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Writing on the (Bathroom) Wall

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the writing on the (bathroom) wall




Course:
WRT 255, Advanced Argumentative Writing

Instructor:
Dr. Lois Agnew

Author's Note:
Daily, people see interactions like the one on this bathroom sticker, but rarely stop to think about them. By examining such simple communications, you can discover an element of truth. Although the topic is both serious and comical, the truth is undeniable. People express what they feel when compelled to; sometimes that opportunity appears in the most mundane of places.

Editors' Note:
Jaclyn's clever, wry essay shows us that rhetoric can exist in some surprising situations; it's a fresh approach to the idea of rhetorical analysis.

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In nearly every women's bathroom stall across the Syracuse University campus hangs a sticker. Although there are a variety of stickers, all containing tips for safety and information about the Department of Public Safety (DPS), in one particular stall, one of these stickers spurred an argument. Armed with pens, apparently far more mighty than swords, an open dialogue began on the bathroom wall. I am afraid I cannot speak to every bathroom stall on our campus; however this is the only such interaction that I have stumbled upon. The initial claim as stated by the sticker was meant to provoke thought and awareness. According to the DPS and the student R.A.P.E. center, "90% of all college women who are victims of sexual assault know their assailant," with emphasis on the words "college women," "victims," and "sexual assault" denoted by larger or type to separate them from the plainer, less important words. Now, let's it is safe to assume that the intended audience of the campaign is v Likewise, from herein, I will go out on a limb and assert that all of the dis

and contributors are also women, who enter bathroom stalls with pens.

It is possible to begin to piece together the progression of the discourse based on which comment refers to another, although there are a few comments that are not apparent, where there is instead carefully thought out speculation. The first of these comments, written by a woman who felt the need to publically rebut the claim presented by the sticker, becomes vital to the comprehension of the rest of the dialogue. There are many reasons plausible to determine the exigency, or compulsion to respond rhetorically, in this situation. Examining this usage of rhetoric in everyday life, we may finally be able to solve that age-old question of graffiti on the bathroom wall by turning to whom else but Aristotle. Although most actions are made subconsciously, the proofs of Logos (logic), and Pathos (emotion), and Ethos (ethics/credibility) guide our hand in daily life. Each action is made with a purpose and in decoding these messages, taking a page from ancient Greece can only provide a time-tested framework from which to judge the practice of writing on a bathroom stall door.

The second woman takes a cruder approach and jots down, "Close your eyes + crap then."

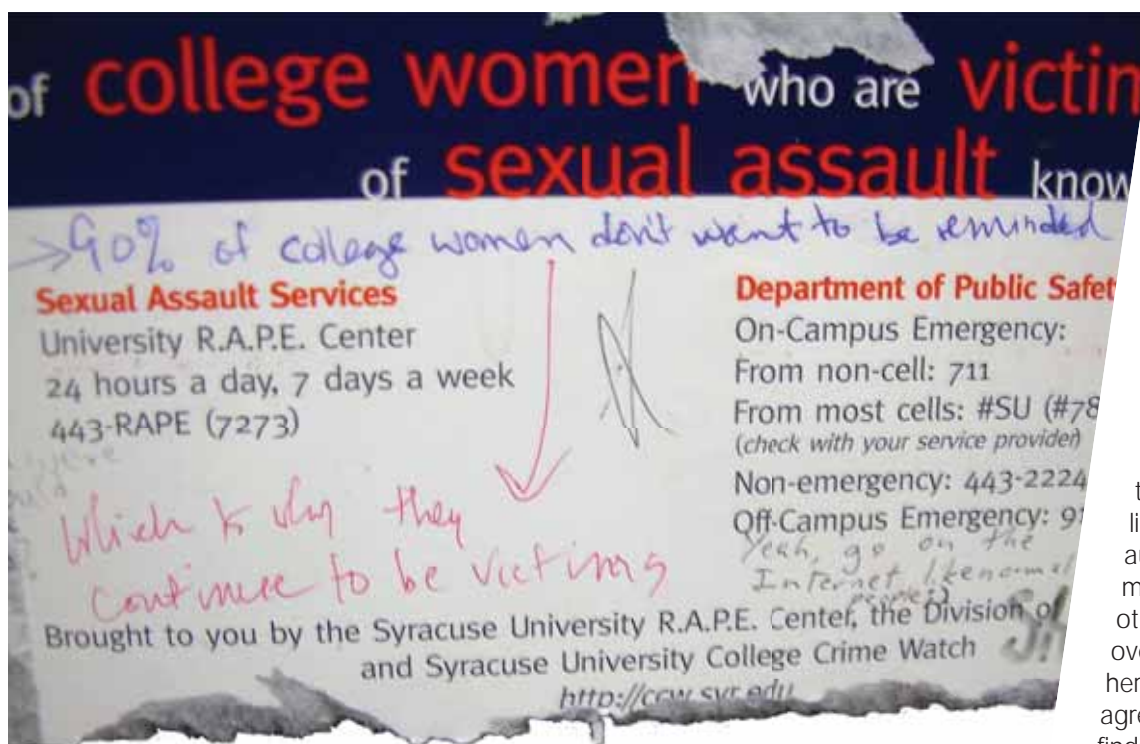
She writes, "90% of all college women don't want to be reminded of sexual assault every time the[y] walk into a bathroom stall" in response, mimicking the initial claim. This was added deliberately and directly under the main point of the sticker. This woman could have an intention of nearly anything depending on her experience prior to this particular trip to the bathroom. She could be the victim of sexual assault, friend of a victim, a conscientious citizen, or a very careful party girl. Although annoyed enough to share her feelings so prominently, she was emotionally invested enough not to double check what she had written. "The" instead of "they" is a common error in our language; yet if she were trying to make

a clear and clever point, would it not be in her best interest to ensure that her retort error free? Taking into account this mistake, as well as the handwriting since it is merely scribble, suggests that the culprit wrote it quickly. (I might also mention that the sticker is in such a place on the door that one must stand and intentionally add to the debate on the door.) The underlined word stresses that she has also seen several other stickers, assuming that she does not only select this particular stall during her days on campus. She establishes no credible reason to agree with her, but seeks to play to the pathos of her fellow women, latching onto their potential shared exasperation at such displays in their 'private sanctuary.' With little eloquence behind her words, this person takes a jab at the idea which has jaded her so, but offers up no insight as to why she feels this way. Nevertheless, her purely emotional appeal serves her purpose based on the outbursts following her declaration, which I will venture to say are unparalleled by any bathroom on this campus.

I believe that the next two statements written in this exchange fall chronologically second because of their location to the original response on the sticker (close enough to the original statement and without crowded letters), as well as the fact these two agree with each other. One woman characterizes the addition as "naive!" – without the proper diacritic mark over the "i" – while the second takes a cruder approach and jots down, "Close your eyes + crap then." Both sources make their own point, effectively denouncing the first woman's statement. The first attacks the character of the dissenter, proposing that the first woman is unaware; however, also does not give any credible evidence of her own. She might also be a victim or may have a relationship with a victim as well. People often form opposite opinions, even from the same experi-



ences (as is apparent with the varied responses all from the same fourteen word phrase). The second response here takes a different approach as its author suggests that the first person, who only has something negative to say, should have ignored the sticker and taken care of her own "business." Certain that the label on the door did not beg for another person's opinion in the first place, the woman in favor of closing your eyes conveys that there are better things to spend your time doing. Then, to drive the point home, she explains this course of action vividly and with language reserved for more intimate company. It is unknown how many women made use of this stall during the course of this conversation via sticker. Therefore, it is unknown how many women remained silent, not deeming the exchange worth their time. (Or just did not think to grab a pen before they entered the bathroom.) But neither of these women strive to employ any of Aristotle's proofs solidly. Instead, they assert why the first failed but do not delve into much more detail, even for a comment on a stall door.



The next remark to follow could have actually originated with the second group. This person employs logos to enhance the quarrel. Her addition: "Which is why they continue to be victims" examines the flaw in the initial response to the warning about sexual assault. This, what I am deeming the fourth comment, is drawn with an arrow into a large blank space, allowing the reader a chance to follow the progression. Setting herself apart, with both space and a rational thought, her statement brings the argument full circle, reexamining the claim made by the campaign. The intent of the DPS caveat was to inform young women of the risk associated with trust. Perpetuating the inability or outright refusal to understand this

point, the initial dissent is attacked at the core by this accusation of ignorance. Before the fourth comment there was no acknowledgement of the real problem. Instead, naivety is cited as the dilemma and looking the other way is the solution proposed. Use of the word "victim" evokes a certain emotion, attempts to sway attitudes, and allows the fourth pen to make an effective argument that seeks to wrench the hearts and minds of its audience. Deducing that the only eyes would remain women (until I broke the cycle by addressing it in this paper), she also plays to the fears women hold onto, whether rational or far-fetched.

Next to jump into the ring is a woman trying to point out the faults in the discourse thus far. In much larger letters and scrawled over some of the information originally printed on the sticker, she writes "quit fighting via bathroom stall..." and draws attention to the seemingly ridiculous squabble dancing in front of her eyes. Although her attempt is noble, the second her utensil touches the paper, she is also

in the midst of the mess. Perhaps a frequenter of this bathroom, she is tired of reading the progression of the bickering. She, alas, gives no reason for the women who travel in and out of the bathroom to stop. There is no logic applied, there is no compelling reason to cease the conversation offered, and still there is no ethos established. Why should the audience listen to this marker over all of the other chatter? Her plea is overlooked, even though her public assertion of agreement for a cease-fire finds good company with the next comment.

With jovial intent, the next to addition to the door is someone who without a doubt finds the whole exchange amusing. I believe this woman is often in the building and visits the bathroom more often than the other contributors. The lighthearted nature of her response hints that she has been watching the drama unfold and can no longer resist inserting herself in the scene. Perhaps a student because of her content, it is clear she is definitely someone who possesses a sense of humor that no one else who places their thought on the board appreciates. "Yeah," she mocks, "go on the internet like normal people ;)" scratched into the little space there is left next to the order to stop the treatise. This is more of an afterthought

than the other words that litter the door. She adds it because she cannot resist. Poking fun at everyone else, without asserting a position, this woman feels above the rest of them. Her addition speaks to a different audience than the rest, addressing those observers who may believe this exchange as ridiculous as she does and choose to stay out of the debate. (Or again, have failed to remember their pens!) Nonetheless, I suppose she is grateful for the entertaining reading material before her in the bathroom. Including herself among the kooks on the door, she also delves into the abyss that is the absence of Aristotle's proofs. Although her two cents are not terribly serious, she fails to offer any proof that the bathroom door is indeed not the perfect situation for such a debate. Neither of the women speaking for an end to the preposterous discussion before them presents any grounds for their position, whether logical or otherwise.

I will admit, I have had the pleasure of watching most of this unfold. This is how I know that the two newest comments are very recent. Both of the following were added during the Spring 2008 semester. The first introduces outside information in order to prove her point. The conundrum here is that she does not truly assert the claim that she is backing, because she only demands the audience "Read Camille Paglia!" An interesting character, Camille Paglia is a feminist writer with five books published, as well as a professor and a columnist. She has written about sexuality throughout the years and has now progressed to analyzing poetry. The person who advocated her literature must have thought that people who argue on bathroom stall doors would get a kick out of real argumentation from a feminist.

The other recent addition to the door rests in the little bit of space that is actually big enough to contribute something legible. "What if you were rapped would u like to be reminded?" This proclamation almost speaks for itself. Agitated at the broadcasts before hers, she portrays someone deeply hurt by the language she faces in this stall. Frustrated enough to scribble a message in shorthand and with a glaring error (especially since "rape" is printed on the sticker), this is the first person to agree with the original addendum since six other people have vocalized their own opinions. Joining the conversation so late, this woman may only be joking like the "internet" comment but there is no way to be sure. Albeit the final statement, almost like a postscript, it poses a rhetorical question that is difficult to argue with, her contention fails like those before her. She does not state why her opinion matters. She does use emotional and logical tactics by constructing the inquiry; however, among all these other anonymous judgments why is this woman any different? The last woman to add does effectively argue in favor of the first to dissent, if you are of the faction in my audience to grant these women the benefit of the doubt.

Several of these women could have encountered something to jade them. There is no way to distinguish who is legitimately scarred and who is just jumping on the band-

wagon and writing on the bathroom wall. An individual's argument became a battlefield for literary critics and jovial emoticons. Throughout the interchange between these women, many others read it and for whatever reason chose to remain observers. The common thread these women failed to grasp dwells with the ethos absent from their discourse. Who are these women? Should their argument be accepted on the mere fact that the audience and the speakers are all women? Which women are they addressing: those who have already spoken or those who will read?

Unfortunately, these questions are not answered in the discussion on the stall door sticker. Although some of the arguments could prove effective, out of context (and sometimes inside the context) they are utterly absurd. The failures presented by these arguments are the type that would madden an educated audience. Seeking attention or not, this spat via bathroom door has constraints that normal arguments do not. To participate one must be a woman, in Syracuse, on the Syracuse University Campus, enter the Shaffer Art building, reach the bathroom, and choose the first stall on the right. Because of our daily or weekly routines it can also be assumed only a small subgroup of the women who fit the criteria will ever enter this particular stall more than once. Specifically, the number of students on this campus who will never participate in this debate is a rather large. Influential in its own right, this display of communication in an obscure venue teaches that rhetoric is present in everyday life, even if the application is sloppy. Why have more stickers remained untarnished? All it takes is one person to start a dialogue before someone else begins to dissent or agree. Note that more bathroom doors might carry this same compulsion once someone breaks the silence. In nearly every women's bathroom stall there hangs a sticker. This sticker presented the opportunity for women to exchange ideas openly and with anonymity; yet, this sticker limits the presentation of the debate. Perhaps if the arguments were solid they would not have to come out in such a situation. Perhaps a dialogue like this one cannot thrive in an open society. Or, perhaps the initiator as an audience was all it took to spark the fire.

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Pictures of the bathroom stall in Shaffer Art Building (first floor), Syracuse University Campus, taken February 1, 2008