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ABSTRACT

The current public debate between the images of the smiling war hero and of the grimacing Vietnam veteran provide opportunities to define two discourse communities that manifest themselves in students' written discourse. These can be seen as akin to the first American jeremiads, which were Puritan treatises written by seventeenth century religious leaders, often drawing upon the Book of Jeremiah. As in the early jeremiads, students often argue with a sense of urgency, employ emotional appeals, assume a homogeneous audience, and argue in a dualistic manner. Like the early jeremiad writers, students frequently look back to the past for answers to current problems. Unfortunately, "correct" conceptions of history do not exist, and the rhetoric and dualism of the jeremiad do not fit many academicians' concepts of academic discourse. Students must be taught that different discourse communities make varied rhetorical demands. This can be achieved by: (1) discussing the current language of sloganeering politicians; (2) having students point out jeremiads in each other's papers; (3) encouraging students to back emotional assertions with academic evidence; and (4) asking students for definitions of shallow political terms. Such steps are necessary in preventing students from clinging to easy dualisms that mar extended argument. (SG)

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Stifled Voices; Clashing Ideologies: Student Arguments and the American Jeremiad

When American troops arrived home recently from the Persian Gulf, they were greeted with patriotic fanfare. Night after night, television news created the images of a nation grateful to its soldiers. The most common image was a large group of people applauding in an airport terminal as a soldier hugged his/her family. As with most television news, the faces were as interchangeable as the accompanying remarks were predictable. The placards read, "Welcome home heroes," and "We're proud of you." Soldiers, still dressed in camouflage fatigues, talked of soft beds and home-cooked food. Tears streamed down the cheeks of mothers, wives, and husbands as they welcomed their beloved ones home. The videotapes rolled.

Twenty years ago, my father, a Marine Corps officer, came home after his third tour in Vietnam to a nearly empty, late-night airport terminal. Hand-grenade shrapnel was embedded in his left leg, and he could barely walk because of the pain. His eyes were outlined with

dark circles. Leaning on his wife, my father limped through the San Diego airport terminal to a waiting car that would take him to the local VA hospital. There were no cameras, no reporters, no supporters. Even his own teenage son was against the war, and the son was ready to pick an argument about it. And my father didn't want a soft bed. He wanted a drink. A strong one.

Much has been written in the popular media about this contrast between how our country welcomed home our most recent war veterans and how the nation treated Vietnam War veterans when they came home. I want to use this public contrast, this public rhetoric, as a gateway to understanding the influence of prevailing political discourse on the rhetoric of college students. I want to use this current public debate because those two images--the smiling American war hero waving to the cheering crowds; the grimaced face of the injured Vietnam veteran not welcomed home--represent the rhetorical masks we wear sometimes, figuratively, as a country. Behind the masks, lies the dualism and reductionism of the American jeremiad, the myth that consecrates our cause as a country and people to accomplish a pre-ordained, God-given errand. Under one mask, our God-chosen country is at last fulfilling its consecrated mission; under the other mask, our country has lost its way in the darkness, and is groping for its true basic values and principles. The rhetoric of university students, as they make their first attempts at extended argument in writing classrooms, often reflects this dualism in its extreme form.

Most rhetoricians do not write in detail about student writing in terms of prevailing political discourse. Joseph Harris, Patricia Bizzell, Peter Elbow, and Stanley Fish, among others, speak about writers working within rhetorical communities, and about the constraints of these communities, but they do not pinpoint such communities in specific ways for university writing teachers. It is true, obviously, as Harris suggests, that, "We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say" (12). And it is true, obviously, as Fish argues, that "the individual is . . . always constrained by the local community standards and criteria of which his judgment is an extension" (440). But Harris, Fish, and other scholars identify certain rhetorical communities only in abstract terms. The question remains: How do specific communities operate in our students' discourse?

I want to use the two masks, the two sides of the American jeremiad, to define two specific discourse communities that manifest themselves in my argument classrooms. These discourse communities, embedded in my student's papers, lead to a type of writing, logic and reality that I find stifles my students' voices and often leads to unnecessary ideological clashes in classroom discussion. Students who want to argue, for example, that all American flag burners in this country "should be deported to Russia or Iran" (and I have had many such students) merely echo a vast, prevailing political

discourse that depicts America as fulfilling its mission as a God-chosen, God-ordained country with sacred principles. This argument fits neatly with the image of the returning American war hero, the John-Wayne-like conqueror, waving to his supporters. But as a sacrosanct argument, it prevents that type of free-ranging dialect most university instructors favor in the classroom. On the other side, there is the type of student argument that seeks to convince by pointing out that the prevailing political power has lost sight of the basic values and principles upon which the country was established. This argument reminds us of the image of the wounded Vietnam War veteran forgotten and abandoned by his country. Yet, through its self-righteous cynicism, this argument becomes as sacrosanct as the argument celebrating the fulfillment of America's consecrated mission. Thus it, too, prevents extended dialogue. It assumes that as a nation we have strayed from a preconceived, righteous path, and that after we take stock of our errors, after we suffer collectively, after we conduct a scathing self-examination, and after we get back to what we have lost, whatever that is, we will become great as a nation again.

These two types of extremist, stifling arguments, which are each part of a separate discourse community with its own set of conventions, stances, and slogans, show up consistently in my argument classrooms. And I find it helpful to perceive much of my students' writing in argument classes as an augmentation of the reductionism and dualism inherent in the American jeremiad. I

realize the danger of categorizing student writing in such a dualistic manner, and I remind myself constantly of this danger, but I find that the concept of the American jeremiad and its dichotomies provide me a flexible enough way of articulating to myself and to my students what I find to be stifling, dead arguments. To those writing teachers who hear in their students' voices that same trite, cliche-ridden political rhetoric, both left and right, we hear repeated in those fifteen seconds or less allotted to national politicans by network news, I suggest this: The American jeremiad is probably lurking within the students' initial logic. The American jeremiad is a powerful and sometimes useful way we express our identity, and our strength, as a nation, but when it surfaces, as it does inevitably, in argument, humanities, philosophy, and political science classrooms, it is most often counter productive to the type of healthy dialect that forges democratic consensus and solidifies or changes beliefs.

The first American jeremiads were Puritan political-religious sermons and treatises written by religious leaders in the seventeenth century. Such treatises, often drawing on the Book of Jeremiah, reminded the new American immigrants that their immigration was a spiritual quest, and that their mission, or errand, was to form a new heavenly city of God. Cotton Mather's 1702 Magnalia Christi Americana is perhaps the most well-known jeremiad, but Samuel Danforth's 1670 speech "A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand Into the Wilderness" is probably a more representative example of an

early-day jeremiad. In his speech, given during an election day in Boston, Danforth reminds his audience that the purpose of their immigration to America was "the expectation of the pure and faithful Dispensation of the Gospel and Kingdome of God" (17), and "the fruition of [God's] holy ordinances" (18). Danforth's speech is quite predictable, and extremely long, and consequently I will not quote extended passages. But what follows is a typical section:

> To what purpose then came we into the Wilderness, and what expectations drew us hither? Was it not the expectation of the pure and faithful Dispensation of the Gospel and Kingdome of God. The times were such that we could not enjoy it in our own Land; and therefore having obtained Liberty and a gracious Patent from our Sovereign, we left our Country, Kindred and Father's houses, and came into these wilde Woods and Deserts where that Lord hath planted us and made us "dwell in a place of your own, that we might move no more, and that the children of wickedness might afflict us no more" 2 Sam.7.10.

Note how Danforth reminds the immigrants of the spiritual foundation for the immigration. Now that the spiritual quest was fulfilled (as it was rhetorically over and over) the immigrants could achieve God's blessing. Thus the celebration of religious faith merged with the celebration of the new political society. It is not an exaggeration to trace at least some of the recent patriotic fever and the celebration of this country as a God-inspired power, to the all-

encompassing ideals of the early-day jeremiads. Consequently, the soldier returning home from the Persian Gulf is, in many politician's rhetoric, not only an American soldier but also God's righteous soldier. It takes little effort to imagine the futility of arguing the merits of the recent war with students, or anyone, relying on such narrow ideology to qualify their actions and beliefs.

On the other hand, the early-day jeremiads reminded the new Americans that they could expect extreme retribution for straying from the errand. It was the duty of the Puritan religious leaders to warn their flocks of the danger of incurring God's wrath, and they often did so publicly and harshly. In Danforth's jeremiad, for example, he speaks of the settlers' "expectations of ludicrous levity," which has caused "decays and languishings" (16). He warns the immigrants not to become "reeds, light empty, vain, hollow-hearted professors, shaken with every wind of temptation" (16). Two scholars, Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch, point out how the early jeremiads, warned that the new Americans were, indeed, straying constantly from their God-inspired mission by committing worldly sins, by not honoring God's will, and by not acknowledging their special status as a God-chosen people. The jeremiads, then, along with celebrating the new society, also condemned it consistently. Through such self-condemnation, and if they returned to their old values, the new Americans would get back on the right path. In this way, some people today, including President George Bush, see the war protests in the 1960s and 1970s as a type of national self-

castigation, and many people viewed the returning Vietnam veterans as symbols of what happens when America departs from its mission. Now that the war with Iraq is over, for example, Bush has told the American people: "We have kicked the Vietnam War syndrome." In essence, Bush, through his rhetoric, is finding a path out of the darkness for his country. He is remaking America as a great nation again. But what is missing here, of course, is the type of dialect and specific definition many academicians seek in their classrooms. What exactly is this "Vietnam War syndrome?" And did we really kick it? If so, did we need to?

Obviously, mythical foundations, such as the American jeremiad, tell "who societies are, how they develop, what they know and why" (Nelson 273). But they become debilitating when people attempt to use them in extended, rational arguments. The sense of errand or mission inherent in both sides of the jeremiads, for example, forbid the type of questioning, openness and logic that leads to developed written arguments which acknowledge opposition, seek legitimate compromises, and rely less on pathos than specific evidence and examples. In Bercovitch's view, the jeremiads, then and now, evade questions that might lead to helpful national self-examination:

> The question in [our] latter-day jeremiads, as in their seventeenth-century precursors was never "Who are we?" but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question: "When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?" (11)

And in my classes, students often argue initially with this sense of urgency and mission. They adopt features of these discourse communities despite widespread evidence that they know little about American history (especially the jeremiad) and the political and religious traditions from which the discourse comes. Their initial arguments are, like the jeremiads, often highly emotional, and they often operate with the hidden assumption that their audience is homogenous. Most importantly, the dualism of their arguments--celebrating political systems and beliefs, or urging a return to basic values and principles--are as predictable as the television images of the troops returning home or of a group of war protestors chanting augmentations of 1960s political rhetoric.

I do not want to simplify my students' arguments, nor do I want to leave the impression that all political rhetoric and all of my students' arguments fit neatly into these two categories. Fortunately, some do not. What I can do is to help students and myself place their arguments in some type of specific, rhetorical context. What follows, then, is a brief passage of a paper written by a student arguing in favor of a constitutional amendment forbidding the burning of the American flag. This is followed by a passage from a speech given by former President Ronald Reagan. This particular student and Mr. Reagan (and his speechwriters) are operating within the same ideological and discourse community.

> I strongly believe that there should be a strict constitutional amendment against flag burning. The

United States flag represents all that we the people have fought for. The land of the free couldn't have become possible if all the people of the United States of America weren't able to unite as one underneath the glory flag.

Call it mysticism if you will, I have always believed there was some divine providence that placed this great land here between two great oceans, to be found by a special kind of people from every corner of the world who had a special love for freedom and a special courage that enabled them to leave their own land, leave their friends and their countrymen and come to this new and strange land--to build a new world of peace and freedom and hope. (11; July 3, 1986)

Note how both Reagan and the student use the same types of patriotic phrases, such as we the people, the land of the free, the glory flag, divine providence, special love for freedom, peace and freedom and hope. This patriotic language is embedded rhetoric in my student's and Reagan's specific discourse community. Both passages can be characterized as simplistic and straight-forward, relying heavily on arousing patriotic emotion. Reagan, for example, uses the basic tenets of the jeremiad to arouse emotion, while the student argues that the flag symbolizes "all we the people have fought for."

Both passages, like the one side of the jeremiad, are celebratory, and obviously support the prevailing political systems. We can easily and naturally associate them with the image of the returning war veteran waving to his cheering supporters.

In contrast, compare the following two passages. The first passage is written by a student, a university junior, arguing against a constitutional amendment forbidding flag burning. The second passage is from a 1981 speech given by Reagan.

> No! There should not be an amendment to the constitution making flag burning illegal. When our forefathers wrote the constitution they were just coming from an impoverished society. The British had controlled the colonies and the colonialists had broken away using their right to freedom of expression and freedom of speech. These are two of the most important points in the constitution. The people who burn the flag probably burn it because it is the only way to get enough attention for their cause. Many people do not have the political means or the financial means to be heard. They have to do something so their issues can be heard. I think the congress is just keeping this issue on flag burning alive because they do not want to talk about the half-trillion dollar savings and loan bailout.

Yes, we have our problems; yes, we're in a time of

> recession. And it's true, there's no quick fix, as I said, to instantly end the tragic pain of unemployment. But we will end it. The process has already begun and we'll see its effects as the year goes on.
>
> We speak with pride and admiration of the little band of Americans who overcame insuperable odds to set this nation on course 200 years ago. But our glory didn't end with them. Americans ever since have emulated their deeds. (24; Jan. 21, 1981)

What makes these passages different than the other two--and all four passages operate within the larger rhetorical context of the jeremiad--is the implied sense that the country needs to return to its basic values, its basic principles. For the student, flag burning should be tolerated because, among other reasons, the country's founders wrote a constitution guaranteeing freedom of expression. For Reagan, national problems can be rectified using the same spirit, the same "glory" as the country's founders. The student uses the word "forefathers." Reagan uses the phrase "little band of Americans." Both the word and phrase, used in this context, hold significant ideological connotations. Although the student and Reagan might disagree on certain political issues (this one included), each operates in the same discourse community, using the same type of logic. America has problems, or faces a problematic decision. The answer to the problems is to return to the principles

and emotions on which the country was founded. We can associate this type of argument with the image of the wounded Vietnam War veteran who represents a country that forgot the lessons and glory of its forefathers.

The concept of looking back to the past for answers to current problems has been a major part of our country's political rhetoric since its inception. In their early-day jeremiads, religious leaders warned their flocks of straying from the foundation of God's righteous path. And in the last decade, our country's prevailing political discourse, specifically the rhetoric of Reagan, Bush, and hundreds of national and local officials, has grown increasingly dependent on attempting to solve societal problems with a return to some better understanding of historical foundations, values and principles. James Campbell calls this discourse "the rhetoric of restoration." Campbell suggests that current political rhetoric argues that "once we have reintroduced the correct historical understandings . . . and returned our institutional practices to these correct conceptions, we will be back on the proper track as a society" (156). The problem is, of course, that such correct historical understandings do not exist, though some of our students think they do.

The larger problem, in terms of this essay, is that the rhetoric and dualism of the jeremiad, which I hear in my students' voices, does not fit many academicians' concepts of academic discourse. Peter Elbow, Sheryl L. Fontaine, and others, warn us about the

improbability of defining one central academic discourse, and Harris writes about admitting a "polyphony" of voices in the academy (17), but it is hard to imagine that, as writing teachers, they do not attempt to move their students away from the close-mindedness of the American jeremiad and the prevailing public discourse. Elbow suggests that it is problematic to argue that we should privilege any certain "set of intellectual practices for better scholarship or for thinking or for arguing or for rooting out self-deception" (153). Under this argument, then, the conventions of the jeremiad should have as much status as anything else in the classroom. But Elbow, as we all do when we write or talk about defining academic discourse, undercuts his argument. From the rhetoric, persona, vocabulary and sheer length of Elbow's recent article in College English emerges a version of reality that seems far from polyphonic, far from the democracy it seems to posit on the surface; subtly the article argues for itself, for its own power to persuade others, for a precise set of "intellectual practices for better scholarship" that are quite different than the rhetorical conventions of the jeremiad. My essay, of course, does the same. The bottom line: In Elbow's classroom, in his writing, academic discourse is what Elbow and his students make it; in my classroom, in my writing, it is what I and my students make it. What, then, I ask, remains the point of trying to define such an indeterminate, nebulous term as "academic discourse?" Even if we could agree on one determined meaning, we know it wouldn't be operating in most of our students' lives, and we know it probably

never will. We obviously need to explain to students how different discourse communities make varied rhetorical demands, and we can help students attempt to join one or some of these communities. But that remains a futile exercise unless we know at least some of the discourse communities already operating in our students' rhetoric. We need to find bridges, not debate definitions, and we cannnot build bridges unless we know the type of ground that exists on both sides of the water.

On one side of the water, then, I have found that many of my students--especially in my argument classes in which they are asked to write about larger community issues--operate in the two discourse communities of the jeremiad. These students present indeterminate words, consecrated political terms such we the people, or glory flag, or forefathers, or land of the free, as if they held determined meaning. They glorify prevailing political systems, or they tear them down, but their logic and reason is often based on the jeremiads they hear on the television or read in the newspaper. My task, as I see it, is to help students break away from this stifling rhetoric, and to provide that help in such a way that I am not perceived as a dangerous threat to their political beliefs. What I find most helpful is to simply talk about and acknowledge with students the influence of political discourse and the jeremiad on their own writing and thinking. Here are some of the classroom techniques I use:

(1) I always talk about current and specific language and

sloganeering politicians use in relation to the historical traditions of the jeremiad. For example, I recently discussed the American rhetoric during the recent war with Iraq, focusing on such words, phrases and labels as all free people everywhere, naked aggression, ruthless dictator, cruel tyrant, patriot missiles, etc.

(2) I have students point out the jeremiads in each other's papers during peer critiques, and I have students bring in recent examples of jeremiads.

(3) I encourage students to use the emotionalism of the jeremiad as long as they back their assertions with typical types of academic evidence, such as statistics, other published sources, interviews, and as long as they use extended reasoning to prove their assertions.

(4) When I respond to drafts, I ask for extended definition of those terms that echo the shallow political discourse I hear.

I do not want to leave the impression that my entire argument class is focused on the jeremiad. It isn't, and not all my students write about specific political issues that employ the rhetoric of the jeremiad. I use the jeremiad as one teaching tool to respond to that type of narrow-minded language and logic I find consistently in my students' papers. My students are not narrow-minded, nor are they dumb, nor are they trite, but they do write and talk within in a political discourse community that I sometimes feel can be all those things. In addition, it remains counter-productive to extended, useful public argument. At the very least, then, this knowledge, as

Harris points out, gives us "a way of talking about why many of our students fail to think and write as we would like them to without having to suggest they are somehow slow and inept because they do not" (16).

Ultimately, what I try to get my students to see is that the dichotomies inherent in the jeremiads only exist as myth. Students create this myth with their own rhetoric and their own logic.

Thus, the contrast between how this country welcomed home today's war veterans and how it neglected the Vietnam War veterans some twenty years ago is more complicated and not as nearly dualistic as what I presented initially in this essay. Obviously, the contrast is based on many factors. So I might ask my students: Can the two wars, in all fairness, be compared? What type of soldiers served in the different wars, and why would that make a difference in public perception? What was the overall public reaction to each war? How did technology--both weapons and media--make a difference in how the public perceived the two wars differently? What is my personal stake in this argument, and how does it make me frame these very questions? The questions could go on and on. Unless we reveal such public dichotomies to our students and then help students ask those questions to break down those same dichotomies, they will continue to cling to those comfortable and easy dualisms that prevent extended argument.

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