

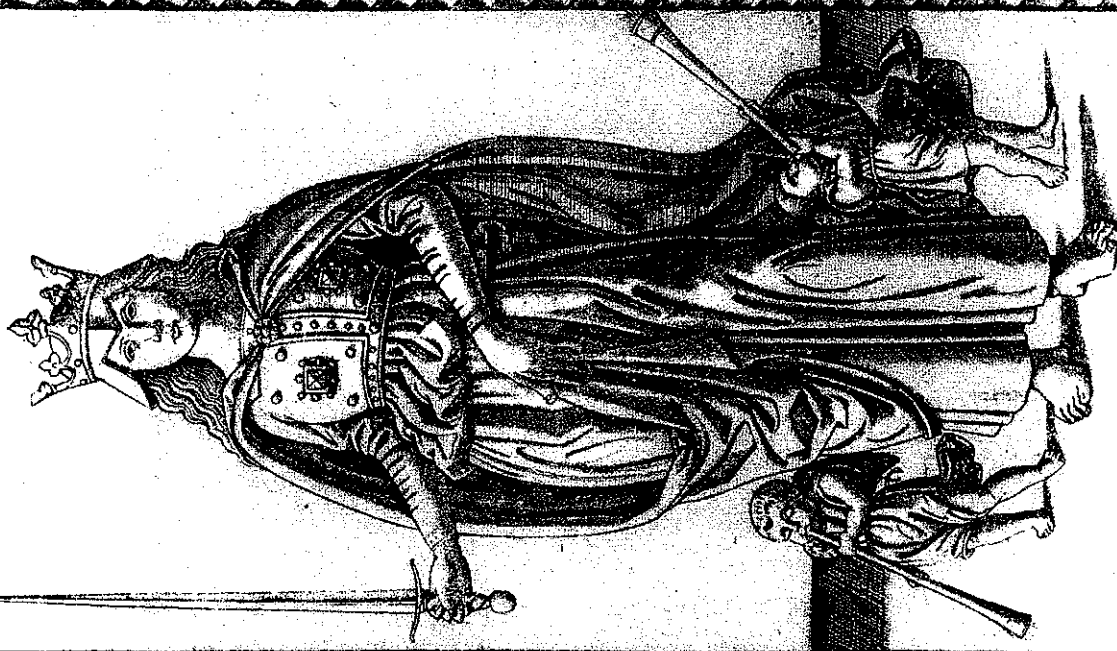
Reclaiming Rhetorica

Women in the Rhetorical Tradition

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Plate from *Die Tarocchi*. Zwei italienische Kupferstichfolgen aus dem XV. Jahrhundert (Cassirer, 1910; Berlin). Ascribed to the painter Mantegna.

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Woman Suffrage and the History of Rhetoric at the Seven Sisters Colleges, 1865-1919

Kathryn M. Conway

The woman suffrage movement was the first public campaign for women's rights in the United States launched and sustained by women who had received formal rhetorical training. These women pioneered both in higher education and in public speaking; they were among the first women to attend college in the United States, and many put their education to work as pro- and antisuffrage speakers. In particular, alumnae of the Seven Sisters colleges gained prominence in this public debate.¹ Their rhetorical preparation included classes in argumentation, elocution, composition, and criticism. These subjects were offered with both oral and written components by the English departments of the Seven Sisters colleges.

In particular, four aspects of rhetorical education for women highlight the connection between rhetoric and suffrage. First, the teaching of rhetoric gave women unprecedented access to the study and practice of oratory. While training in oratory had been a traditional prerequisite for men entering political life, Kennedy and O'Shields note that women in the mid-nineteenth century were "beginning to awaken to their rhetorical potential," and thus eagerly sought this training, too. To engage in public debates on the same basis as men, women had to become convincing and persuasive public speakers. Skill in oratory and familiarity with argumentation were especially important for women who sought to demonstrate that women could be full "political persons": women not only wanted to vote, they also intended to hold political office.²

Second, rhetoric was a required subject at all of the Seven Sisters colleges. Thus, all the thousands of women who graduated from these schools were trained in an essential activity of participatory democracy: the practice of informed discourse. Rhetoric courses instructed students in methods of logical thought, which could be expressed in either written or oral form. Thus, the ancient art of oratory, heretofore reserved exclusively for men, became the object of women's study. In the spirit of Greek and Roman orators, young women learned how to construct and deliver convincing and persuasive arguments in their argumentation classes. Rhetoric courses encouraged women to explore, develop, and articulately express their own ideas on many subjects, particularly public policy topics. Because the students lived at single-sex colleges, suffrage was an obvious and appropriate concern to be raised in rhetoric classes. As a complex topic, woman suffrage offered the student of rhetoric a challenge: whether she was for, indifferent about, or against suffrage, she had to state her position clearly, research the changes that the adoption of suffrage promised, and subsequently present her views to her professors and classmates in a structured argument. In retrospect, we can see that rhetoric classes made an important contribution to the intellectual growth of the suffrage movement: they provided a means for developing both arguments and audiences.

The college audience was strategically important because a significant number of these young women became leaders in the suffrage movement (Scott and Scott 164). Others became leaders in science, government, and social reform movements, and carried their knowledge of and commitment to women's rights to these fields. (See, e.g., Solomon; Ware; Rupp and Taylor; Kradt; Cott; Brown).

Third, the ambitious young women of the Seven Sisters colleges created community forums. Classroom training alone did not give students sufficient practice in addressing an audience to make them confident orators. So, on their own initiative, some students formed extracurricular groups, called "literary societies" or "debate societies," in which they discussed and practiced their rhetorical skills. These self-governed societies organized oratorical events wherein students spoke publicly, both to other societies and to the college community. Woman suffrage was of particular interest to debating societies, as documented by the extant records of these groups, and by the letters and autobiographies of students. Many alumnae later praised the direct contribution that rhetorical training had made to their careers.

Fourth, many of the women who took full advantage of the excellent rhetorical education offered at the Seven Sisters colleges also participated in local, state, and national suffrage organizations, such as the National College Equal Suffrage League. With both an academic and a practical background, these young women graduated as orators and activists rather than as novices. Women faculty in the English departments and professors from other departments were also active in the suffrage movement, and so stood as an inspiring example to their students. Whether a mentor was a pro- or an antisuffrage activist, she guided and encouraged her students to apply their study of rhetoric to their own political goals.

A few outstanding women who successfully drew upon their training in rhetoric were: Harriot Stanton Blatch (Vassar, class of 1878 and 1894), daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and member of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage; Susan Walker Fitzgerald (Bryn Mawr, class of 1893), recording secretary of the National American Woman Suffrage Association; Harriet Burton Laidlaw (Barnard, class of 1902), author and member of the Woman Suffrage Party; and Lucy Burns (Vassar, class of 1902), assistant to Alice Paul, the militant founder of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage.³ These women and hundreds of other alumnae of the Seven Sisters colleges shared two strong bonds: their training as orators and their campaigning as suffragists.⁴

A brief look at women's severely limited access to rhetorical education in the first half of the nineteenth century provides a stark contrast to what was available by the end of that century. Prior to 1835, seminaries offered education beyond grammar school, but no college programs were available to women. For example, the Troy Female Seminary, founded by Emma Willard in 1821, offered a "curriculum similar to that of the contemporary men's colleges" (Scott 3) as did The Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, founded by Mary Lyon in 1838 (which became Mount Holyoke College in 1888). Both schools included basic rhetorical instruction in their curricula; however, they emphasized writing rather than oratory.

In 1835, Oberlin College became the first college in the United States to welcome women, an opportunity that Lucy Stone recollected with no little gratitude: "Men came to Oberlin for various reasons; women because they had nowhere else to go" (Hosford 107). Stone and her class-

mate Antoinette Brown Blackwell struggled at Oberlin to gain the right to speak publicly, an act then forbidden to women. As historian Frances Juliette Hosford observed, nineteenth-century women were told "not to appear before a mixed audience and were to utter no word in the churches" (50). Men were assumed to be preparing for the ministry, law, or politics and so received training in oratory and debate in the form of weekly declamations and discussions. The women, in contrast, were instructed in essay writing because they were expected to become teachers. Hosford comments that "in sentiment, Oberlin was pathetically anxious to preserve the conventions of female modesty, while making certain concessions to the female brain" (50).

Stone and Blackwell, frustrated in the rhetoric classroom because they were expressly forbidden to debate, joined with a few other women students in a secret debating society.⁵ Stone recalled that they met off campus, where they discussed "educational, political, moral & religious questions." No doubt they addressed woman suffrage as one of these "questions," because they discussed "Women and Politics," and the resolution that "ladies have a right to debate and declaim in public" (Seidman 15). Reminiscing, Stone wrote to Blackwell that their most significant activity was learning "to stand and speak, to put motions, how to treat amendments, &c [sic]" (Lasser and Merrill 263). Her confidence secured by practice, Stone had boldly asked the Oberlin administration for permission to read a commencement address. Graduating men presented their essays orally at commencement, but in 1847 Oberlin was not ready for women to do the same. The rebellious Stone refused even to write hers, because she had been denied the right to read her own work. Not until 1874 did Oberlin grant its women students the privilege to "engage in the same Rhetorical Exercises as the gentlemen." In so doing, Oberlin finally permitted the long-sought equality of rhetorical education, but even then did not wholly sanction women orators, for the conservative faculty remarked that "the appearance of young ladies in public orations is not in the best of taste, or desirable" (Hosford 105).

Stone, Blackwell, and the classes of women who followed after them worked for decades to garner respect for women orators. Their efforts attested to the intense desire of women to gain the practical speaking and leadership skills that men cultivated in rhetoric classes. The debating society that Stone and Blackwell had participated in furtively in 1846 was later officially recognized as the Young Ladies Literary Society. Blackwell was compelled "to immortalize that primary woman's Club," for she recognized women's laying claim to language as a historically and politically significant act. The stated goal of the society was "to im-

prove its members in writing, speaking, and Discussion" (Seidman 14). Blackwell knew that women were empowered by their collective study of oratory in societies and clubs. As one of her student successors at Oberlin commented, "society" was one place where women could discover their "hidden oratorical powers" (Seidman 15). She witnessed the proliferation of women's clubs during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and recognized that these clubs were crucial to the success of the suffrage movement (Lasser and Merrill 233). Oberlin women pioneered, setting educational and social precedents for the women who would attend the Seven Sisters colleges.

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By 1865, when Vassar College opened, state universities and a few other colleges accepted women students. Some women graduates from these institutions and some women without formal schooling were by now familiar figures on public platforms as activists in the abolitionist movement and in various post-Civil War reform movements. Stone, Blackwell, and a subsequent generation of women introduced and thus began to articulate and debate the issues of women's rights, and like Sojourner Truth, they eventually gained public respect as orators and leaders.

The accomplishments of these exceptional women orators notwithstanding, women's intellectual abilities still were questioned publicly by conservative critics. Following the 1868 campus visit of the well-known speaker Anna Dickenson, Matthew Vassar responded with exasperation to criticism of women's education:

The truth is it is all nonsense and irreconcilable with Divine truth in regard to the Mental Capacity of Woman, nothing but long prejudice with the dominating [sic] spirit of Man has kept Woman from occupying a higher elevation in literature & art, but mans tyranny & jealousy [sic], and wilfull usurpation of her normal rights &c. (Haight 184-85)

Vassar was keenly aware of the disadvantages against which women toiled, and had established the first women's college so that "our Fair sex" could gain an education as excellent as men's. Vassar's letters to the first trustees, administrators, and students of the college affirm his confidence in women and reveal his commitment to women's rights. Moreover, unlike the administrators of Oberlin College, he clearly advocated oratorical training for women in his curriculum preferences and his encouragement of extracurricular activities.

By inviting women's rights activists to speak on campus, the founder and the faculty encouraged students to respect and emulate women orators. Writing home to her parents in 1869, a young woman enthusiastically described the politically conscious environment in which she studied: "Really the large view we get of national problems interests me more than any other subject unless it is 'the woman question'! I expect yet to be the assistant editor of the 'Revolution' in collaboration with Mrs. Stanton and Susan B. Anthony" (*Letters* 130-31). She was inspired directly by her professors and their friends, for some of whom women's rights represented a lifetime commitment.

At Vassar, faculty and students frequently dined together, and in some cases were housed together.⁶ In *The Earliest Days at Vassar*, Frances Wood speaks of a community of professors and students devoted to political change, describing her memories of the world-renowned Vassar astronomer Maria Mitchell:

However interested you might have been in woman suffrage and all the other subjects concerning the "cause," you felt that in comparison with this great woman you hardly knew the alphabet. She judged everything from the standpoint, "How is this going to affect women?" . . . Every woman speaker of note in that day,—Julia Ward Howe, Anna Dickinson, Mary Livermore, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ednah D. Cheney, were personal friends of Miss Mitchell, and at various times her guests. (82-83)

Vassar told a student who attended the prosuffrage lecture by Dickinson that his "300 Daughters" (the students at the college) should be fully aware of the "shameful" categorization of themselves in New York state law: at that time, women were excluded from suffrage, as were "criminals, paupers, Idiots &c." Vassar urged his students to apply "the remedy" to this situation (82-83).

One aspect of "the remedy" was self-improvement. As an incentive, Vassar wrote in 1867 that he would sponsor debates four times a year for the "encouragement of 'Gifts or Talents' of the young lady pupils in public speaking." He further suggested that this series of debates be the basis for the founding of a "Vassar College Offhand Speaking Society," so called because the debates were to be extemporaneous, rather than prepared in advance (Debate Folder, Vassar College Special Collections). Vassar was well aware that young men prepared themselves for citizenship by joining such societies, and he wished to extend their benefits to women. In effect, Vassar created a setting geared toward educating the "good woman" orator, much

as Quintilian had outlined the rhetorical education of the "good man" (Meador). Vassar sought the best available teachers for his students and engaged them to teach the subjects studied by classical orators: philosophy, logic, history, religion, and rhetoric.

Each of the Seven Sisters colleges required students to follow a prescribed program of rhetoric courses, offered by the English departments, which also offered elective courses and lectures. Notably, the colleges did not introduce courses designed especially for women: the programs did not differ markedly from the standard fare at men's colleges, in that they utilized the same texts and had similar requirements. Yet, the number and depth of courses differed among the seven institutions. The strength of the departments varied, too, and reflected the relationship between the college's administration and the department's faculty. Thus, the core curriculum, electives, and faculty determined the different character of rhetorical education at the colleges.

The first rhetoric courses at Vassar included lessons on grammar, composition, elocution, and analysis, all devised with the goal of improving the students' writing, reading, and speaking of the English language. The junior year was devoted to the study of Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* and to the use of syllogisms in argument. Classical texts concerning rhetoric were studied in other courses, in the original Greek or Latin. Two of Plato's dialogues, *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*, along with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, were studied in Greek, while Cicero and Quintilian were studied in Latin. For centuries, knowledge of Latin and Greek had been reserved for the socially elite group of the educated men who governed Western society. When women acquired these languages and studied the masterworks of rhetoric that had previously served as models for male orators, they initiated a significant new tradition.

Three other women's colleges opened soon after Vassar: Smith and Wellesley in 1875, and Radcliffe in 1879. A decade later, the remaining three "sisters" further increased women's access to higher education: Mount Holyoke in 1888 and Barnard and Bryn Mawr in 1889. All their students participated, willingly or not, in the required writing of "daily themes," a practice originally instituted in rhetoric courses at men's colleges.

Professors assigned literary topics and encouraged their students to work on personal topics, too. Professors and assistants read and corrected themes for grammar, composition, style, and clarity. The 1876-1877 Vassar annual catalog stated that the criticisms of these themes were "minute, personal, and free, being made in private interviews between the teacher and the students individually" (Vassar 18-19). The

constant quest for material to use in themes led Barnard graduate Alice Duer Miller to remark, "Nothing is sacred; your hat, your diction, your anecdote about your maiden aunt—all may serve as copy for the voracious 'daily-themer'" (221). Always in need of material for a daily theme, students found Maria Mitchell's question, "How is this going to affect women?" to be a continually useful device for generating topics. Often, the question resulted in essays that expressed how the student, as a woman, was affected by her academic experiences.

Students crafted their themes in the form of short essays or verses, and although most themes had a serious tone, some had a self-reflective, satirical slant. The 1895 Barnard annual included such a poem, which strongly resembles Miller's later published work, *Are Women People? A Book of Rhymes for Suffrage Times*.

"Why can't I write as others do?"

She sighed—then wrote her daily page;

The subject of her essay was

"The Voting Woman of Our Age."

Friday she seized her weekly pack,

To find this theme she glanced it through;

"It's marked 'Conventional!'" she cried,

"Why do I write as others do?" (77)

Through the use of antimetabole, or the "turning about" of words, the author cleverly presented the rhetoric teacher's comment, "Conventional," as ambiguous. Was the reader to think that the daily-themer wished to emulate her peers' manner of writing, their interest in suffrage, or both? Furthermore, did the phrase, "Voting Woman of Our Age," refer to the women outside of New York state who were already enfranchised, or did it refer to the author's classmates who would work toward that goal? The ambiguity might have been a humorous ploy, or quite possibly, a sincere attempt by the author to camouflage her own political stance.

In that case, the author chose to remain anonymous, but for most students, writing was a public act: a student had to contend with the comments not only of her classmates but of her professors as well. In the classroom professors read, or requested students to read aloud, both "good" and "bad" themes. In a letter written to her parents in 1869, a Vassar student reported on one of her recent themes: "When Prof. Backus praised it highly and said it was better than the others because I used purer Saxon language and my essay was a fine example of the easy, flow-

ing, graceful, and simple style (he used all those adjectives)—I nearly died the death of the righteous" (*Letters* 32-33). For young women, the first experiences of baring their inner thoughts to the public criticism of peers and professors created anxiety at best and trauma at worst.

Radcliffe student Abby Parsons MacDuffie worried, "I am afraid my poor composition will be badly treated. You know that ridicule is the Harvard College theory" (20). A woman suffrage advocate during college, MacDuffie struggled to reconcile the value of rhetorical training with the everyday conflicts engendered by her harsh professor, Adams Sherman Hill, the influential holder of the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard and author of the textbook that was adopted by most colleges during the 1880s. To her, he was "simply dreadful" (18). When he read one of her essays aloud, "Slash, bang, went his caustic criticism, while slow, infinitesimal tears wet my cheeks" (11). For four years she and her classmates endured the notorious rhetorician's remarks, painfully conscious of his scorn, which MacDuffie reported in letters to her family: "Mr. Hill said the other day that I was the most cheerful person he knew. I hope he doesn't think I am an idiot and therefore cheerful" (24). Although she felt "very much taken down" by this treatment, she persisted, regarding Hill's rhetoric text as "valuable" (16).

By the turn of the century, rhetoric programs had adopted a standardized sequence that typically included description, narration, exposition, argumentation, and criticism.⁷ In the first year, the student took "Rhetoric and English Composition," a survey and theme-writing course. In subsequent years, she studied criticism, style, and argumentation. The latter courses involved both the written and the spoken word, with the emphasis varying from one school to another. Argumentation was especially important for women with political aspirations, because their success depended upon well-reasoned thought. For instance, in 1892 Wellesley offered a rigorous course entitled "Argumentation and Persuasion," which included "a brief based on some skillful argument; three forensics, preceded by briefs, discussion of briefs and of forensics; debates once a week; criticism of the speakers" (Wellesley 1892-1893).⁸ This type of course opened a practice that had been of long standing in men's colleges to women. Donald Hayworth, in "The Development of the Training of Public Speakers in America" concludes from the history of men's education that "undoubtedly the Wednesday Afternoon Forensics' were highly significant in the training of all college and academy students, and especially for those with political ambitions" (492). So, too, were the women's forensics.

Those women who sought more training in rhetoric than was offered in the required courses continued their studies through electives. Barnard, Bryn Mawr, and Radcliffe offered some electives of particular interest to future orators, such as "Oral Discussion and Platform Reading" (Radcliffe 1902), but by far the widest range of options was offered at the remaining schools.⁹ Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, Vassar, and Smith all presented advanced courses in argumentation, such as one taught by Mary Jordan in 1900: "Exposition in Oratory, Science, Philosophy." The first section of the course focused on debate and argument, parliamentary procedure, study of speeches and debates, and "Practice in writing and delivering arguments." The second part required an "Argumentative Paper, written after consultation with instructors, preparation and criticism of trial briefs, and proper use of reference material" (Smith College 46-47). Smith students remembered Jordan's pedagogy in vivid terms: "Her method was to take something and tear it to pieces," said Mildred Scott Olmstead, class of 1912, an influential feminist who subsequently abandoned writing in favor of public speaking (van Voris 30). Pulitzer Prize winner Constance McLaughlin Green, class of 1919, found the rigor of Jordan's rhetoric, and Jordan's insistence that students express their ideas in "lucid English" the best thing that happened to her in college (Van Voris 45).

Alumnae letters and memoirs reveal that although the Seven Sisters colleges generally supported the right of women to speak publicly, the faculty and administrators were by no means unified in their individual encouragement of women as speakers or as potential voters. Annie Winsor Allen observed that Radcliffe students were not at ease in rhetoric class. Although Harvard rhetoric classes provided male students with a comfortable forum in which to speak, women who studied with the same professors at Radcliffe remained silent. Outside the classroom they told each other that they disagreed with the professor, but in the classroom the professor so intimidated them that they could not speak. Allen found her classmates' ideas "original" and she understood why they hesitated to stand up to older academicians. In a daily theme written in 1887, Allen asserted:

I think women, besides really lacking independence, add to their apparent servility by their timid silence. Women students often disagree radically and emphatically with their instructor's statements and opinions, often have independent sensible notions of their own, but they do not dare to express their dissent, or knowing themselves ignorant they do

not feel justified in propounding original theories to men who have spent years in study. They are not the mere receptacles which they seem to be. (Allen 1)

On the verso of this theme, her professor, Barrett Wendell, wrote, "Clever, Thoughtful," an incongruous comment when reviewed in light of his later scathing remarks about Radcliffe students.¹⁰

If a woman dared to voice an "independent sensible notion" in support of suffrage, she risked censure at Radcliffe because the administration and many of the faculty members were adamantly opposed to universal franchise. The historian Barbara Miller Solomon points out that Radcliffe was the only college of the Seven Sisters to have an organized antisuffrage club (237). In this atmosphere, young women who were prosuffrage, or even undecided, were set apart as dissenters. Solomon found that in 1895, when a Harvard rhetoric professor asked his Radcliffe students to compose a theme concerning woman suffrage, only "two nonconformists wrote in its favor (out of almost seventy students)" (111). The two women brave enough to speak their mind were Maud Wood Park and her friend Inez Haynes Irwin, both of the class of 1898.

In contrast to Radcliffe's English department, which drew its all-male faculty from Harvard, the predominantly female faculty of the English department at Mount Holyoke supported students' prosuffrage activities and guided them in articulating their views. For instance, at the turn of the century, Clara Stevens offered courses in rhetorical theory, structure, style, and journalism, all of which permitted students to research and develop arguments concerning suffrage. In 1902 Beth Gilchrist, one of Stevens's journalism students, entered her essay, "Equal Suffrage as an Influence on the Individual and on the Race," in a Press Club contest and subsequently won the then sizable sum of \$75 (Gilchrist 1902). While the coincidence of a student's viewpoint on suffrage with that of her professor did not guarantee harmony, it may well have allowed the student easier access to constructive criticism.

Wellesley's women faculty members were well known for their activism, which they did not hesitate to carry into the classroom. This was demonstrated by the predominantly female English Composition department, which required all students to take "Critical Exposition and Argumentation." In 1906 the second question on the Midyear Examination for this course instructed each student to arrange twenty-one statements concerning "Woman Suffrage in logical, brief form under an appropriate propositional heading." If a student altered the order or re-

jected any of the statements, she needed to justify her decision. This question allowed students to apply the skills of argument that they had learned in class to a familiar debate, the outcome of which could affect their lives profoundly. To complete the task, the student first categorized the statements as evidence ("The only other disenfranchised classes are idiots, criminals and children"), assertion ("Suffrage is a natural right"), irrelevant ("Women are interested in the education of children"), or objection ("Women are represented by men"). Because the content of the given statements was such that only an affirmative case could be made, the student then arranged the statements in a logical form that would convince her audience of the necessity of woman suffrage. The positive emphasis on suffrage in this exam question was a conscious rhetorical choice made by members of the department.

A similar decision was made by Sophie Chantal Hart, chair of the English Composition department, when she approved the use of a lesson book from Harvard's introductory composition classes. Hart modified the content of the book to make it more appropriate for Wellesley women. Originally, "English A: A Manual of Instructions and Exercises for 1914-15," written by a Harvard professor, contained no references to suffrage.¹¹ However, the Wellesley version of the same manual, which was used during World War I, contained six suffrage topics as suggestions for themes, as follows:

—Suffrage in My Home Town

- Why I am a Baptist, democrat, antisuffragist (or anything else you really are).
- The Militant Suffrage Movement in England
- The Status of Women's Suffrage at the Present time—Particularly in its relation to the peace movement
- Reply to J. S. Mill's "Subjection of Women" or Frederick Harrison's "The Future of Woman." (English Composition 21, 23-24)

In her own teaching, Hart attempted to guide each student in her writing "to possess the content of her mind, to correlate ideas, [and] to discover her reactions to ideas and connection between things which have just begun to dawn, enchantingly, on the horizon of the mind" (Hart 373). Obviously, the Wellesley rhetoric professors considered woman suffrage to be one such idea on the political horizon, and Hart and her colleagues made special efforts to awaken their students to this issue.

III

Young women at the Seven Sisters colleges organized literary and debating societies, as Stone and Blackwell had done at Oberlin, and as men had done for decades (Hayworth). Mount Holyoke and Wellesley had active literary and debate societies as early as the 1880s. Often the societies included a woman professor as adviser or honorary member. Rhetoric professor Clara Stevens sponsored "The Reading Circle" so that Mount Holyoke students could practice literary and social criticism on an informal and regular basis outside of the classroom, much as Oberlin students had done in the Ladies Literary Society.

Suffrage was a favored topic of discussion and debate "in society." Writing home from Mount Holyoke in 1895 to describe her debate society activities, Matilda S. Calder reported "a great deal of excitement" in a letter to her parents: "Our side for Woman's Suffrage held the rally on Saturday night. The speeches were very good and we had some patriotic songs." Two weeks later, the entire college gathered to hear the debate teams: "All the good arguments were on our side—for it." As was customary in such debates, the members of the audience cast ballots on the resolution debated. Calder's confidence notwithstanding, the negative side won. She also noted that Wellesley held a similar debate on the same night and that the affirmative side won (Calder, letters of Oct. 27, Nov. 9, 1895).

Clearly, women valued their literary and debating societies as training grounds for their eventual participation in public discourse. Wellesley's Phi Sigma literary society member Edith Metcalf argued in 1889, "Have not our oral debates, discussion of papers, conversation upon current affairs, and above all, that impromptu critique . . . vindicated their value repeatedly?" She continued in praise of the group's activities, asking, "Where else were we taught the laws and etiquette of criticism?" and "Where else did we gain any true hint of parliamentary usage?" She concluded her argument for the practice of rhetorical skills by noting that college graduates "forcible in business or the professions, speak with unbounded gratitude of their society training." She foresaw that women schooled and practiced in rhetoric who found themselves in "a knot of floundering women frantically trying to organize into something" would know just what to do to bring about order and facilitate communication (Metcalf 1889). The "societies" section of the 1900 Vassar yearbook includes an illustration of one such well-prepared student calling her colleagues to order: she holds a gavel in one hand and *Roberts Rules of Order* in the other.

Vassar College was recognized as "the pioneer in debating for women" (Yost 129). The "T&M" society was formed in 1879 and included all the students in the odd-year classes, while "Qui Vive" was formed in 1882 and included all the students in the even-year classes. The societies' foremost function was to "train the individual member in habits of logical thought and forceful expression" (Colton 145). Each society held three debates per year among its own members. At the end of each year the societies debated each other in the "Intersociety Debate." Topics for all the debates were chosen by the students themselves, and focused on state- and national-level economic and political policies.

Although the debate societies were a time-consuming extracurricular activity, students on each campus participated in them with great enthusiasm. To prepare for a debate, a student carefully researched her topic, consulted with her teammates to choose appropriately persuasive strategies, arranged a convincing argument in the form of a written, forensic brief, and finally, practiced the oral delivery of her argument. All of these steps were taught in argumentation class.

Gertrude Buck, professor of English at Vassar College, co-authored *A Handbook on Argumentation and Debating* with her former student Kristine Mann in 1906.¹² The handbook contained detailed guidelines and suggested topics for debate, including suffrage. In one exercise, the authors instructed the student to "write a three minute speech to persuade women who believe in suffrage, that suffrage would not be a good thing for women" (12). This exercise gave the antisuffrage student practice in articulating her views in an efficient and persuasive manner. Alternatively, the exercise alerted the prosuffrage student to the possible arguments of her adversaries, to which she might prepare rebuttals. In another exercise, the student had to "suggest three ways of wording a question for debate on women's suffrage, showing the change of emphasis corresponding to the wording" (44). Manipulating emphasis prepared students to analyze arguments and taught them how to control the direction and the extent of an argument.

Suffrage was distinguished as the only topic out of more than fifty debated more than once in a ten-year period at Vassar, demonstrating both Buck's influence and the students' sustained interest. When the Qui Vive Society debated the resolution, "That women should have an equal voice with men in municipal government" in 1899 (Buck's second year at Vassar), both the issue in question and the affirmative team lost the debate, which was decided by a vote of the judges and the audience (1900 *Vassarion* n.pag.). Four years later, a new crop of Qui Vive mem-

bers debated the resolution, "That full suffrage should be extended to the women of the United States." This time, the affirmative won (Colton 169). In that same year, students dedicated their yearbook to Buck, who instructed the debate teams. The decision for the 1909 T&M Society debate on the resolution, "That New York State extend the suffrage to its women" was not recorded (Colton 168).

A growing acceptance of women as public speakers had taken place during the latter half of the nineteenth century, as noted by Mary Jordan in *Correct Writing and Speaking* (1904).

The old teaching that women should not be heard in the congregation has given way before necessity. Probably few women who speak in public began by choosing to do so as the gratification of any taste or desire for publicity. But circumstances forced the effort upon them, repetition made its difficulties less formidable, and gradually the feeling has grown in the community that women ought to be able to do what public speaking naturally comes their way. (66-67)

Bolstered by this trend, Wellesley and Vassar staged the first women's intercollegiate debate in 1902, before a public audience. This event and others like it gave the young women access to a wide and appreciative audience, a stepping-stone to some of the more difficult audiences they would face as suffrage activists. As World War I escalated, so did the suffrage movement. According to E. R. Nichols, "During the war the debating interest [in the nation] was sustained in large part by women students ('Historical Sketch III' 259). This gave women the necessary leverage to gain entrance to men's forensic honor associations, such as Pi Kappa Delta ('Historical Sketch II' 601). With an increased sense of power, women spoke out of what they saw as necessity, and went further to capture public speaking opportunities than what 'naturally' came their way. As a senior at Smith in 1920, Katherine Graham Howard did 'good hard digging for source material' as a member of the debate team. Standing in public to debate at this early stage of her life was 'a tremendous help' to a woman who later became the secretary of the National Committee of the Republican Party, and who held many other high-ranking political appointments (Van Voris 48).¹³

IV

Some students who eagerly absorbed their lessons in rhetoric, argumentation, and oratory also debated, and they went beyond the campus

environment to join local and national suffrage organizations before they graduated. The administrators and faculty at the Seven Sisters had a dual impact on this phase of a student's involvement with the suffrage movement: they were both academic and political mentors. The combined contributions of these individuals, added to the other consequences of rhetorical education, produced outstanding leaders for the movement. Solomon asserts that "most women's colleges . . . were not potent breeding grounds for the cause," basing her conclusion on the results of polls conducted in the early 1900s, which revealed that the majority of students at all-woman colleges did not favor the extension of suffrage to their own sex (112). Nonetheless, the large number of leaders who graduated from these colleges points to a different interpretation of the colleges' influence on the movement: the Seven Sisters colleges furthered the suffrage campaign greatly by educating its future leaders, who had responded to both positive and negative campus experiences as they matured. These leaders followed a pattern in their affiliations: as students, they belonged to college suffrage clubs; as graduates, to national suffrage groups; and after suffrage was won, to national political parties.

In several cases, the college administration discouraged or forbade prosuffrage speeches and meetings on campus: Radcliffe, Smith, and Vassar had antisuffrage administrators. At Smith, Mary Jordan, chair of the Department of Rhetoric and Old English, agreed with the administration, whose policy was "to refuse any form of recognition to woman suffrage." Jordan spoke at large rallies and also authored "Noblesse Oblige," an antisuffrage pamphlet published by the Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women (Jordan n.d.). Although students were fond of Jordan, who was a powerful speaker and administrator, they regarded her political beliefs as "quite old fashioned," and questioned Jordan publicly, asking, "How can you help college girls discussing what they will?" (Newspaper clipping, n.d., Jordan Papers). One student, Mildred Louise Colton, boldly did prosuffrage research for Jordan's "Junior Argumentative Paper" course (Colton Papers).

Indeed, college women did discuss suffrage, even if they had to do so in secret: some went so far as to hold meetings in a graveyard, as did Inez Millholland, a debater at Vassar (Solomon 112-13). She resorted to this off-campus rendezvous because Vassar's President Taylor forbade suffrage meetings. Despite the ban, Millholland successfully started the Vassar chapter of the National College Equal Suffrage League, which had one hundred members by 1917, according to the 1918 *Vassarion*. She later undertook an exhausting cross-country speaking tour on behalf

of the cause (Fortieth Anniversary Report 11). Taylor also had refused to allow Jane Addams to speak on campus because of her prosuffrage position (Taylor). In a turnabout for Vassar, Taylor's successor in 1915, Henry Noble MacCracken, favored suffrage. MacCracken, who had taught previously at Smith, became a member of Vassar's English department, which housed a large number of suffrage advocates, including its chair, Laura Wylie, and the well-known rhetorician Gertrude Buck. The department's faculty welcomed this change of presidents and the subsequent policy changes.

The presidents of Mount Holyoke and Bryn Mawr Colleges, Mary Woolley and Martha Carey Thomas, joined with other colleagues to form the National College Equal Suffrage League (NCESL) in 1906. Thomas became president of the organization in 1908, and also traveled widely, speaking on behalf of NCESL and NAWSA (Bacon 198-99).

Students started suffrage clubs on every Seven Sisters campus. Most often, these clubs were affiliated with NCESL. At Vassar, the club members took an active part in working for the passage of a full-suffrage constitutional amendment, proposed to the New York state electorate in a 1917 referendum. This was a pivotal vote, because with its success, "victory throughout the nation was assured" (Kraditor 6). Alice Snyder directed the activities of the club in the Poughkeepsie area. Snyder was well prepared for the job, for in addition to her rhetorical studies, she had debated suffrage in 1909 as a member of the T&M debate team (1918 *Vassarion*). Club members worked doggedly, "circulating the voters, house-to-house canvassing and watching the polls Election Day." During the second semester they prepared to send out workers to non-suffrage states (1918 *Vassarion*). To learn more about political organizing, the students relied upon materials provided by their national association, and may well have consulted "Organizing to Win by the Political District Plan: A Handbook for Working Suffragists," written in 1914 by Harriet Burton Laidlaw, a Barnard College alumna. Laidlaw urged her coworkers: "At every political meeting, and in every political committee, the Women Suffrage Party's voice must be heard in undeviating demand for the submission of the woman suffrage amendment to the voters" (Laidlaw n.p.). The author herself spoke fervently at massive street gatherings in immigrant neighborhoods of New York City, answering opponents' challenges with arguments that she had outlined in another publication to which she contributed, "Twenty-Five Answers to Antis" (111). These women built upon the wave of activity in New York state that had been generated by yet another graduate of the Seven Sisters: the daugh-

ter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriot Stanton Blatch, class of 1878 and 1894, who had earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Vassar (Kraditor 268-69). Inspired by the suffragists with whom she had worked during her twenty-year residence in England, after her return to the United States, Blatch formed the Women's Political Union in 1907. By organizing labor workers and by tapping into Inez Millholland's newly formed New York state affiliate of the NCESL, Blatch's group grew to over nineteen thousand members in just one year (Flexner 253). Blatch brought oratory out of the confines of the meeting room and into the street, creating a massive and mobile outdoor forum for women speakers.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, most suffragists belonged to the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), led by Anna Howard Shaw, who until 1915 "devoted her truly great oratorical powers to the suffrage cause" (13). Alice Paul and other militants founded the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage in 1912 and broke from NAWSA in 1914. Paul's sister Helen, a Wellesley graduate, wrote of the Englishwomen who inspired this new group in an article entitled "A Glimpse of the Suffragette movement" (*Wellesley College News* 1914). Other Seven Sisters alumnae joined this radical organization, which merged with the Women's Party in 1917 to become the National Women's Party (NWP). Lucy Burns, who had debated suffrage questions at Vassar was "Miss [Alice] Paul's chief lieutenant" (Kraditor 280).¹⁴ In *The Story of the Woman's Party*, Inez Haynes Irwin observes that Burns "speaks and writes with equal eloquence and elegance. Her speeches before suffrage bodies, her editorials in the *Suffragist* are models of clearness; conciseness; of accumulative force of expression" (16-17). In sum, the training common to all Seven Sisters alumnae gave Irwin the authority to recognize and praise Burns's rhetorical excellence.

Most activists remained with NAWSA and bitterly opposed the NWP's tactics, which included inflammatory oratory and civil disobedience. Despite the rifts in the movement, suffrage became a political reality in 1919. In the aftermath of the struggle, the women orators who had contributed zealously to the cause found or created new and related pursuits. For example, Marguerite Hickey Lawler, class of 1912, one of Jordan's students at Smith, continued to press for the extension of suffrage by educating immigrants. She knew that by studying the English language, rhetoric, and civics, hundreds of thousands of women and men in New England could acquire the communication skills required for citizenship. With her own strong background in rhetoric, Lawler secured

an appointment as Connecticut State Agent of Americanization. She traveled and lectured widely to promote the state's program, and also applied her mastery of rhetoric to the writing of a textbook for Americanization instructors, *Lessons for New Americans: Advanced Course* (1923). Her choice of materials included excerpts of speeches by well-known United States orators, which she recommended as oral and written models for women and men students (Conway 1986).

As members of the League of Women Voters, Seven Sisters alumnae and faculty members turned their prosuffrage energies toward registering and educating women as voters. Maud Wood Park, the "nonconformist" student at Radcliffe, progressed from her membership in NAWSA to become the first president of the League of Women Voters. Others, like Martha Carey Thomas, followed Alice Paul's lead in pressing for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1909 an optimistic Vassar student penned "A Suffragist Soliloquy." In verse, she dreamed of a woman who would ascend to the top of the political hierarchy in the United States.

To take the stump, to vote, perchance be President

.....

Yet who can bear the calm of household life,
A voteless year, the proud world's contumely,
Pangs of despised franchise, the law's defect,
The politician's scorn and cruel jokes
That earnest suffragettes from voters take,
When they might rulers make
With "Votes for Women?"

(1909 *Vassarion* 206)

She and her college-educated sisters before her had proudly gained access to the ancient, male-dominated tradition of rhetoric, and had used what they learned in rhetoric classes to speak out on behalf of women. Having successfully argued for the privilege of participating in a political state far more democratic than those inhabited by the Greek and Roman masters of oratory, these women continued to work collectively to empower women as fully realized political persons who could skillfully and persuasively engage and inform public discourse.

The history of rhetoric at the Seven Sisters colleges reveals three key factors in the lives of the suffragists who contributed to the eventual success of the movement. First, as a group they were uniformly well educated in rhetoric: they studied the same classical texts and benefited

from the same oratorical training as did their male contemporaries, and thus were the first women in the United States who were purposefully educated to be full "political persons." Second, they became deeply involved in organizing themselves into "societies" during college, an activity that gave them great confidence in their own ability to be effective public speakers and political leaders. Third, and finally, they forged lifelong associations with mentors, peers, and successors in academia and in state and national women's organizations—connections that proved to be invaluable for coordinating a national political movement.

NOTES

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1. The Seven Sisters colleges were founded exclusively for women. (For names, dates of founding and further discussion, see Wagner, Notes, this volume.) Although the twentieth-century stereotype portrays a woman at one of these colleges as a rich white woman of a Protestant religion, many students were middle class, some were poor, some were black, Hispanic, or Asian, and the students represented many religions. The archives of each college preserve student records that supply this biographical information. See also Barbara Miller Solomon's *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America*, chap. 5, "Who Went to College."

2. "Political persons" was the phrase used in 1911 by Lorna Birtwell, a pro-suffrage Radcliffe student. Quoted in Solomon 113.

3. For the names of other Seven Sisters graduates who were suffrage leaders see Kradtior, Solomon; and Flexner. Oates and Williamson document the important role of the Seven Sisters colleges in producing women leaders, in "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers" and "Comment on Tidball's 'Women's Colleges and Women Achievers Revisited.'"

4. Throughout the later decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, increasing numbers of students lobbied for suffrage. By 1918 the Vassar Chapter of the National College Equal Suffrage League reported a membership of over one hundred persons, most of them students. Six of the Seven Sisters colleges formed chapters of this organization, while Barnard students formed the "Suffrage Club" in 1914 and the "Feminist Forum" in 1916. This information can be found under various listings in the archives of each of the colleges, such as "suffrage," "student clubs," and the specific names of the individuals and organizations.

5. Cazden writes in "Antoinette Brown Blackwell: A Biography" that Stone and Blackwell did debate once in class, with the encouragement of their rhetoric professor, James Thome. Their brilliance in the debate resulted in an outcry from the rest of the faculty and from the Ladies Board of Oberlin College (28-29).

6. According to Horowitz, in the earliest days, unmarried women faculty members lived in apartments in the students' dormitories.

7. The popularization of Adams Sherman Hill's teachings led to this reduced notion of the domain of rhetoric. For various accounts of the history of rhetorical instruction in men's colleges, see: William Riley Parker, "Where Do English Departments Come From?" and Ronald F. Reid, "The Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory, 1806-1904." In "Two Model Teachers and the Harvardization of English Departments," Donald C. Stewart mentions Gertrude Buck, Helen Mahin, and Ruth Mary Weeks, who were all students of Fred Newton Scott, a "model teacher" of rhetoric. But Stewart fails to give these women any further credit for their subsequent careers as educational leaders. Buck created an innovative rhetoric department at Vassar College and was the author of over twenty textbooks and articles on rhetoric. According to *The University of Michigan: An Encyclopaedic Survey*, Mahin became professor of journalism at the University of Kansas and Weeks "became a distinctive leader in the liberal movement in language matters" (562). James Berlin gives more attention to Buck in his books *Rhetoric and Reality* and *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*.

8. In "Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum" S. Michael Halloran argues that "the classical art of oral public discourse" that predominated in late eighteenth-century men's colleges underwent a "severe eclipse" in the late nineteenth century, never to reemerge, even in today's rhetoric programs. A consideration of the emphasis placed on oratory and the focus on public issues in the rhetoric programs of the Seven Sisters colleges at the turn of the nineteenth century could lead to a different reading of the history of rhetoric in the United States.

9. Barnard relied upon Columbia for many of its professors, especially in rhetoric. Radcliffe drew its English department faculty members entirely from Harvard. The limited offerings in rhetoric may be linked to the male domination in these departments. Formidable women rhetoricians such as Sophie Chantal Hart at Wellesley, Mary Jordan at Smith, Clara Stevens and Margaret Ball at Mount Holyoke, and Gertrude Buck at Vassar developed their own theories of rhetoric, some of which drew heavily upon classical rhetorical theory rather than on Hill's theories.

10. Wendell wrote a caustic attack on Radcliffe College women twelve years later, in 1899, claiming that they were a corrupting threat to "the pure virility of Harvard tradition." He wished to protect the university which was to him, "even more profoundly than it seems, an institution of learning, a traditional school of manly character" (4, 6).

11. The book was written by C. N. Greenough. A newly hired Harvard graduate, P. W. Long, suggested the use of Greenough's book to Hart, as documented in Hart's personal copy of the book (Wellesley College Archives, English Department Files).

12. This handbook was an outgrowth of Buck's 1899 textbook, *A Course in Argumentative Writing*. Buck, a pedagogical innovator, believed that students should learn how to argue by means of the inductive method: each student would examine her "own unconscious reasonings" for evidence of "logical formulae." Other authorities began by teaching what Buck called the "maxims and formulae

regarded by the learner as malign inventions of Aristotle" (Buck and Mann iii-v). Furthermore, she advised students to work on topics of current interest about which they already held strong convictions (3).

13. Mary W. Dewson, Wellesley, class of 1897, led a similar life, first as an active suffragist and then as the vice chairman of the Democratic Party National Committee (Ware 146).

14. Burns participated in an intersociety debate in March 1902 on the resolution "That legislation against Negro suffrage is justifiable" (Colton).

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At a time when it was uncommon for women—and in particular black women—to speak publicly, Sojourner Truth was a major force in speaking on pressing matters of public policy. Much has been written about her as an abolitionist and as a champion of women's rights in the nineteenth century. To date, however, no research has focused on her oratory as deliberative rhetoric¹—the sort of rhetoric that many theorists place in "settings mainly civic" (Bitzer 71) and that "gives primary emphasis to communication on public problems" (Halloran 246). A former slave who remained illiterate all her life, Sojourner Truth commanded large crowds in an effort to arouse public action on the two most crucial political and social issues of her day—slavery and suffrage.

Sojourner Truth was born a slave in upstate New York sometime around 1797. She was given the name Isabella by her owner, Charles Hardenberg, a wealthy Dutch landowner; the first language she learned to speak was Dutch. After passing through the hands of several owners, Isabella served from 1810 to 1827 in the household of John J. Dumont of New Paltz, New York, where she bore at least five children by a fellow slave named Thomas. After learning that Dumont intended to renege on his promise to grant her freedom prior to the 1828 mandatory emancipation of slaves in New York state, Isabella fled Dumont's household in 1827. She found refuge nearby with a Quaker family whose surname she took; Isabella remained with them until emancipated.

As Isabella Van Wagener, she arrived in New York City with her two youngest children around 1829 and secured domestic employment. Al-