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## *The Persuasive Power of a Quilt: A Study of a Women's Prison Project*

Jane Amelon

*In 1995 women convicted of committing felonies against their abusive partners, were serving sentences at the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women. As part of their rehabilitation, the women formed the Battered Offenders Self-Help group (B.O.S.H.) and constructed a quilt. Their creation carried such a powerful persuasive message that it was displayed publicly to bring attention to the women's situation. Most significantly, upon viewing the graphic images depicting the experiences of battered women, Kentucky Governor Brereton Jones was moved to tears. He subsequently commuted the sentences of the quilt's makers. The persuasive power of the quilt succeeded where legal briefs had failed. The author discusses a variety of rhetorical studies of quilts, followed by an analysis of how the B.O.S.H. quilt communicated its persuasive message.*

A woman on her knees . . . a man holding a gun to her head . . . the caption "Do you want to die now or later?" A woman tied to a bed . . . a man with a knife to her throat . . . the caption "This is NOT a husband making love . . . It's RAPE!" A little girl in bed . . . a giant hand at her throat . . . the caption "NO PLEASE Daddy! Don't do this again!"

These images, and others equally disturbing, appear on the prison quilt made by the members of the Battered Offenders Self Help (B.O.S.H.) group (plate 10). They depict the very real stories of battered women imprisoned in Kentucky for killing or injuring



their abusers (plate 11). Since the nineteenth century, women have used quilts to express the messages they were unable to voice in public. By examining quilts in terms of rhetoric, we recognize them as a traditional method of persuasion available to women. Through rhetorical analysis, this paper shows how the B.O.S.H. prison quilt functioned as a form of persuasion.

### *Background*

On January 27, 1992, Kentucky Governor Brereton Jones appointed Martha Weinstein to the post of Executive Director, Commission on Women.<sup>1</sup> Weinstein, a feminist, had been active in women's issues her entire adult life. She had first met the governor in 1988 when she unsuccessfully ran for the state legislature.

Settling into her new position, Weinstein found in her office a file labeled "Clemency." That folder prompted her to recall an article she had read a year earlier that reported that the governor of Maryland, William D. Schaefer, had granted clemency to eight women convicted of killing or assaulting their batterers. Ohio's governor, Richard F. Celeste, had also granted clemency to twenty-six women convicted of similar offenses.<sup>2</sup> After reading the article, Weinstein arranged to have lunch with Helen Howard-Hughes, the newly appointed chair of the Parole Board for the state of Kentucky. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Howard-Hughes had previously served in the same position Weinstein currently held, the Executive Director of the Commission on Women. During that time, Howard-Hughes had received a federal grant to research domestic violence victims in Kentucky. In 1993 her research remained the only data on domestic violence in Kentucky.

Marsha Weinstein and Helen Howard-Hughes met at Flynn's, a restaurant in Frankfort, Kentucky. At this meeting, the two women decided to use their positions of power to help vulnerable women who not only had been victimized by their husbands and boyfriends, but also further abused by the judicial system. During their meeting, Weinstein and Howard-Hughes discussed the recent



passage of Kentucky House Bill 256. The bill required the courts to consider the history of domestic violence when determining if the defendant is entitled to the defense of self-protection. Although signed into law, the Kentucky courts had not implemented this new legislation. Howard-Hughes assured Weinstein she would survey the cases of current inmates to determine who might be affected by this new law.

After reviewing the ways other states had organized clemency for convicted battered women, Weinstein and Howard-Hughes developed their plan of action. Weinstein first approached the Governor's General Counsel, Mike Alexander, asking him to outline the steps necessary to expedite a governor's clemency for the women inmates. Alexander informed her that the governor's policy was not to pardon anyone until he or she had been released from prison for ten years. A more formidable obstacle to her efforts was the prevailing attitude of what she later referred to as "the good ol' boy network," that women who were too stupid to remove themselves from abusive relationships probably deserved their battering.<sup>3</sup> Aware that current laws beneficial to battered women were being ignored and that the state government lacked an understanding of domestic violence, Weinstein realized that she needed a back door approach in order to effect change.

As Weinstein and Howard-Hughes investigated the issues of imprisoned women at the state level, an employee at the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (KCIW) initiated a program to help the women. On May 16, 1994, her first day as a rehabilitation counselor at KCIW, Chandra McElroy sent a memorandum to all prisoners inviting them to participate in a new self-help group for battered women. To be eligible, the women needed to satisfy three points: 1) they must have been convicted of murder or a related crime to their abusive partner; 2) they must take responsibility for their actions; and 3) they must admit what happened and what they had done. On August 8, 1994, twelve women attended the first meeting of the Battered Offender's Self-Help (B.O.S.H.) group.<sup>4</sup>

McElroy soon realized that she and the B.O.S.H. group needed to learn about domestic violence. On December 2, 1994, McElroy





sent a request for general information about domestic violence to various agencies in the state.<sup>5</sup> She was looking for facts and statistics about domestic violence, signs to look for in individuals who may be abusive, and characteristics of abused women. McElroy later recalled, “I wanted the women to feel empowered and feel as if they were taking an active role in learning about themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Weinstein received one of these letters, contacted McElroy, and set up a meeting. Weinstein, accompanied by Sherry Currens, the Director of the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association, arrived at KCIW on April 3, 1995. They were met by KCIW warden, Betty Kassulke, who surprised them with her assertion that the convicted women had no business being in prison as they were trying only to defend themselves.<sup>7</sup>

The three women discussed their frustrations in dealing with Kentucky law. For example, the libel law in Kentucky forbids defendants to make derogatory statements about a deceased individual, effectively stifling evidence needed to defend abused women. Additionally, many defense attorneys considered domestic abuse a motive for murder; consequently, the battering the women sustained was never admitted into evidence. Even with new laws and guidelines, a debate emerged questioning the law: Are victims of domestic abuse being sent the message they will not be held accountable for their actions? Consequently, pardons relevant to domestic abuse sought by the Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy from 1992 to 1995 did not make it past the Parole Board.<sup>8</sup> Weinstein, Howard-Hughes, and Currens all voiced frustration and concern that their own voices were lost in the legal framework. Three powerful women in Kentucky, struggling to work within the system, recognized the obstructions to the battered women’s freedom and their unsuccessful efforts in achieving justice for the women.

After the meeting with the warden, Weinstein and Currens met with McElroy and the B.O.S.H. group. At first, the inmates were very quiet. As they grew more comfortable, they began to speak, expressing a desire to prevent other battered women from suffering the same abuse and eventual incarceration as they had. As the



meeting drew to a close, an inmate named Rachel said, “No one cares about us, and we have no voice.”<sup>9</sup> The word voice reminded Weinstein of something she had once heard. Speaking to a meeting of Jewish women, Shelly Zegart had described the role quilts have played throughout history in giving women a voice. Zegart, a well-known quilt collector and curator, had used the example of nineteenth-century women who expressed their support of the temperance movement through their quilts.<sup>10</sup> Through needlework, an activity deeply embedded in the women’s sphere of home and family, women had expressed their ideas in a non-threatening manner. Weinstein suggested that the inmates make a quilt with pictures telling their stories.

### *The Process*

The B.O.S.H. Group embraced the idea, recognizing that they could use the quilt as a way to educate the public. They also recognized that the process of making a quilt could be therapeutic. McElroy saw the project as an opportunity to “help bring the women closer and increase their self-esteem.”<sup>11</sup> Unable to leave the prison, the group asked McElroy to purchase pink and white fabric for their quilt. Not really knowing what was needed, McElroy purchased markers and pink and white sheets from the local Wal-Mart, using funds supplied by the prison. Two inmates, Sherry Pollard and Karen Stout, had some quilting experience, so they told McElroy to purchase the batting, the backing fabric, and the yarn for tying. McElroy purchased blue yarn and lace because the women “wanted the quilt to be attractive.”<sup>12</sup>

On April 13, 1995, less than two weeks after the project’s conception, the women met to begin work on their quilt.<sup>13</sup> McElroy later recalled that, since no one had ever listened to the women’s stories of domestic violence; “the women wanted this quilt to represent everything they had been through.”<sup>14</sup> When given the materials, “they took off with the idea and worked on the quilt in all of their spare time together.”<sup>15</sup> Some of the women drew the actual



Figure 1. “Fists of Pain,” B.O.S.H. prison quilt.  
*Courtesy of The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc.*

pictures for their own quilt blocks, but others could not. Some women could draw their own quilt blocks, but needed help in coloring in the images of their story. They often found it just too difficult to relive these horrid memories. The women worked on each other’s quilt blocks, passing them around for others to complete. As McElroy explained, “They could look at the other person’s, but they couldn’t look at their own.”<sup>16</sup>

Each woman completed five or six quilt blocks depicting aspects of her life of abuse. When their quilt blocks were completed, the women typically asked someone else to keep them; it was simply too frightening to have those images close by (fig. 1). So this



cadre of women shared the responsibility of protecting their friends from the horrors of the images of their lives.

For the large square in the center of the quilt, the group recruited the artistic talents of another female inmate. From the group's suggestions, this inmate drew the tearing eye behind the bars with a key underneath. The group later adopted this image as their logo for a T-shirt.

McElroy recalled the night the B.O.S.H. group came together to arrange the finished blocks for their quilt: "Nobody was speaking. Everybody was crying. Very emotional. [It was the] first time they had brought all of their squares and placed them all out."<sup>17</sup> As the culmination of the group's efforts to translate their emotional memories into tangible, visible, and material form, this event proved to be a powerful catharsis for the women.

Stout and Pollard, the experienced quilters, took responsibility for sewing the odd-sized blocks together to complete the quilt top. They added blue lace to the outer edge and showed the other women how to fasten the layers together with yarn knots. The B.O.S.H. group completed the quilt during a period of about three weeks.

Weinstein recalls that when she first saw the quilt, her immediate reaction was disappointment. The quilt was not beautiful, nor did it express the traditional qualities associated with quilts, of softness, warmth, and comfort. But almost simultaneously, Weinstein recognized the powerful message the quilt embodied. The quilters' stories were heart-wrenching, and the symbolic images on the quilt collectively had their effect on Weinstein. The process of making the quilt also provided therapeutic benefits to the creators.

### *Quiltmaking as Therapy*

The women who participated in the B.O.S.H. group were not the first to recognize the therapeutic value of the quiltmaking process. Individual women have found solace in needlework for some two hundred years. In the first half of the twentieth century,



psychiatrist Dr. William Rush Dunton observed that quilting could soothe the nervous nature of women preoccupied with worry over “wrongs or slights which may be real.”<sup>18</sup> The physical process of constructing the blocks gave the individual women a sense of purpose and satisfaction in creating something outside of themselves. Today, certified art therapists commonly use quilting to treat victims of domestic violence. According to the American Art Therapy Association, quilting as a form of art therapy allows conflicted individuals a method of self-expression that assists in the resolution of conflicts and elevates self-esteem.<sup>19</sup>

But the therapeutic benefit to the B.O.S.H. group making the quilt went beyond that of a typical group quilt. The women used the quilt to tell their stories of domestic violence, many for the first time. Working within a group, the women could see that their experiences were not isolated events, but part of a larger pattern of violence against women.<sup>20</sup> According to McElroy, “the quilt had a lot to do with rebuilding their self-confidence. . . . The women could not speak of their abuse. But once they got to putting their stories into the quilt blocks, their emotions started flowing.”<sup>21</sup> According to McElroy, the women experienced guilt and remorse for killing their abusers. Working on the quilt helped them begin to forgive themselves. If the quilt had done nothing else for the women but to facilitate the process of rebuilding self-esteem and self-confidence, the project would have been a success. But, as it happened, their quilt yielded even greater benefits.

### *Quiltmaking as Education*

The women in the B.O.S.H. group originally undertook the quiltmaking project in order to educate the general public about domestic violence. With this in mind, Weinstein suggested that the quilt be displayed at the State Fair, in Louisville, in August 1995. Unaware of the graphic nature of the quilt’s imagery, the fair officials readily agreed to display it.<sup>22</sup>



The B.O.S.H. group sent a press release to local news media to publicize the display of the quilt and bring public attention to the issue of domestic violence: “We, as a Group, have put together a quilt. Each one of us has created squares depicting scenes from our lives. The scenes will always remain, not only on the quilt, but forever in our minds. We lived these scenes.”<sup>23</sup> They received responses from three Louisville television channels: WAVE 3, WHAS 11, and WDRB 41.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this coverage, the quilt became a major focal point of the fair.

McElroy attended the fair every day to observe people’s reactions to the quilt. The line to view the quilt was always very long; when people passed in front of the quilt, they adopted a somber and reverent attitude.<sup>25</sup> Some even cried, whether from compassion or perhaps in recognition of their own experience of abuse.<sup>26</sup> Warden Betty Kassulke also attended the fair and reported public reaction to the quilt: “It wasn’t a quilt in the traditional sense of the word. But the wording, the tears, the way it really depicted their pain and their abuse, it was an emotional experience for people.”<sup>27</sup> Fair officials estimated that more people saw the B.O.S.H. prison quilt than any other exhibit in the history of the fair. Clearly, the quilt was fulfilling the group’s goal in promoting public awareness of domestic violence. But the quilt produced another result that had a profound impact on the women in the B.O.S.H. group.

### *Quiltmaking as Persuasion*

On August 26, 1995, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the Kentucky Commission of Women sponsored a suffrage celebration at the State Fair, with Governor Brereton Jones as their keynote guest speaker. After his speech, Weinstein took the opportunity to show the B.O.S.H. quilt to the governor and Mrs. Jones. Upon seeing the quilt, Governor Jones reacted strongly. He later described the experience he shared with his wife:



Libby and I were in attendance at the state fair, and were walking through the exhibits like any normal fairgoer would, and we went through the section of the handmade quilts. And, of course, there were some lovely, lovely quilts there and some great workmanship on them, and we were admiring that. And then all of a sudden [we] came upon this quilt that just sort of jumped out at us because instead of having beautiful flowers or an historical scene depicted or, or something that was going to be very pleasing to the eye, it was depicting violence and murder and blood, and I thought, what in the world is this? And they said it was made by a group of women, . . . that they were incarcerated for committing crimes and they were speaking out as to why they committed those crimes because they had been abused. And of course, my reaction to it was, well, if they were abused and it was self-defense, what are they doing in prison?<sup>28</sup>

The quilt had communicated the concept that the women had acted, not from unprovoked aggression, but to defend themselves and their children from further battering. After viewing the quilt, the governor turned to Weinstein and said, “We have got to see about getting these women out of prison before I leave office.” Weinstein responded, “Governor, Helen Howard-Hughes and the Parole Board have already begun to review their cases.” He replied, “Good, this is one thing that we can take care of.”<sup>29</sup>

By September 12, 1995, the Kentucky Parole Board had completed their review of the women’s cases.<sup>30</sup> In November 1995 Marguerite Neill Thomas, the Assistant Public Advocate for the Commonwealth of Kentucky, recommended that additional women be added to the list. At Weinstein’s urging, the governor reviewed the cases of these women.<sup>31</sup> With the graphic images of the quilt still in his mind, Jones granted clemency to all but one of the B.O.S.H. group, just before leaving office on December 11, 1995.<sup>32</sup> Two years later, the governor reiterated how the experience of seeing the quilt had affected him: “Without the quilt, in honesty, I doubt [the women’s parole] would have happened, because [the quilt] made [their plight] very clear. . . . The quilt was so easy to focus on. Many things in our society—if they’re visual and right there in front of you—you grab them. If they’re not visual, and if they’re not readily attainable in a busy day, you may or may not be



able to focus on them.”<sup>33</sup> Weinstein and others had tried for years to argue that the women committed their crimes in self-defense. The visual message of the quilt succeeded where verbal and written argument had failed.

The story of the B.O.S.H. quilt proves that it visually communicates a powerful message. To explain how quilts communicate is one aspect of this study. A second aspect is to understand how people make sense of their world. Both of these aspects can be addressed through a rhetorical analysis of the quilt.

### *Rhetoric in Everyday Life*

Rhetoric can be defined as a type of persuasion symbolically apparent in different texts or artifacts.<sup>34</sup> Most of us recognize rhetoric as a key element of political speeches. For example, the speeches of President Barack Obama are generally acknowledged as very persuasive and eloquently phrased. The effect of his speeches on audiences is evidence of the power of rhetoric.

Not only words, but also images and objects can perform a rhetorical function. For example, photographs can be analyzed for their power to persuade.<sup>35</sup> Images of the World Trade Towers wreathed in billowing black smoke not only provoke a strong emotional response among viewers, but those pictures also are credited with increased numbers of volunteers for military service.<sup>36</sup> Quilts, too, can function as rhetoric. Although female quilters had long recognized quilts as a woman’s voice, only recently have rhetoricians done the same. Recognizing women’s stances, voices or points of view that have historically been ignored allows the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge of our foremothers to penetrate our culture. To recognize quilting as a legitimate form of rhetoric promotes a unity in our culture and clarifies our culture’s value judgments. Researchers have identified a number of ways that quilts have functioned as rhetoric. Each of the following case studies demonstrates a different approach to examining our culture and our values using quilts.





### *The Secession Quilt*

Jemima Ann Cook of Fairfield County, South Carolina, created what is now called the Secession Quilt, in 1860.<sup>37</sup> She embellished her wholecloth linen quilt with stuffed and corded images. The central design shows Lady Liberty riding on an eagle's back. In addition to the floral images typical of wholecloth quilts, Cook also included images and texts of political significance. Mary Rose Williams, now a professor of communication technologies, included this quilt in her study of quilts as protest rhetoric for her dissertation.<sup>38</sup> An examination of the Secession quilt in Williams' study demonstrates how she has applied rhetorical analysis in her interpretation: "Cook could not express her support for unity openly; therefore, she found a way to couch her message within the folds of the quilt. Beneath the names of Southern politicians and the South Carolina state seal lies this woman's true message—a plea to keep the Union intact."<sup>39</sup>

Williams analyzes the rhetoric of the quilt as Cook's covert protest strategy to express her desire that South Carolina not secede from the Union. Cook's husband, a plantation owner, later served as a general in the Coast Artillery of the Confederate States of America, so Jemima Cook's choice of rhetoric was a respectable method for the wife of a plantation owner to challenge a war.

Although the central design is an eagle with the word "Secession" embroidered under it, the way Cook depicts the Union in other symbols on the quilt suggests her desire to maintain the Union intact. In so doing she has depicted the government of 1860 in a positive light. Her neutrality is, perhaps, best realized with an examination of the balance of words embroidered on the quilt. Not only are senators from South Carolina referenced, but "Washington" and "E Pluribus Unum" are embroidered; thus, she has not only established common ground but ambiguity with the contrasting symbols. According to Williams, the confrontational and symbolic support of the Union contained in Cook's quilt satisfies the criteria for protest rhetoric.



## The Crusade Quilt

The Crusade Quilt was made in 1876 to celebrate the women's temperance movement in Ohio. The silk squares contain the inked signatures of more than three thousand women and the mottoes of many Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) state auxiliaries.<sup>40</sup> The quilt was presented at a national WCTU convention in Baltimore in 1877.<sup>41</sup> Mrs. Lathrop of Michigan observed at the convention that the quilt represented "women's patience in matters of detail—a quality that had been valuable in temperance reform."<sup>42</sup> Other participants, however, saw the quilt as a vehicle of oppression, the yoke that harnessed women to the home. Amid the controversy, Frances Willard, a suffragist, argued that the quilt should be a symbol of women's social protest.<sup>43</sup>

Sue Carter, a professor of rhetoric, analyzed the persuasive properties of the Crusade Quilt using the properties of *epideictic* rhetoric.<sup>44</sup> Epideictic rhetoric typically is used for ceremonial display, embodies the values of the group, and also suggests a more idealized image of the rhetors, that is, the speakers. Carter examines the way the quilt functioned at the convention. First, it was displayed prominently on stage at the front of the convention hall, a form of ceremonial display inherent in epideictic rhetoric. Second, the quilt firmly placed traditional home values in the forefront, thus, embodying and affirming those values. Third, Carter argues, the quilt's visionary quality was an attempt to construct an idealized image of female reformers.<sup>45</sup> The quilt symbolically represented what Willard stated as the most important work of the WCTU: "reconstructing the ideal of womanhood."<sup>46</sup> Carter also interprets Willard's metaphor of women: "mothering," through the quilt, the nation, which is in crisis.<sup>47</sup> According to Carter, the presentation of the Crusade Quilt is an example of how epideictic rhetoric can simultaneously juxtapose and resolve two contradictory elements. In this case, the WCTU's prominent display of the quilt transformed it from a lowly symbol of women's traditional role into a banner for active social change.



### *"I Remember Momma" Quilt*

At age twenty-two, Janette Miller made a quilt to memorialize her mother, Cora Miller, who had died in 1902. Miller's quilt consists of fabric from forty-one garments that had been worn by Janette Miller and her mother over a period of three decades. Miller also kept a scrapbook that identifies the fabrics and their use.<sup>48</sup> For her essay that explores this quilt, "I Remember Momma: Material Rhetoric, Mnemonic Activity, and One Woman's Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Quilt," Liz Rohan, a professor of rhetoric, applies an epistemological approach.<sup>49</sup> She suggests that Miller's quilt can be analyzed with regard to how memory is made, how that memory persuades, and how memory is important in and of itself.<sup>50</sup>

First, Rohan analyzes how the quilt assists in recalling prior experiences. Applying nineteenth-century mourning rituals and mnemonic devices, Rohan examines Miller's method of remembering her mother.<sup>51</sup> In reviewing the scrapbook, Rohan examines how Miller's description of each piece of clothing stimulated her memories. For example, Miller described one piece as a "Dark brown (chocolate)[d]ress I had when I went over to play with Gracie Waters. [I] Swung in her hammock and watched the dress trail behind because it was longer than usual."<sup>52</sup> In this case, the fabric swatch stimulated Miller's memory.

Second, the memory of her mother persuaded the daughter to make a quilt, illustrating the values of the mother and now the daughter. A traditional verse that appeared on mourning quilts in the nineteenth century, "When this you see, remember me," (although not on this quilt), echoes the interface between the mother and the daughter via the quilt.<sup>53</sup> At the turn of the century, quilting was deemed by some as an out-dated activity; therefore, for the daughter to quilt illustrates the power the mother's memory had over the daughter. The daughter was persuaded to adopt rituals from the previous generation: the generation that quilted and valued the physical properties of the fabric as a keepsake. The generation of the daughter valued photographs and store-bought items



rather than home crafts.<sup>54</sup>

And third, Rohan cites Miller's diary to show how memory is important in and of itself: "I haven't a memory . . . [yet] I enjoy bringing up old times"<sup>55</sup> In this quotation, Miller freely admits to a poor memory; consequently, a memory aid satisfies Miller's need to remember her mother. Her father moved from the family home shortly after the mother's death and soon remarried, so it was incumbent on the daughter to keep her mother's memory alive. Rohan argues that Miller's strong connection with family was the reason she made the mnemonic aid, the quilt. Further, Rohan suggests that the quilt is an example of a rhetorical canon.

### *Scandalous Sue Quilt*

Knowing that Karen Horvath longed for a Sunbonnet Sue quilt, the members of the Bee There quilting group in Austin, Texas, made such a quilt for her surprise birthday gift in 1984.<sup>56</sup> Instead of the standard image of a chubby little girl in profile, the members made nine variations that depicted female figures, each with an identifying bonnet, in an act of scandalous behavior. Sue is shown burning her bra, dancing a can-can, reading "dirty" books, drinking a martini, skinny-dipping, smoking, kissing Overall Bill in the backseat of a car, taking a shower with Overall Bill, and getting married as a pregnant bride. The blocks were made in good humor and with a sense of playful fun.

Linda Pershing posits in her article, "She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman': Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue," that quilts can be the rhetorical vehicle for quilt-makers to confront accepted social standards and persuade others to join in non-compliance.<sup>57</sup> The conclusions from such an analysis are enlightening as they provide "both a 'safe' and critical commentary on social and gender-specific norms."<sup>58</sup> Pershing believes the quilt exemplifies the quilters' uncertainty about the role of women in the 1980s.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Pershing believes the women illustrated their creativity through the making of this quilt, yet contested cultural norms.



*Analysis: Properties of the B.O.S.H Quilt*

I believe all of these studies are enlightening, yet they have limitations. All examine various aspects of rhetoric, but as yet no one has applied a neo-classical rhetorical approach to a quilt in order to explain how it persuades, and to understand how people make sense of their world through the artifact. I believe that applying a neo-classical rhetorical approach to the B.O.S.H. quilt will demonstrate the usefulness of the rhetorical approach in analyzing how quilts communicate cultural messages.

The B.O.S.H. quilt consists of fifty-two blocks, each approximately eight-inches square, and a center block, 24 inches by 40 inches. The white and pink cotton squares are arranged checkerboard-style around the larger center. The images and text on the blocks are drawn with markers (some of which have blurred to become almost illegible). The batting is a lofty polyester, and a white, twin-size, cotton sheet functions as the backing. The layers are tied together with royal blue acrylic yarn in the junctions where the blocks meet. The quilt is edged with a royal blue lace ruffle. The entire quilt measures approximately 72 by 64 inches.

In structure, this is an album quilt, in that it contains blocks made in a group. But there the similarity ends, and the graphic nature of the images takes over. The blocks are joined without sashing strips or borders to frame them, so the viewer initially responds to the quilt in its entirety. The visual composition of the quilt is structured, then, along the dimensions of a framed-center quilt.<sup>60</sup>

The economics of the quilting materials also affect the overall image. The members of the quilting group did not have money of their own. They could not shop for themselves. They lacked the power to make their own decisions regarding fabric. McElroy shopped for inexpensive fabric to stretch her prison budget. The use of the cheapest and lowest quality of materials suggests that the women and their work were not valuable enough to deserve better.

Only the pink and white blocks have ties in the corner; the large center block is left unquilted. After time, the center block's batting will bunch and distort the image. The corner ties become



part of the background; they blend in and become lost, much like the abuse victims blended into their communities and became lost in the legal protection and justice systems. The seam allowances were pressed open in dressmaker fashion, therein exposing the thread and weakening the durability of the quilt. Just like their construction of the quilt, the battered women inadvertently weakened themselves by remaining with their abusers.

### *Analysis: Color as an Element*

The pink and white colors of the quilt's fabrics are flat and lack modulation; the lives of the women who made the quilt were flat, without interests or careers, focused on survival, day by day. The colors seem ironic in this context. In Western culture, white often represents purity and innocence, as in christening dresses and bridal gowns. Pink is frequently associated with the innocence of childhood. Infant girls are identified by pink clothing, and small girls seem to favor pink party dresses. Some researchers have found that pink has been found to be a relaxing color in the treatment of hostile and aggressive individuals.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the offenders have used soft colors that seem to emphasize the child-like helplessness they felt as victims, while ironically representing the innocence that was denied them and their children. The royal blue of the yarn ties and lace edging offers little contrast with the predominant colors. The powerlessness associated with the soft colors evokes an emotional response of pity and a desire to nurture among typical viewers.

The most striking color of the quilt is the red in the pictorial details. The large, center square depicts a red heart, to which the red details in the smaller blocks are visually linked. The women used red markers to depict blood, as in dripping from the nose or mouth, seeping from cuts, or in blood-shot eyes. The images of hearts and blood symbolize life, a life that is being threatened through various acts of violence. The bright color red initially attracts viewers to the quilt, but, on closer inspection, the red details and their negative associations repulse the viewer (plate 12).



*Analysis: The Center Image as a Symbolic Element*

The center image of the quilt provides a stark symbolic image that combines four elements—a heart, an eye, prison bars, and a key—that together express the inner emotional state of the imprisoned women. Compared with the smaller, more specific images that surround it, the central image is a static, generalized representation of the women's life in prison. The first image, the heart, is widely recognized as a symbol of the spiritual, emotional, and moral attitudes of an individual person. Here, the heart is imprisoned, suggesting that the potential for actualizing these essential human attributes has been blocked. Images of hearts most often represent love; however, the hearts on this quilt depict the physical and emotional violence inflicted on the individual's life and soul.

One of the most frequent—and therefore significant—motifs depicted on the center medallion of the quilt is the human eye. Eyes represent both the site of violence—blackened by injury—and the sight of the women—observing what is done to them. Typically, the eye appears in a close-up view of the face of a victimized woman. This becomes a transactive element as the blood-shot or blackened eye pierces the viewer (plate 13).<sup>62</sup> In the large central image, an eye is superimposed on the heart. This eye is blood-shot, crying; a purple shadow below suggests bruising. The large eye stares out at the viewer in what might have been a threatening way, were it not for the superimposed prison bars.

These prison bars, the physical boundaries keeping these women from freedom, emphasize the isolation and powerlessness of the prisoner. The placement in the center medallion establishes the ultimate significance and importance of the bars. The bars now are physical, but the bars have been symbolically in place for many years prior to prison for most of the B.O.S.H. women.

Beneath the eye is a key, given a central place because the B.O.S.H. group members felt that “this quilt was the key to their healing.”<sup>63</sup> The key is painted with gold glitter, emphasizing the high value attributed to the image and its meaning. Though important, the key is not visually prominent and blends into the back-



ground. The key also symbolizes, both to the group and to the viewers, a release from prison. The women seem to have recognized intuitively that a more prominently visible key would give the idea of release more emphasis than was warranted.

*Analysis: Eight-Inch Block Images as Symbolic Elements*

The eight-inch blocks contain significant elements as well: hearts, eyes, guns/knives, women being raped, and children. The smaller quilt blocks depict broken or cracked hearts, as in a knife piercing a cracked heart. A heart pierced by a weapon symbolizes betrayal in love, often through infidelity (plate 14). Pierced or broken hearts may also indicate a certain cynicism about the possibilities or trivialization of romance and true love. All of the B.O.S.H. women felt betrayed in love. The graphic violence in these images evokes strong feelings of revulsion and pity for the victims.

Eyes are also an important element in the smaller squares. In most of the smaller quilt squares, the women eye the viewer through their blood-shot eyes (fig. 2). In one image, the woman's eyes are closed, as if to block out the reality of violence as she hugs a small child. The men perpetrating the violence toward the women in the quilt squares are never shown facing the audience. The viewer never sees their eyes as their gaze is always directed at the woman; thus, the abusers are non-transactive.<sup>64</sup>

About a quarter of the images in the quilt include weapons, typically a knife or gun. These weapons are wielded by powerful men toward smaller, defenseless women. One block shows a small, defenseless brown dog sliced open with a knife while a helpless woman tied to a tree fearfully watches. Other blocks show hearts pierced by bullets or a knife, violent images that invert that of the arrow-pierced heart in a valentine (plate 15). Many of the guns are shown pointed to the head of a woman.

In western culture, knives and guns are associated with the activities of men, whether involved in criminal acts of violence or the socially sanctioned practice of hunting. In this quilt, knives and





Figure 2. “Broken Heart with ‘Please Mend My Heart,’”  
B.O.S.H. prison quilt.  
*Courtesy of the Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc.*

guns represent both actual violence against individual women and the symbolic domination of men over vulnerable women. The image of a knife/gun, blood-letting, and death are all firmly intertwined. The ability to spill blood, the very essence of life, is an extraordinarily powerful image and a very potent symbol. Both guns and knives are phallic and most assuredly one of the sources of their dreaded sexual abuse. At its most primal level, guns and knives represent Death. The helpless women fear death will occur at the hand of their attacker. In fact, most of the women revealed



that they were relieved to be imprisoned since they assuredly would have been killed.

Children are depicted in many of the quilt squares. The children are always defenseless, innocent, small, and never central to the block's image. Only two blocks show a woman consoling or being consoled by a child. Many times the child is aligned with the man-attacker and not, as expected, next to the woman. In one block, a woman is surrounded by a fence, while the child, outside the fence, cries, "Mommy!" (plate 16). The fence represents the woman's inability to reach her child, whether before or during the mother's imprisonment. One block, drawn in black on white fabric, shows a young mother, eyes closed, on her knees, embracing a child. Ultimately, the frequency of an obviously helpless, innocent individual on the quilt blocks forces the observer of the quilt to frame the entire quilt in the mode of helpless innocence.

Five of the blocks on the quilt depict women being raped. Shown tied up or chained to a bed, tree, or door, the women are invariably rendered defenseless. Often the woman is naked, but the attacker is clothed. No one viewing the quilt could escape a physical reaction of revulsion to these dehumanizing images. The man strips away the woman's self-esteem. Forced nakedness is a universal indicator of exploitation and domination; thus, she is raped of her power; she is helpless. All of the women in B.O.S.H. had little, if any, self-esteem and felt completely helpless.

### *Rhetorical Analysis of the B.O.S.H. Quilt*

The story of the B.O.S.H. quilt proves that it communicated a powerful persuasive message. The analysis of properties and elements of the quilt provides the explanation of how the quilt persuaded. A rhetorical analysis of a quilt looks deeper to examine how a quilt persuades and to understand how people make sense of their world. We can explore a quilt's rhetoric by asking three basic questions: 1) How do the quilter's cultural perspectives affect the message being communicated? 2) How do current/historical



events affect the quilt's message? and 3) How do the politics of the era affect the viewer(s) when seeing the quilt? These three questions form the basic structure of the rhetorical triangle, one of the primary elements of neo-classical rhetorical analysis, as I have applied it in this study.<sup>65</sup>

First, how does the quilter's cultural perspective affect the message being communicated? The quilters of the B.O.S.H. group were battered women with little to no self-esteem or feeling of worth. The majority of the women had believed that there was no escape from the abuse of either their batterer or the justice system which appeared unfair to these women. Consequently, the quilters expressed their perspective through several aspects of the quilt. They designed images that graphically portrayed highly charged emotional episodes of abuse. The selected colors conveyed the innocence and helplessness of their situation. The stories and symbolic elements depicted in the blocks create the emotional effect consistent with the quilters' battered spirit. The construction of the quilt, like the women themselves, affirms weakness. These elements combine to saturate the viewer with the message.

Second, how do current/historical events affect the quilt's message? The quilt was displayed at the state fair during the seventy-fifth anniversary of women's suffrage. The atmosphere of such an event would draw a crowd predominately sympathetic to women and their causes. It is reported that the crowd when observing the quilt was silent and reverent, thus giving greater credibility and respect to the persuasive message of the quilt. Another current event augmenting the quilt's message is the fact that other battered women convicted of crimes against their abuser had been granted clemency in other states. Additionally, Jones was leaving office in a few months, so any political repercussions would be minimal if and when he acted upon the quilt's message. And last, quilts are seen as non-threatening objects, so a quilt would be able to relay a subaltern voice without any negativity. All of these elements promoted, and even amplified the quilt's powerful message.

And third, how do the politics of the era affect the viewer(s) seeing the quilt? Some blocks in the quilt indicate the judicial system's



further abuse of the battered women. That message strongly affects the viewers who see themselves as ethical people who want to help the weak and powerless. The quilt effectively establishes the women as weak and powerless, and the ethical viewer as a potential agent of change. Consequently, the viewer is aligned with the realization that the system is not just and that “something needs to be done to help these women.” Thus, the ethical governor is placed in a situation in which he must assist these abused women, and the climate is conducive for his advocating clemency.

Domestic violence continues to occur in families regardless of race, education, or economic situation. In my research, I discovered that family members of the abused women were aware of the abuse, but did not know what to do, so they did nothing. Thus, domestic violence continues. In California, alone, eleven thousand women who have survived domestic violence are currently imprisoned.<sup>66</sup> In fact, 80 to 85 percent of women imprisoned in the United States attribute their incarceration to their association with their batterer.<sup>67</sup>

The quilters, their quilt’s message, and the politics of the time all came together to effect a change, a change that would have an immense impact on the lives of many people. For these women, change has occurred. No longer would a B.O.S.H. woman be on her knees with a gun to her head; no longer would another be tied to a bed as she was attacked at knifepoint; no longer would the little girl experience a rape by her father; no longer are the B.O.S.H. women imprisoned. The B.O.S.H. women’s voices had been heard through the rhetorical power of their quilt.

\* \* \*

If you suspect that you or someone you know might be in an abusive relationship, please call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), 1-800-787-3224 (TTY) or your local domestic violence center.



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