revises our interactions with texts, not just of the American Renaissance, but with writing by women throughout American history, up to and including contemporary authors. Thus, it is not just an “organizing principle,” it functions as a unifying principle.

In noting the schism in feminist theory between white feminists, who were/are angry at being excluded by white men, and black feminists, who were/are angry at being excluded by white men, black men and white women feminists, and in noting the justification on each side, Grasso points to the need for a unified principle of anger. Anger “turned inward” leads to “guilt, depression and self-doubt” and “leaves the existing power structure intact.”4 Relying on Barbara Deming’s distinction between “anger that is affliction” (inward-turned anger) and “anger that is determination to bring about change”5 (anger focused on external causes), and on the Aristotelian relationship between righteous anger and justice, she posits that “women’s literary anger is collectively political.”6 She uses a set of questions to establish a framework for analysis,

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2 Grasso, p.4.
3 Gross, p. 4.
4 Grasso, p. 11.
5 Ibid.
6 Grasso, p. 6.
including determining the anger-producing conditions under which each writer creates and locating the metaphors, specific to the anger paradigm, that each writer uses. Here, she applies Konesces’s and Lakoff’s “folk theory of anger,” which notes how the physiological effects of anger get turned into descriptions, and posits that antebellum women in particular rely on two of the most common anger metaphors: anger as heat and anger as a dangerous animal in need of restraint. She goes on to note additional signs of anger specific to white women writers, including “crying protagonists,” “diminished men,” and claims that illness, acts of sacrifice and other debilitations are actually signs of “women’s forbidden angry expression.” Her theories about intentional reversals and masks, explained later in the text, make these signs more believable as expressions of anger.

Grasso’s discussion of the history of women’s anger rings true. The patriarchal practice of “trivializing and dismissing the anger of those in the less powerful class, race or gender position undermines the latter’s critique by insisting that their perceptions are invalid and unwarranted.” We see this practice repeated throughout history, even into twenty-first century society that continues to trot out the trope of “the angry black woman” and “the manhating feminist.” She points to gendered anger ideologies, established with the creation of the republic and the economic middle-class, and upheld by biblical interpretation, that defined moral anger and law enforcement as masculine privilege, while “ungoverned” anger, which could threaten the republic, as female. Thus, middle-class women were denied the right to be angry, even—especially—in anger-producing situations, causing tension between the desires to express anger and to retain middle-class respectability. Since women writers were unable to safely express

7 Grasso, p. 7.
8 Ibid.
9 Grasso, p. 15.
anger, they could internalize it or manifest it in text. Grasso suggests that these authors then “invent and practice an artistry of anger that is integrally related to the culture they are hoping their words will transform.”

Grasso opens each chapter with a quote from a woman writer, ostensibly to illuminate the ideas she explores within that space, cleverly inviting the reader to apply the anger paradigm to that text. Chapter 2, in which she explores the anger paradigm specific to antebellum America, opens with Dickinson’s poem 1362, encouraging readers to use the anger paradigm as “the one ray/To clarify the Sight/to seek them by.” In calling out the paradoxes on which American society is built (i.e. democracy vs. freedom), and the fact that while Europeans flew to America to escape persecution and poverty, American women such as Margaret Fuller and Harriot Jacobs fled America for Europe in order to find freedom, she establishes the basis for the anger-producing situations of this period, though of course these are far more numerous and complex than surface-level hypocrisy.

Again, Grasso shows that feminist theory has not created a “common language” for describing previously devalued authors, styles and genres. She notes that the classification of “sentimental” is still in use as a broad umbrella. However, feminists disagree on how to apply the term. Using Uncle Tom’s Cabin as an example, she notes that Nina Baym replaces the term “sentimental” with “womanly,” but says that Stowe doesn’t qualify because her protagonists are not young orphan girls triumphing on their own (a very narrow and perhaps inaccurate definition of “womanly” literature on Baym’s part), but Mary Kelley says Stowe does fit the “literary domesticity” label because she is “exemplifying struggles other white women writers faced.” Jane Tompkins keeps the term “sentimental,” and keeps Stowe within the category, but redefines

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10 Grasso, p. 17.
11 Grasso, p. 19.
it as poli-social, whereas Josephine Donovan finds Stowe to be a local color realist and insists that sentimentalists are “unworthy of literary study.” Grasso claims that the anger paradigm eliminates the semantic muddle. In addition, the anger paradigm situates all women’s writing in socio-political context in a way that feminist theory has not done. “…one of the limiting consequences of the literary domesticity paradigm has been the tendency to obscure the political ways in which nineteenth century women’s texts participate in national conversations.”

Since the economic shift from agrarianism to capitalism placed women in new roles as “republican mothers,” responsible for upholding/instilling morality (Grasso argues that this was previously the church’s role), women “performed the moral work of the nation by sacrificing [their] own needs and desires in order to ensure the success of the grand republican experiment.” Free black women had to do this for both the black community and the nation at large. “Black women could refute racist stereotypes by becoming literal embodiments of decorum and gentility . . .” Domesticity, then, becomes a constrictive force.

Grasso examines the Transcendentalist tenets of child rearing in order to show how the anger paradigm plays out in writers such as Louisa May Alcott. These tenets included viewing children “self-guiding, self-controlling beings,” but this idea was gendered; it did not apply to female children. Transcendentalism for men encouraged freedom and will, but for women it meant cheerful acceptance of whatever happened, which “cheerful acceptance” made “the self-reliant male nation-building possible.” Where males were encouraged to guide and control themselves, the girl children, at least in the Alcott family, were encouraged to keep journals

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12 Grasso, p. 21.
13 Grasso, p. 22.
14 Grasso, p. 23.
15 Grasso, p. 24.
16 Grasso, p. 25.
which the parents read and used as tools to “supervise the children’s moral progress,” by
“commenting on their comments.”’ Louisa May Alcott’s journals elucidate her personal battle
with the enforced dualism of quick temper and self-repression required in order to uphold both
familial and national felicity.

Grasso’s analysis of both Little Women, Alcott’s autobiographical novel, and “Behind a
Mask,” Alcott’s sensationalist short story, highlight hallmarks of anger paradigm metaphors. In
Little Women, Alcott upholds the middle-class sensibility, showing Jo as both angry but
struggling to repress it. The Camp Laurence scene, in which Jo successfully swallows her anger
and is commended by her sister and rewarded by the author by winning the game, and in which
her desires for justice and vengeance must be approved by the wealthy white male Laurie,
reflects the anger-producing situation in which women of her class found themselves. But Alcott
inverts these tropes in her sensationalist fiction, presenting a protagonist who proves that
“women’s greatest power . . . is her ability to perform the gendered roles of erotic object, humble
servant and devoted caretaker while tricking those duped . . . into believing no performance is
occurring.”’ This echoes the trope of masks identified by the anger paradigm. “One of the
central aesthetic features of the artistry of anger is the way in which writing women . . . invent
masking techniques in order to critique cultural norms and practices in socially acceptable
configurations.”’ Grasso quotes Alicia Ostriker in support of this claim, “the greatest women
writers are usually the most profoundly and excitingly duplicitous” and notes that Emily
Dickinson was “an especially gifted masker . . . in both her life and her poetry.”

17 Grasso, pp. 26-27.
18 Grasso, p. 31.
19 Grasso, p. 37.
20 Grasso, p. 38.
This appears to be a more concrete example of the power of women’s writings to make socio-political statements that object to the anger-producing situations. Novels that uphold the status quo while exhibiting latent classist tendencies (Grasso notes Alcott’s desire to create a new class of right-thinking wealthy folk and eradicate the poor) may express the writer’s discontent with their own place in society, and thus fit the anger paradigm on a personal level, but do not subvert the patriarchal paradigm.

Grasso applies a more thorough critical lens to Harriet Jacobs’s work. She begins by noting the anger-producing situation: Jacobs’s “anger, coupled with her desire to be useful to the abolitionist cause, propelled her to write” to refute lies about slavery. Given that she worked as a domestic for slavery sympathizer Nathaniel Parker Willis (Fanny Fern’s brother, a connection that becomes even more important later in the text), Jacobs had to hide the fact that she was writing. Even when she did complete her work, publishers required verification of her truths from someone “known to the public.”

Hallmarks of the anger paradigm abound in Jacobs’s work. She published under the pseudonym, Linda Brent, thus creating a mask behind which her anger could be expressed. She employs the “persistent theme of homelessness in nineteenth century women’s texts [that] signifies their sense of exile from the national homeland and their anger at this betrayal.” She projects her anger at the invasion of her privacy onto whites, calling them a “pack of hungry wolves.” She uses houses as metaphors, in this case “the pillaged house is a metaphor for the black woman’s body under slavery,” “symbolically she is continually raped by her country.”

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21 Grasso, p. 33.
22 Grasso, p. 36.
23 Grasso, p. 34.
24 Ibid.
25 Grasso, p. 35.
Grasso’s exploration of Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* supports the use of the anger paradigm as a critical lens and shows again the need for a unifying principle, if only to process the polarizing views held by the reading public at the time of the novel’s publication. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in her essay in support of Fern, claims that the novel would allow “other women to recognize their own oppression and respond appropriately,” which is given as a main purpose of righteous anger, and suggests that if all men feared being publicly exposed, they would be fearful of being such tyrants in the first place.\^{26} Grasso points to Stanton’s use of the rhetoric of the abolitionist movement, and her suggestions that *Ruth Hall* should be read as if it were a slave narrative as another instance of masking, where white women writers use color and lower class to say what they cannot. Fern uses the same technique, using the mask of a pseudonym, then the masks of male, child, and women of color characters to express anger, to use “words [that] are weapons that secure the victory of retribution” in a text encoded to purport forgiveness.\^{27} While the text does successfully champion women’s rights, Grasso notes that it does *not* champion race rights or the rights of the power. She does indict the novel as “a fantasy of white middle-class women’s equality in the capitalist marketplace,” and points to its function of “‘others’ [only] to help Ruth Hall reach her ultimate destination.”\^{28}

Grasso is most successful when she is able to clearly align the predetermined textual signposts of the anger paradigm lens with the text. Given that all of the women writers she examines are exposed to more or less the same anger-producing situations: the white writers are all middle class women who are constrained by their respectability to swallow ambition and pride, to be limited in their financial means to the success and good will of the men in their lives.

\[^{26}\text{Grasso, pp. 136-137.}\]
\[^{27}\text{Grasso, pp. 142-145.}\]
\[^{28}\text{Grasso, p. 147.}\]
and to hold themselves as paragons of virtue, never demonstrating anger toward men at all or women of their class, but free to displace it onto people—especially women of color, and women of lower class. The black writers are all black women in antebellum America, denied full humanity, subject to physical and psychic abuse at the hands of every person they encounter, yet required to hold themselves to the same standard as middle-class white women without any of the benefits.) it is perhaps less necessary to open each case study with a thorough examination of each writer’s specific anger-producing situation.

Examination of metaphor is a standard practice of close reading, as is the exploration of the relationship between signifiers and signified. These practices serve both the anger paradigm as well as the performative speech theory that Debra J. Rosenthal presents in her text, *Performatively Speaking.*

Rosenthal builds on speech theories proposed by Derrida and Austin to promote a theory of performative speech, or speech as actual action. For example, beginning a sentence with “I promise” is more than just saying words, it is engaging in the real act of promising. Thus, “performative speech can be described as an utterance that creates or produces the very action it names.”

By examining the speech action of certain antebellum texts, Rosenthal attempts to re-illuminate meaning in those texts. Though Austin dismisses speech in fiction and poetry as “hollow and void,” as it is essentially speech pretending to act, and Rosenthal circumvents this problem by focusing on the authorial intent behind and purposeful employment of speech acts.

She uses Derrida to counteract Austin, citing Derrida’s claim that the “performative nature of literature . . . underwrites language’s performativity.”

29 Rosenthal, p. 2.
30 Rosenthal, p. 6.
31 Rosenthal, p. 4.
In agreeing with Austin’s theory regarding the confluence of circumstances necessary for speech to become a felicitous, illocutionary or successful act: the right words must be said by the right people in the right situation, Rosenthal sets the parameters for her textual interpretations.\(^{32}\) She focuses on examples of illocutionary speech within her chosen texts, perhaps losing an opportunity to focus on what happens when a character, or an author, executes a failed attempt at illocution and what such intentional ineffective speech might mean. In citing Emerson’s ideas about performative language, culled from his essay “Eloquence,” and from the “Language” section of “Nature,” namely that “words are signs that emerge from humans’ relationship to the natural world” and that language “is the electricity of action. It is action, as the general’s word of command or chart of battle is action” Rosenthal legitimates her claims of authorial intent.\(^{33}\) Emerson’s contemporaries and literary descendants would have been familiar with his theories, and, she posits, shared them.

Rosenthal ties performative speech to sociological and economical paradigm shifts in antebellum culture. She contradictorily notes the advent of written contracts due to the loss of faith in spoken word, yet insists that speech continued to carry great power, pointing out that broken contracts resulted in loss of money but that broken promises could result in destroyed relationships\(^{34}\) (though financial loss might have been felt more deeply and had longer lasting effects than hurt feelings.) She focuses specifically, in Chapter One, on the illocutionary act of promising. Here, Rosenthal misses an opportunity to posit that perhaps the act of slavery, with its hypocritical interpretations of biblical language and the necessary deceptions and double-speak required to uphold the institution may have contributed to the loss of power of speech.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Rosenthal pp. 9-10.

\(^{34}\) Rosenthal, p. 17.
Instead, Rosenthal focuses on the peculiar phenomenon of the slave promise (she refers to specific examples of slaves promising to return to their masters), which she determines can be more binding than paper contracts, and through which, she claims slaves achieved a measure of equality and personhood otherwise denied them. Under Rousseau’s definition of a promise as “equitable agreements between people, or between a person and the state,” women and slaves exist outside the social contract, since neither held independent legal status as citizens.\textsuperscript{35} However, women did have access to what Cindy Weinstein terms the “paradigm of contract”\textsuperscript{36} between family members, which afforded individual rights within a family, and which Rosenthal expands to include slaves. The parallel is not exact, of course, but this understanding, in conjunction with Austin’s definition of a promise as “description, true or false, of the occurrence of the inward performance. . . Thus ‘I promise to’ obliges me—puts on record my spiritual assumption of a spiritual shackle”\textsuperscript{37} means that a promise, in essence, establishes subjective equality and recognizes the agency of the promiser. Speech, in the form of the promise, enacts self-empowerment.

Part of Rosenthal’s argument hinges on her examination of the “I” as ego, and part of it rests on Derrida’s theory that speech only has meaning because it has been understood before, so that the utterance of the phrase “I promise” satisfies Austin’s confluence of circumstance rules. She argues that it is “white privilege that claims pure intention of language,”\textsuperscript{38} yet focuses on the heroic virtue of the slave promise as the demonstration of this illocutionary speech, and does not discuss the examples of white owners breaking that contract in literature (i.e. George Shelby’s broken promise to free Tom.) If we accept that authors intentionally employ these performative

\textsuperscript{35} Rosenthal, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Rosenthal, p. 23.
speeches, and if the promise serves as “double bondage” while somehow empowering/freeing the slave, then are the authors saying that the broken promise diminishes the white owners’ selfhood? Rosenthal neither asks nor answers this question, but her claims create space for the debate.

Rosenthal provides a more successful examination of the Temperance Vow. After sharing Elaine Parsons’s six key features of the standard temperance tale (which include external influences as both the initial cause of the disabling addiction to drink and the path to redemption from alcoholism), she focuses on the need for performative speech to ultimately free the drunkard from his habits. Using T.S. Arthur’s stories as the basis for analysis, she shows how the drunkard’s pledge is “at once binding and liberating.” The “I promise/I pledge” speech here performatively binds the speaker but also transforms him, via the speech act, from a person who drinks into a person who has promised to give up drinking. This distinction may seem negligible, but the temperance vow seen in these stories, performed in front of a witness or witnesses, performed with intent to hold to the vow (irony, sarcasm and disingenuity do not count), and citing a pre-existing script both uphold Austin’s confluence of events and serve as forerunners to the practices of the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and twelve step program. Here, then, is a case in which life imitated art.

Rosenthal also includes a case study of Ruth Hall that dovetails with Grasso’s assessments of the text. Both authors investigate the double sets of masks in place (Sara Payson Willis writing under the pseudonym Fanny Fern and Ruth Hall writing under the pseudonym Floy) as performative, in that the pseudonym enacts safety and protects perceptions of womanly

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39 Rosenthal, p. 28.
40 Rosenthal, p. 33.
Rosenthal supports Grasso’s anger paradigm theory, referring to *Ruth Hall* as a revenge novel used to lambast Willis’s father for his lack of support, brother for his refusal to publish her writing and publishers for their maltreatment, noting the power of language to “tarnish male . . . reputations.” However, Rosenthal is ultimately more concerned with the performative act of signing at the end of the novel, claiming that Ruth creates her alter ego in the moment of signing in the same way that the people, collectively, of the American Revolution are enacted through the speech of the Declaration of Independence. Derrida, in questioning whether the people were already free and simply making that freedom publicly known through the declaration or whether they freed themselves in the instant of signing, decides that “the signature invents the signer.”

Since Derrida does not take gendered differences into account in the right to sign, Rosenthal claims that “the act of Ruth signing her name demonstrates that all along Ruth, as a married woman, contained the right to herself . . . by gifting herself with a public writing persona and then signing that name, Ruth declares herself to be a self-governing woman author. . . A woman’s signature, therefore, can prove to be transgressive and liberating in a way that a man’s cannot.”

Rosenthal’s explorations of the power of female speech acts also focus on verbal violence in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, specifically in Cassy’s rebuttal to Sambo when he threatens to whip her for helping Tom. This is a narrow focus, indeed, but Rosenthal claims that with this one speech, Stowe subversively explodes her own thesis of sentimental speech as a more powerful agent of change than violent speech or violent action.

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41 Rosenthal, p. 46.
42 Rosenthal, p. 45.
44 Rosenthal, pp. 50-51.
45 Rosenthal, p. 81.
Francophone influences of New Orleans culture support the idea that when Cassy threatens to “say the word,” she is threatening to invoke Vodun magic. The Vodun practice itself, as a syncretization of Catholicism and West African polytheism/naturalism, serves as a reflection of performative speech. Middle-class American belief in mysticism, “mesmerism and spiritualism” would have laid the foundation for tenuous belief in the power of Vodun threats. Stowe herself, as a participant in seances and such, would have a kinship understanding of the power of the supernatural.46 The fact of Sambo’s retreat suggests that this interchange satisfies the necessary elements of performative speech.

Rosenthal shows that when Stowe creates the paradox of Cassy, a woman using violent speech that should cost her the good will of the reading public, yet somehow retaining sympathy, she uses Cassy to do what she, as middle-class white woman, cannot. Echoing Grasso’s assessment of the anger-producing situation: a society in which women were meant to be bastions of gentility and were not enfranchised to give moral instruction to men, Rosenthal accuses Stowe of putting on textual blackface by living vicariously through Cassy. “Cassy’s threat shows us that by granting verbal power to a doubly disenfranchised human . . . Stowe uses language to both evoke a feminine presence of sentiment with which readers could identify and sympathize and to assume the fiery, compelling challenge akin to that of a masculine pulpit minister.”47 Cassy’s success in staving of a whipping through use of violent language does function as successful speech action, and it does “show readers how do to things with words.” Since Cassy survives and Tom does not, Rosenthal’s case about the reversal of Stowe’s thesis holds some value.

46 Rosenthal, pp. 88-89.
47 Rosenthal, pp. 92-93.
Pairing these two texts creates a more complex feminist lens through which to assess writing produced by women in any century, but with an especial understanding of the linguistic gymnastics of nineteenth century women writers. When we wed formalist speech theory with the anger paradigm, we see the interactive patterns that create a clearer vision of the culture and of women writers’ significance within the canon.