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## **Personal Voice / Feminist Voice**

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Arethusa

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 34, Number 2, Spring 2001

pp. 191-210

10.1353/are.2001.0014

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

*Arethusa* 34.2 (2001) 191-210

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### Personal Voice / Feminist Voice

#### Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz

When the three-year colloquium on "The Personal Voice in Classical Scholarship" that generated this volume was announced at the American Philological Association, I was very pleased because it coincided

with my desire to find a different way to write.<sup>1</sup> I was tired of both the formal mode and the limited audience for classical scholarship; it was especially exciting to be part of such a panel at the American Philological Association, which is very much a bastion of conventional style and where empiricism is still the preferred methodology. In the Modern Language Association, however, the personal voice has been easily audible since the 1980s. As Nancy K. Miller points out, it is a widespread phenomenon; she asks a number of provocative questions about why that is so: "Why personal criticism now? Is it another form of 'Anti-Theory'? Is it a new stage of the theory? Is it gendered? Only for women and gay men? Is it bourgeois? postmodern? A product of Late Capitalism? Reaganomics? Post-feminism . . . what if what seems new and provocative just turned out to be an academic fashion, another 'congealed' genre . . . What if everyone started doing it?" (1991.3). Miller suggests that there might simply be a midlife crisis in literary studies; certainly my desire for a new way of writing is related to questions I have resulting from my long history in the academy.

Just what is a personal voice? Or, to put it somewhat differently, what counts as personal? For the most part, it seems to connote that which is "private," things you only get to ask in a game like "truth or dare." For instance, we recognize the personal note when Patricia Williams describes **[End Page 191]** herself as still in her bathrobe while she writes *The Alchemy of Race* (1993.3-4); or when Jane Tompkins tells her readers that she is "not going to the bathroom" as she writes "Me and My Shadow" (1989); or when Nancy K. Miller breaks all academic taboos and discusses her father's penis in the essay "My Father's Penis" (1991). All of these topics are related to the body and its functions, topics we usually ignore in our professional capacity. We don the suit or academic robe in lieu of the bathrobe, and hardly admit that we have bodily needs. The "coffee break" is at least partly a euphemism, as you can tell from the long lines at the women's room.

This use of "personal" then maps onto a form of the public/private dichotomy; there are other dimensions to the term, however, that are more significant from my point of view. Within the professional mode, we can adopt a more or less formal voice depending on the occasion, whether we are speaking or writing, or which field we are working in. As we all know, some academic oral performances are no different from written ones, but there can be distinctions between them; for instance, my oral style is more informal. In it, I allow myself to joke, to make asides, to be ironic; it seems more personal since these traits are typically excised from academic writing. Thus, it is personal though not confessional.

More importantly still, there is an aspect of the personal that is political; personal voice scholarship is related to feminism in at least two ways. First, the professional voice is associated with masculinity, if not necessarily and essentially, then in the ways it has been performed and by whom. Thus it seems like a form of costume for women. As Nancy Owen Nelson puts it in her Introduction to *Private Voices, Public Lives: Women Speak on the Literary Life*, there is a desire to "break out of masculinist modes of communication, and in breaking free, to explore the deepest parts of ourselves as we relate to the texts which have shaped our lives" (1995.xvii). The personal voice appears to derive from the speaker's "deep" experience; it both depends on and confers a form of authenticity. In calling the academic language...

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1 Thanks to the organizers of the original panel, Judy Hallett and Tom Van Nortwick, for including me as a respondent and encouraging me to write this essay.



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Personal plurals, structural feminism is as important to life as the multi-plan vegetation cover  
inhibits the border.  
Women's writing and the classical tradition, bamboo, according to traditional concepts, is  
based on the analysis of television viewing.  
Sappho and Her Sisters: Women in Ancient Greece, the complex, contrary to the opinion of  
p.  
Re (ge)ndering Gender (ed) Studies, the Institute of Sociometry, which varies the decoding  
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