
Patricia Howell Michaelson. *Speaking Volumes: Women, Reading and Speech in the Age of Austen*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. 261p.

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Patricia Howell Michaelson's *Speaking Volumes: Women, Reading, and Speech in the Age of Austen* presents a very original perspective on the literature produced during Jane Austen's time. Austen lived from 1775 until 1817, although Michaelson includes the entire "long" eighteenth century in her analysis, which incorporates works published as early as 1710 and concludes with Austen's *Persuasion*, published posthumously in 1818. As her title suggests, Michaelson presents a close examination of the process of reading, not as a wholly silent and solitary pursuit, but rather in its use as a social activity, where the spoken performance of written literature allows the reader/speaker to negotiate her or his own identity within a social context. Her primary texts, therefore, become not only numerous examples of published literature such as novels and plays, but also literary representations of different speech acts, incorporating theater reviews, journals, letters, and other more personal accounts of individual acts of reading.

This format allows Michaelson to develop a unique framework within which to develop her argument. Essentially, she takes as her central premise the assertion that language use by women cannot adequately be explained from a perspective that equates speaking and silence with power and submission, respectively, as much feminist linguistic criticism has done. Michaelson also rejects the notion that such a thing as a universal "woman's language" existed during this period. Instead, she encourages the reader to imagine "a range of strategies possible in any specific encounter, and a range of motivations guiding our strategic choices. Indeed, speaking and silence should not be seen solely as a power game that everyone tries to win" (6). Building on this belief, Michaelson explores a wide range of forms of expression exemplified by different writers of the long eighteenth century, which necessarily includes consideration of class and religion in addition to gender. Ultimately, she demonstrates how silence can in fact be a very powerful tool and how language in and of itself is not always a symbol of power, especially, for example, when it is embodied in the form of the stereotypical woman's language of the time, associated with loquacity and senselessness.

Michaelson divides her discussion into five chapters, beginning with a general discussion of women and language in the eighteenth century, especially as examined by linguists, educators, and writers of conduct books. This chapter provides a very thorough and useful foundation for the chapters that follow, each

of which focuses on one or two main figures, which include Amelia Opie, Sarah Siddons, Frances Burney, and, of course, Jane Austen. However, rather than provide extensive close readings of their writings (or in the case of the actress Siddons, her performances), Michaelson examines the people themselves within their biographical and historical contexts, which include but are not limited to their professional careers. She examines, for example, the circumstances surrounding Opie's conversion to what Michaelson refers to as a "mediated" form of Quakerism, whose tremendous emphasis on the importance of silence during worship and whose preference for sincerity over civility in speech gives Michaelson ample opportunity to explore different modes of speech available to women of this time.

Similar discussion is found in the chapter on Sarah Siddons, who, Michaelson explains, negotiated with various degrees of success her different roles as public actress and private woman, wife, and mother. Equally well treated is Frances Burney, whose relationship with her father, Charles, provides valuable insight into different forms of reading and speaking within the domestic circle. The most important figure, however, is Jane Austen herself. Michaelson explains in her preface that it was by reading *Pride and Prejudice* aloud with a friend that she first became interested in this topic, and her esteem for Austen is shown throughout the work. All six of Austen's completed novels are discussed in some length, with relevant references made to at least one of the novels in each of the first four chapters. More importantly, the final chapter, "Reading Austen, Practicing Speech," uses the most detailed textual analysis in the book, focusing on *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* to support Michaelson's claim that during Austen's time, novels eventually took the place of conversation manuals in the teaching of speech, especially to young women, who were denied access to the elocutionists' target professions of "the senate, the pulpit, and the bar" (152). Michaelson explains, "While women were generally excluded from practicing public speech, they were offered belletristic texts for the practice of conversational skills" (190). As one of the more highly regarded novelists of the period, then, Austen becomes a very logical and worthwhile subject in this regard.

Over the course of the book, Michaelson bolsters her claims by bringing together a broad collection of theorists, the majority of whom are contemporaries focusing on such common topics as female education, speech, and conduct. Thus, she discusses the theories of various representatives of the elocutionist movement, especially Thomas Sheridan, and such conduct book writers as John Gregory, James Fordyce, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Michaelson also provides useful discussion of other figures, especially in the final chapter, where she introduces an examination of Aristote-

lian ethics as the basis for her exploration of modes of speech in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*.

The only difficulty that this work presents might arise from the reader's predisposition. Academics who have been trained to expect close textual analysis when they read the names of prominent writers in chapter headings may need to be patient with Michaelson's approach. Frequently, she provides such extensive discussion of the important theorists whose ideas form the context for her discussion that the "true" subject appears forgotten. In her chapter on Opie, for example, Michaelson provides a two-paragraph biographical introduction, then offers a twenty-five-page examination of the Quaker tradition before returning to Opie for the final eight pages of the chapter.

However, in this as in every chapter, Michaelson includes a clear rationale for her subject choices, providing a very deliberately organized and specific plan of development before embarking on more specific discussion. Throughout the book, she frequently refers to the introduction or previous chapters to establish obvious connections and a sense of coherence. Once one becomes accustomed to her organization of ideas, the true strength of Michaelson's accomplishment can be appreciated. ✨