

The Hegemony of “Liberation”
Response to E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*

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Exordium

Rhetoric and Ethic is a book that holds up a mirror, or perhaps better, a reflected image of our profession –our assumptions, our activities and our goals. Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza presents us with this glass not simply to describe, but to provoke discussion, thought and change. She reminds us that we largely have left behind a view of Biblical Studies as a dispassionate discipline, and she invites us to assume a new vision: “to become a critical transformative intellectual rather than just a professionalized one” (10). I share her desire that our work and play make its impact *beyond* our own company, and that our discourse and action would also take place in the public forum. (Our presence could have even modest aims, as we, for example, stem the tide of grammatical confusion, reminding our students that the word ‘impact’ is a noun and not a transitive verb and that *it’s* is not the possessive!) On a more serious note, it is challenging to ask “are Christian theology and biblical scholarship able to step into the increasing vacuum of meaning and hope generated by the transnational globalization process?” (41)

Stepping into this vacuum will mean that we engage in a sober assessment of our own roots. It is true that for long-time the meeting of faith and academia in North America has been framed by the Janus faces of positivism and fundamentalism (And here I use the technical, rather than slurring popular definition of the latter term). So it is salutary to be reminded that rationalist queries and proofs have ended in a cul-de-sac. On a personal note, I have myself struggled with a formation that promoted belief in a book (cf. *Rhetoric*, p. 41) and a system when it purported to give a way to the Author and the Truth; and like many here, I have come to discover that the chastening voice of old or neo-liberalism, heard in my graduate years, is in the end bankrupt. Again, it is clear there is no such thing as value-free inquiry (41), and that texts have a surplus of meaning best approached through a “hermeneutic of imagination.” I might note that I am myself indebted to Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza for the structural lens that she has

offered for a fruitful reading of John's Revelation. As a reader who has also entered into the rich text of the Johannine apocalypse, I have tasted of this symbolic, even sacramental, world where *logos* merges with story. Thus, I am convinced of the irreplaceable role of imagination for adult as well as childlike quests.

In short, it is bracing to move beyond description, without leaving it behind: 'It does not suffice to know the world as it is; what is crucial is to transform and change it' (3). The role of community in this is key, and I appreciate Prof. Shüssler Fiorenza's choice of the term *politeuma* as she envisages such a transformation. For *politeuma* reminds us, by its two meanings, that action and community are intricately bound up together. Moreover, I agree that persuasion or peaceful resistance, rather than attack, is bound to be the most fruitful approach (p. 77). Finally, I embrace her suggested stance for the one who would foster change – that of being a 'qualified resident and remain[ing] a foreign speaker at one and the same time' (74). Attachment to the narrative of the incarnation means that I need no conversion to the view that salvation must come from within and from without.

Narratio

But here I must stop, and move on from the pleasant establishment of exordial *ethos* to my dreaded task. I fear that already the game is up. It appears that my "within" and "without" are not the same as our illustrious author's, and that I must, like poor parent Paul, play the fool in my discourse. She is right: a speaker needs to determine the goal, and so I ask myself 'What is the overriding rhetorical problem...that ...[I] have to overcome in order to win the audience over to my point of view' (108)? I fear I know too well the problem, and this may be insuperable. The problem is that we -- the author (or at least the implied author) of *Rhetoric and Ethic* and myself-- we speak a different language. In using that different language, we hold to a different story which guides our speech, and a different view of the goal, both of biblical studies and of human effort. I know this because of what is silenced in her manifesto. In *Rhetoric and Ethic* there is a studied marginalisation of that very story which for me shapes *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. The marginalisation is done through caricature, through silence, and through moralising assumptions which rule my story out of court, in short, unethical. The self-absorbed part of me wants to cry out: Who is now the 'marginalised scholar?'

But far more important than my personal *angst* is the studied repression in *Rhetoric and Ethic* of what many have found to be the grounds for true liberation.

Part of that liberation involves an ecstasy, a going out of the subject (myself) to the object of study or to the one with whom one has concourse. That is, indeed, the pattern behind the typical speech, where *narratio* and *confirmatio* take over from the establishment of *ethos*, and where there is a final pathetic appeal which embraces the other. No doubt the movement out of the subject was both absolutised and domesticated by a last generation, who espoused neutrality as a controlling mode, and so taught from the ivory tower. We have tired of the pretense, and are more frank about the place of the subject in knowing and thinking and professing. Yet the pattern away from self has been celebrated on a fuller scale by philosopher, theologian, and mystic alike, as these die to self in the quest for something or Someone greater. In recalling his experience with his mother Monica, Augustine remembered their moment of access: "And while we were speaking and panting for wisdom, we did with the whole impulse of the heart slightly touch it" (*Confessions*, 9.10) Even more direct is the Eastern voice of St. Symeon: "But , O what intoxication of light, O what movements of fire" (*Hymns of Divine Love*, 25) or the alternate voice of Teresa: "What God communicates to the soul in an instant is a secret so great and a favour so sublime" (*The Seventh Dwelling Places* 2.3). But where is the play, the ecstasy, the forgetfulness of self, in the dance prescribed by Professor Schüssler Fiorenza? For everywhere the first person prevails ("my own work," "my discussion", "my presidential address", "my marginalization") – no doubt the voice of experience speaks, but the hegemony of the first person is also programmatic. It is not just that the perceived 'dance across the minefield' effaces the smile of the dancer, and renders her steps self-conscious. It is also that the voice of solipsism is built into the programme for deliverance. For the dictum of Elisabeth List has been embraced: "the place of feminist thought is always the place of woman who thinks herself and the world" (7). The subject (especially the woman subject) must "think herself" – that is where it starts and perhaps also where it ends. But to one who seeks a different liberty, the terminal goal, to make the woman a subject and agent, is short-sighted: there are many kinds of prisons.

And what about “thinking the world?” Here is a brave project. Despite the eschewal of relativism, the language of the book is that of constructing and reshaping the world, of re-envisioning. The Kantian and post-modernist lessons have been well learned, that we cannot touch what is there, but that our greatest role is to create a “different religious imagination” and an alternate world. This leaves no room for a voice which points to something outside of the subject, difficult though it may be to apprehend. Also silenced are those who may have modest goals for the biblical and human enterprise, who think that observation and description may have some value of themselves. Could it be that there are *grounds* for mimesis rather than simply symbolic conventions that are to be manipulated to drive the hearer to action? Deliberation is only one mode of rhetoric: where is there room in this book for legitimate epideictic and forensic discourse? All is subsumed under power and ethics.

Confirmatio

Method

So, we have been captured by different stories and speak with different tones, to different ends. Let me, nonetheless, try to engage the book by asking methodological and concrete questions of it, before I close with my own ruminations about our theological discourse. Two initial questions that beg to be asked are *What or who is marginalised?* and *What or who is given priority?* The book sets out three competing paradigms, which it hopes to question and surpass: the doctrinal-fundamentalist paradigm, the “scientific” positivist paradigm and the (post)-modern cultural paradigm, which she rightly insists still retains vestiges of modernism. These paradigms are seen as moments in what she hopes will eventually complete a “full turn” or transformation in our discipline. In her critique of the first ‘doctrinal’ paradigm Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza establishes what she considers to be its inadequacy -- its emphasis on orthodoxy and its so-called alliance with a naïve literalist approach to the Bible. Her critique of the second paradigm questions its artificial positivist or scientific emphasis upon ‘factual’ truth. The third approach she sees as more promising, but still hampered by its atheological and relativistic character. These paradigms find their correction and fulfilment in the “rhetorical-emancipatory” paradigm of which she is the herald.

In deploring oppression, the author castigates others who ‘stereotype those who don’t agree’ (40). Yet, of course, it is a hard thing to see others, or ourselves as others see us, and so a good deal of her own stereotyping goes on, for example, in her depiction of those who give priority to doctrine. One might ask whether there can indeed be a vital ethic (rather than just a probative suggestion) without doctrine. In her suggestions as to how the focus could be shifted, the author asserts “biblical interpretation must rely on probabilities rather than certainties; thus its adjudication should be made in terms of resistance and persuasion rather than attack.” (77) However, it becomes clear that the emancipatory paradigm has not really left behind the moment of doctrinal fundamentalism and violence. Her book is surely a ‘site of struggle’ (72) and the discourse of this fourth turn is fuelled with doctrine which leads to the anathematisation of the dread enemy “kyriocentrism.” (“All hegemonic traditions are imbued with kyriocentric ideology and function,” 95, my emphasis). Although she eschews the idea of canon within canon, it is clear that a *Sachkritik* will be involved for at least some practitioners of this paradigm, who are called to be “responsible” in exegesis (110) –in what sense responsible, to what or whom? A breathtaking appeal is made to “biblical values and visions” (9) and indeed to a “feminist scale of values that may be inspired by, but ... not necessarily derived from the Bible” (51). Such belief, visions and hierarchy of values are not explicitly demonstrated, but rather assumed. It seems that we are to know by “commonsense” what is oppressive, and that we should take as a truism the rather pallid doctrine which emerges: it is our duty to “overcome structures of domination and achieve well-being for everyone” (44). In this very book, we see clearly demonstrated the “rhetoricity of all scholarly inquiry” – including this one, which we are to embrace rather than resist.

Because of its global vision, and its purpose in the realm of public discourse, the emancipatory-rhetorical paradigm marginalises not only some faithful and older-style academicians, but also many in the public realm. For the point of this discourse is not simply to exist alongside other approaches, but to win ground by displacing them *when necessary* (pp. 48, 92). In short, there is a new hegemony, so sure of its doctrine, methods and goals, that it must envision, rather matronisingly the “conscientization” of those who do not see themselves as victims. This movement is supposed to appreciate difference (46) – but there is, by the nature of its cause, a limit to what it will tolerate.

The proliferation of imperative verbs in the book also indicates that this goddess is a jealous one. In fact, the needed bringing together of critical methods “can be accomplished *only* within a critical feminist framework” (68, my emphasis). To be sure, the paradigm is first introduced with the language of possibility (p. 10); within a page, however, “could” is transmuted to “must” five times. After all, this is a programme of reform, and so those who do not care to “constitute themselves as subjects of knowledge and history” must be forced to be free. Is this a dance, or a battle? The hermeneutic presents itself as a grand scheme to overcome splits – but in so doing obscures its main drive (49) – the displacement of other approaches and paradigmatic structures.

Throughout the discussion we frequently see a separation of ethos and pathos from logos. To cast everything in terms of power-struggle seemingly reduces discourse to assertion, accusation and textual shouting, since dispassionate argument is suspect. More serious, however, is the noticeable lack of a carefully articulated story. The story which is sketched devalues those women and other persons of the past whose lives may have been politically silent, but whose impact on the human story actually has been immense. Frequently Professor Schüssler Fiorenza speaks of “story-laden” discourse as though this were a problem – but in fact, as she recognises, we all operate within a metanarrative. The very narrative which she asserts brings “double alienation” (94) to women has not operated that way in the lives of many, women or men, throughout the history of our complex world. Her major evaluation of the shape of that metanarrative is to agree that one should be suspicious of claims regarding the value of suffering, forgiveness, purity, the need for redemption and obedience (51). These certainly have been used by the unscrupulous, that is, by the story-teller who has not been grasped by the story, but who seeks to use it against its grain as a control over others. However, the biblical narrative hinges upon great reversals -- exodus, exile and return from exile; incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. In these turning points, the One who is greatest takes up the cause of the least, utterly identifying with them, so that the powers of oppression, sin and death can be robbed of their prey. Any re-telling which does not place such reversals at dead centre has mistaken the character of God, and is bound to be oppressive. However, the story’s contours have had a lively power to fire centuries of creative thought, as demonstrated by Northrop Frye in his analyses of Western

drama and story. In contest with this vision that strength is made perfect in weakness, is the stratagem of the fourth paradigm -- ethical reflexivity coupled with the manipulation of power to create a new world.

Exegesis

Let us go on to examine how this drive for a new world directs the reading of text. Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza brings the implied world of 1 Corinthians into relief with what she, along with many others, characterise as the pre-Pauline formula of Gal 3:28. She sees Paul's letter, like her own work, as primarily deliberative in mode, although she does note epideictic and forensic elements in it. While the debate over forensic versus deliberative rages on in studies of the Corinthian letters, and is well represented here, the discussion of epideictic gets rather short shrift in *Rhetoric and Ethic*, with no substantive reasons for its dismissal. However, if forced to look for an overall genre, deliberative seems most apt. Yet it might be worth questioning the value of searching for a coherent mode in an occasional letter of this sort, which is, after all, not a discrete rhetorical act. It seems, moreover, that the author's very understanding and method, that responsible exegesis is praxis-oriented, predisposes her to highlight all discourse as deliberative, with the epideictic and forensic playing only supportive roles. She goes on, assuming the traditional role of exegete, to build a bridge from the present to the past (109) -- but to do so in such a way that Paul's story is not the only one told. A telling alternate story is to be discerned in, between and behind the lines as we hear of Chloe's people. A rather compelling case is constructed that Chloe was a leader in the church, parallel to Stephanas. What is not so compelling is that Paul's stance towards such high-born women is reservedly hostile (122), and that this is because of a clash between the social world of Chloe's people and Paul's symbolic universe, where women have a particular place. Nor is the reconstructed larger narrative wholly plausible, that the submerged story is about a Paul who introduces kyriarchy (117, 119) into a church which contained a vision of radical equality. We are grateful that she warns the reader against a simple view of decline (from freedom to institutional hierarchy, 146); yet her picture builds upon a major plank of the time-worn hypothesis of emerging early catholicism. Paul retains a typical role of the villain who introduced rigidity into a more promising situation (of course, for some, the villain was the deutero-Paulines). It is not surprising that some readers have not noted her subtlety, and accused her of

romanticising about a pristine church. For she does indeed suggest a Fall of sorts, although she begins with a complex original state.

This story cannot be told consistently in 'postmodernese,' a language which admits of many accents. Indeed, despite protestations that she is not intending to judge Paul, the criticism is patent (131 versus 170). Paul has claimed apostolic privilege; she claims the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed (139) and must deconstruct his symbolic world even as she reconstructs Chloë's. The most tragic move in this contest is the domestication of the story passed on by Paul. Paul's overarching story, with its pattern of reversal, is relegated to a stance appropriate and particular to the likes of him. It is "rooted in his own experience" (122), since he had given up high status to embark on the Way. The implication is that this was not (nor should it be) the experience of others, including even high-born women, and so they understood (and we should understand) the baptismal covenant differently.

And what of the baptismal covenant? Along with other exegetes, who note the repetition of the formula in other Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters, Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza characterises Galatians 3:28 as traditional material. This, she argues, has been co-opted by Paul to forward his own construction of reality. I am surprised, however, by her appeal to a *consensus* that only the first three-quarters of the phrase goes back to the liturgy: that is, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no male and female." What is missing from this baptismal formula would then be the very thing that makes it baptismal: "For you are all one in Christ Jesus." Tellingly, her own English translation of the passage (p. 154) does not render the last three words *en Christô Iesou*, although no manuscript elides them. (There are variations). What is missing here is the centre of the early Church's understanding of baptism, that baptism incorporates believers *into the Anointed One*, thus conferring anointing on them. We might note also her charge that Paul's use of the formula is thoroughly androcentric and her choice to read the term *huiou theou* in verse 26 mainly in terms of Paul's expansive family illustration (the son and slave of chapter 4.) Not to emphasise *huiou theou* as the plural of the phrase *Son of God*, an alternate title for Messiah, or anointed, is odd. But this move privileges yet again the concept of equality over the concept of solidarity with Christ. I would argue that Paul's extended messianic term 'sons of God', and his choice of the masculine *eis* over *en* ("for you are all one") does not bear a strongly gendered

meaning; rather, it emphasises that the anointed ones are one because they are in *this* Messiah, this Son of God. Thus, the complete phrase, structured in pairs, and ending with the singular, is a formula of recreation and reversal: in Genesis, “So God created adam in his image, in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created *them*”; in the description of new-birth, “you are all *sons* (i.e. christs) of God, for as many as were baptised into Christ has put on Christ...there is no male and female, for you are all one [that is, identified with the *one son*, the Anointed].” There is a new creation. Paul, as the author of 1 Cor 14, would surely be astonished by the assertion – “equality seems to be understood here as uniformity that does not admit of differences” (158).

So then, I would agree with Boyarin that this formula is best understood in ontological categories, and would insist that it utterly deformed when wrested from its foundations – that baptism is *in Christ*. Yet the baptismal declaration also makes its impact upon praxis, and Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza is almost certainly right that there was debate as to how this new creation was to be realised (the debate over its first category, Jew and Gentile is almost programmatic for the New Testament). *Rhetoric and Ethic* fills in this debate by presenting a group that used the baptismal formula as a counterideology to kyriarchy: “Because of Gal 3:28 wives could have leading roles in early Christian movements. They were among those who initiated and shaped those movements, and it was Paul who, in defense of patriarchal marriage sought to curb their work.” Notice what has happened as we read. We have moved from the realm of reconstruction to assertions about history, as though the mimetic axis was totally secure, and our inscribed author had access to a real historical world rather than just a world of signs. It is by making the reader forget that we are in the clutches of imaginative reconstruction that appropriate action in our field can be enjoined. ‘World’ has been evoked as a field of power for the reader, so that we must decide between the reconstructed Paul and the reconstructed dynamic of Chloe’s people. Our sense of ethic will, presumably, rightly guide our choice.

What if it is not only our world which is “more and more complex” but that Paul’s views also admitted of some complexity? In sketching a more nuanced portrait of Paul, we would see not only his ordered view of human glory, of men and women, but also his espousal of mutual dependency (1 Cor 11:11-12); we would note that he uses both

orderings, Priscilla and Aquila and Aquila and Prisca; we would read how he pays serious attention to the information of Chloe's people rather than moving immediately to reconstruct a dubious tension with them. And we would expect that in a society which believed that the great reversal had taken place, there would be some creative (if vigorous) discussion as to how this was to be played out, as the drama continued. Such discussion need not have always been framed in terms of power-play and rights, with demonstrable patriarchal villains and oppressed groups aiming at liberation. Rather, I suspect that the parties and players often sought to come to a common understanding of what it meant to be in Christ, irrespective of how this worked itself out in the concrete instances of *parresia*, mutual submission and respect. The *character* of the persons involved, and their positive inter-relationships are ultimately more interesting than a hypothetical sketch of power-struggles, adapted as morality tales for the twenty-first century. One final note: Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza is rightly critical of those who have not embraced a practical outcome of Gal. 3:28, thus rendering it inoperative. However, I wonder whether Wobbermin's cruel exegetical mistake was not, as she argues, that he spiritualised the meaning of 'one in Christ', thus extending the traditional limitation of women so as to disenfranchise Jewish Germans. Rather, could it be that his focus upon "German spiritual life" (172) over against shared life in the Spirit, that is, life in Messiah Jesus, was the critical error? If this is so, then those who try to contain Christian spirituality in any such limiting terms, including those of the "feminist vision" might take warning. "Biblical criticism and spiritual vision" may often be "blind-folded and turned away from each other" (102). But which new blind-folds are secured when spiritual vision is *equated* with the feminist cause, laudable though its aims may be?

(Peroration) Reflections on Theology:

And so we come to theology – the inconstant companion of biblical studies. Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us that God, as creator and judge, provides the warrant for critical theology. From the standpoint of human play and subcreative work, this is an important insight, which I am sure most in this room share. She then goes on to think about two alternative ways of understanding theology: speaking for God, and speaking about God. Here are prophetic and instructive roles, both of which theologians have pursued to good ends, and to bad. There is yet another role, however, as we hear an ancient voice reminding us that 'a theologian is one who prays' (that is who speaks *with*

God – and also listens.) These roles for theology --power (speaking for God), signification (speaking about God) and communion (speaking with God) -- should not be played off, it seems to me. To ignore the last imprisons us in the wearisome role of the eternal subject, and suggests that there is nothing worthwhile save active power or the manipulation of constructs. But we know in our bones, and from the best of our communion with one another that power is not everything. Play (which is less directive), beauty (which frequently beguiles literary and rhetorical critic) and silence (which is necessary for authentic communication) are every bit as significant. That is, the ‘passive’ and impractical can be, *mirabile dictu*, active! Thus, the unnamed woman who enacted her silent epideictic in washing Jesus’ feet, does not need to be rehabilitated by a power-centred contemporary hermeneutic: her love, her vulnerability, her gestures, and her silence speak for themselves, and direct us to the one in the centre of her picture. What would it mean, to be a truly “*radical Spirit-centre*” –that is, a community that went back to the *roots* of its vision, and invoked the holy, particular, Spirit sent by the God of Israel and of Jesus, rather than a human construction? It would mean, I suspect, to be a community who recovered the roots of the term *ekklesia*, not simply as an assembly, but as ones who are “called out.”

And here, I applaud Prof. Shüssler Fiorenza’s desire to hear from those on the margins. However, after deploring eurocentrism, frequently the romantic is shocked by what it is that is said, for example, by an African Christian voice. Are we dismayed by its frequent lack of attention to its own rights, its emphasis upon Christ, upon suffering, and upon the mystery of re-enacting the biblical metanarrative as a way to true freedom? What questions are asked of us, and our glib talk of marginalisation, by those who have really suffered? Here is one such voice that points away from itself, towards the pattern of his friends who have, in their own lives, retold the story that has captured them.

I too, have been with Marc (who recently died while serving in Sudan) and we had done projects together which will continue to be my memory and pride and of the Episcopal Church of Sudan. You know that the design and building of the then new Chapel of Bishop Gwynne college in Mundri was all Marc's idea.Marc in fact, was the Architect and Resident Engineer!

I was, as well as many Sudanese Anglicans, were amazed and impressed by Marc's design and concept of the CROSS at the east wall of the Church. It shows an 'explosive image' of the Cross with light rays radiating from the center at the

point of the joint and extending outwards in four different directions - tracing out the pattern of the Cross. It was a challenge to the builders but Marc was there to put it down into the stone wall. That explosive and radiant Cross will always remind us of Marc, our beloved brother, true follower of Christ and martyr.

On October 1, 2000, the Pope canonized St. Bakhita into the family of Saints. A Sudanese woman and former slave girl! It was not the Sudanese who voted for her! It was Italians and Christians in general. God has not forgotten us and even as slaves he welcomes us to His Kingdom. I believe Marc Nikkel is one Saint we Sudanese have voted for. He left mother and father, sister and brother, family and country, comfort and pleasure, peace and treasure - to come to our turbulent Sudan - as if he had no life to live, no dream to pursue, no success to achieve in the natural world. Instead he chose the life of Christ, to dream in Christ and to succeed for him. May God welcome our brother home in peace!

(e-mail message, Fr. Thomas P. Kedini, Sudanese refugee)

At the conclusion of her book, Prof. Schüssler Fiorenza calls her readers, members of the guilds of biblical studies and theology, to enter into a kind of perichoretic dance with the Scriptures, the elements of the biblical traditions and the Spirit of God. This is only possible, I submit, if with Bakhita, Marc Nikkel and others like them, we allow our work to be transformed by a deeper study of the Bible and a fuller understanding of theology. This would entail more than assessment, description, critique and reconstruction. It would mean to enter into a story not of our own making, and to live in such a way that it becomes our very own. To step into the 'vacuum of meaning' would mean to acknowledge that this step has already been made in a decisive way, by one whose voice was silenced and whose power was set aside.