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**“A Maturity of Thought Very Rare in Young Girls”: Women’s Public Engagement in  
Nineteenth-Century High School Commencement Essays**

Though largely debarred from public rhetorical performance as adult women, young women in the nineteenth century US received rhetorical training and performed their original compositions before large public audiences as high school students. Their access to the academic platform stemmed in part from their politically contained position as students and “girls” in this context. But students used these opportunities to intervene in political debates and to comment on their experiences as women and students. These rhetorical interventions represent an important part of our rhetorical history, shedding light on a significant rhetorical opportunity for many young women across the US.

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“We wish them to be able to communicate the knowledge they have gained, and we instruct them in the great principles of language by means of a thorough instruction in the Latin and French, by constant practice in impromptu compositions, and by giving them the simpler principles of Rhetoric...Above all this, however, we labor to make them independent in thought and action. We endeavor to cultivate the individual character of each, and not bring all down to one dead level. We believe in system, but not in that system that demoralizes the whole character while it keeps the body under restraints; that loses sight of the individual and recognizes the class only.”

–Principal E. A. Holyoke, Louisville Female High School, 1860

Speaking at the 1860 commencement ceremonies of Louisville’s Female High School, Principal E. A. Holyoke underscored the importance of developing the independent character of each of his students, and of understanding them as individuals and not merely as a (social, gender, or cohort) class.<sup>1</sup> This high-minded mission characterized the educational and professional opportunities of Female throughout its first two decades of operation, as educators worked to define the identity of Louisville’s first public high schools in the landscape of academies, colleges, normal schools, and common schools, and in relation to the local educational and social needs of this growing city.

Louisville’s first free public high schools, named simply Male and Female, were established to provide a collegiate education to the city’s white youths, particularly to provide

teachers for the common schools. These schools were part of a larger national trend to establish public high schools that began in Boston in 1821, but which was not widespread outside of major urban centers until at least the 1880s (Graves xxi). Especially prior to that date, high schools had an uncertain location in the educational landscape, most clearly taking on the work of private academies and seminaries but also acting as normal schools and even colleges in some areas, which made classifying and articulating schools difficult throughout the century (VanOverbeke). In Louisville, Male conferred bachelors and even master's degrees on its students until 1911, the standards of which compared favorably with other colleges. A degree from Female qualified graduates to teach for the public schools, and its curriculum was comparable to female colleges in the South (see Farnham).

Female High School's tenuous institutional position between the common school and the college, as well as its locally focused mission to provide teachers for the lower schools, served as a warrant for providing enhanced rhetorical education and opportunity to its students. Specifically, these young women were provided remarkable opportunities to intervene in public discourse through the reading of their own original compositions: under the auspices of commencement essays and as "high school girls," young women in Louisville (up to 21 years old) were speaking annually before mixed-gender audiences of hundreds, and using this opportunity not only for the epideictic and encomiastic rhetoric typical of such occasions, but also to comment directly on their own lives, their school, and their roles as women in American society. This was at a time of great national anxiety over women's higher education and public rhetorical performance, when women's and co-educational colleges were still new, and even the most progressive among them (like Oberlin) were not allowing women to read their own graduation compositions.

Rather than arguing that the students at Female were an anomaly, however, I position these students in relation to other young women who were afforded advanced rhetorical training and public speaking opportunities as a result of their institutional and social positioning, such as students at southern women's colleges (Farnham; Gold and Hobbs). Historian Christie Anne Farnham argues that the middle- and upper class women of the South who could remain in school through the higher branches were afforded comparable opportunities for rhetorical education and practice as "belles" displaying their accomplishments. In a similar vein, historian Karen Graves suggests that high school students in St. Louis were afforded greater opportunities to develop as "female scholars" prior to the development of a differentiated curriculum that aligned education more directly with professionalization and posited educated women as a threat to a sex-segregated labor market. Whether as "girls" or as "belles," these were women whose discourse was not deemed a threat to the social order because of their clearly feminized and subordinated social positions and their seeming detachment from the labor market beyond the school—and who therefore were afforded surprising opportunities for rhetorical education and performance that are important to our history.

Though they have been underexamined by rhetoric and composition scholars to date, nineteenth-century high schools represent an important part of the history of rhetorical education and practice in the US, especially for our understanding of women's schooled literacies, as women remained underrepresented in colleges until 1978 but have been a majority of the graduates from high schools from at least 1870 (Davies 57; Graves xvii). Moving beyond the story of elite colleges that are at the center of many of our histories, I follow scholars like David Gold, Catherine Hobbs, Jessica Enoch and Jacqueline Jones Royster who have looked to schools "at the margins" of educational practice and of our own educational histories, noting that it is in

these spaces where “demographic and social changes are first felt and where innovation and progressive change may first take place” (Gold 7). Though the white, middle class students of Female cannot be said to be “marginalized” within the context of Louisville, as the students in Gold’s, Enoch’s, and Royster’s work were, they are “at the margins” of established traditions and practices: Female High School was at the margins of North and South and their attendant educational values and models, between the common school and the college, and opening in a moment of significant change for women’s education and the nation at large. In highlighting the experiences of high school women, then, I contribute to the recovery project initiated by feminist historians such as Anne Ruggles Gere, Lindal Buchanan, Nan Johnson, and many others who have sought to uncover the spaces where nineteenth-century women were learning, writing and speaking for themselves.

As I will demonstrate through a close reading of three students’ essays from 1860, the seemingly contained rhetorical space of the high school commencement ceremony—constrained and politically attenuated most obviously through the marking of these readings as “essays” rather than “addresses,” as the student readings at Male were termed—nevertheless allowed room for and even highlighted work that contained challenging elements. While the essays are demonstrably not “subversive” essays, they evidence a kind of intellectual latitude that was built into the institution within which these young women were writing, and was capitalized on by students. While part of this latitude stems from the apparent limitation of the school ceremony as a rhetorical context and the rendering of the high school girl as an unlikely rhetor, these young writers clearly pushed at the boundaries of this containment as they selected the topics of their compositions, and had a broad public audience as well. In this way, the account of these students’ writerly activities and the rhetorical landscape surrounding them invites us to

reconsider assumptions about the constraints of women's rhetorical training and practice historically.

### **“Frolicsome Innocence of the School Girl”**

I suggest that the status of high school girls as high school girls had a particular impact on their educational opportunities—that the high school girl was rendered innocuous through her association with and containment within the common school system, and thereby may have been afforded more opportunities for public rhetorical engagement and professionalization than her early college or normal school counterparts. While women's education was a fraught issue at this historical moment, identification as a gendered subject—and the expectations and anxieties that have attended that identification—morph across adolescent and early adult development, as well as across historical moments and social contexts (Driscoll). According to Catherine Driscoll, the very idea of the “girl” is a product of late modernity and the myriad changes in legislation (such as child labor laws), educational structures, discourse about puberty and majority, and “new modes of knowing the subject,” that “constituted not only new gender norms and roles, but new genders, including the girl” (57-58). The modern discourse about girls constructs them in dialectal relationship to a modern subjectivity and independence against which they are defined, producing feminine adolescence as necessarily “contained and disempowered” (52). As a result, the concerns about and justifications for girls' schooling were different from those of college “women,” and those concerns and justifications also vary regionally and at different points across the century.

Their position as part of the common school system, not the college, highlighted the high school students' status as “girls” and aligned the high school with the project of citizenship

training of mothers and future teachers. As Lucille Schultz explains, the goal of high schools “was to prepare increasing numbers of students for the reading and writing tasks of participating in a democracy” (127-28). The role of rhetorical performance for girls may be less surprising, then, given the connection between public education and democratic participation, and between public performance and teaching. Even if women were as yet barred from direct political participation through voting or holding office, they were conceived of as democratic citizens participating in the public discourse of the community, at least (or especially) within the protected space of the school auditorium and classroom.

Far from the specter of the “college girl,” the students at Female High School were presented as “our children” and their work was purposefully directed towards “our schools.” In a characteristically dismissive representation, a report of the 1858 public examinations of the school from the front page of the Daily Courier characterized the students as “A bevy of rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, thoughtful browed, lithe-limbed girls” (“Examination”). Other reports similarly frame the students as children, emphasizing the importance of both parents and citizens supporting them in their efforts and remarking on “the kindly feeling of the audience” towards their young charges (“Commencement Exercises”). A report on the school’s 1860 closing ceremonies is worth quoting at length for its articulation of the uncertain social status of the high school girl:

The delivery was perfection, and the quiet self-possession, though nothing bold or unmaidenly, with which the young ladies sustained their various parts, was surprising. It required much determination, aided by an imperative sense of duty, for shrinking damsels to perform a part that has blanched the cheek of manhood, and which strong men have shrunk from. It could only have been done by those who felt conscious of doing creditably what they all did in fact most admirably, and with a naivete [sic] that was charming they seemed to preserve all the sweetness and simplicity of girlhood, coupled with the grace and dignity befitting the estate upon which they have just entered. At no period in the life of woman is she so attractive as when she is just gliding from the

frolicsome innocence of the school girl into the undefined responsibilities of more advanced life (“High School Exhibition”).

As this report makes clear, the young women who spoke in these ceremonies were safely contained within a discourse of girlhood naiveté that capitalizes on the fact that these were not really “women” yet. Though the specter of womanhood does surface here, these young women did not “[confront] suspicions regarding their sexual drive, motivation and identity” in the ways that Lindal Buchanan and others have demonstrated that other women addressing mixed-sex audiences did (53). Rather, as “school girls” doing “school exercises,” these students were rhetorically contained and ascribed an appropriate role within the production of knowledge and labor of the school system. As Nan Johnson emphasizes, rhetorical practices are “enacted on a politicized cultural field constituted by the links among ideologies about gender, race, or class and conventional principles of rhetorical performance” (10). Some of the seeming conflicts and contradictions in women’s rhetorical instruction identified by Johnson take on new meaning when we further acknowledge this gender of “girlhood” and the enabling context of the high school ceremony. In short, the “cultural field” is also articulated in relation to age and institutional location for high school students, who were provided exceptional opportunities for public engagement because of their particular gendered identity as girls rather than women.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, I describe the context of these rhetorical opportunities and analyze samples of student essays read at these public events, demonstrating the ways “school activities” served also as opportunities for the young women to intervene in public discourse toward their own ends.

### **“A Place for Her Name on the Scroll of Fame”: Three Commencement Essays**



To better understand the uses young women made of these public speaking opportunities, I analyze several compositions read by graduates of the 1860 class of Female High School at the closing ceremonies. The closing ceremonies were a two-day event, including a public examination and a graduation ceremony. Both were well-attended public events that featured readings interspersed with musical performances and remarks by the principal. From the very first class of graduates, all students of Female composed and presented “impromptu compositions” during their public examinations, and all graduates also read their own compositions during the school’s graduation ceremony. The impromptu compositions were “on various subjects, selected from those given by the audience at the request of the Principal, and by him drawn from a hat, written in the presence of the audience during the examination of other pupils,” demonstrating the central role of the community in the work of the high school (Annual Report [1860], 26). The exigence and circumstances for composing essays for the graduation ceremony is less clear, but the range of subjects suggests that the students selected their own topics.

The three essays I discuss below are commencement readings, composed and read by graduates on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1860, before a public audience, and subsequently published in the annual school board report of that year. Though all graduates composed and read their original compositions, these are the only three preserved in the school board report, and also the only ones discussed in newspaper reports on the event.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the dry “themes” we have come to expect from nineteenth-century student writers, the writings engage serious and controversial social issues, draw at times on personal experience, and evidence an impressive flexibility in genre, topic, and tone. I begin with the most conventional of the three, a discussion of the rhetorical constraints of letter writing that is most recognizable as a “school theme” due to its

fairly impersonal approach to a standard topic. Next, I introduce a more complicated essay that creatively engages political debates about separatism as an analogy for the student's own experience of leaving high school, and which draws frequently on shared cultural references—from Shakespeare to popular magazines—to produce a lively portrait of life at the school. Finally, I conclude this section with an essay that takes on controversial ideas about women's roles by arguing that women should be afforded both educational and professional opportunities equal to men's.<sup>4</sup> While Schultz and others have argued that nineteenth-century school-based writing “was not a site for play, for resistance, or for writing about writing” (127-28), these texts show students making these very moves in a school exercise, if not a classroom.

Laura Alice Burke (Howard) “Letters”

We can always tell the letters of a friend. They are frank and unstudied, with a warmth of feeling glowing throughout, as it wells up from the heart and drops upon the page. The letter of a man of business, short and ceremonious, with words like quarter and half-pound papers of coffee, tea, and spice, and sentences measured as men measure calico, very much stretched, and yet too short. The Lawyers! What a pity that we should pay for what we cannot read! Stiff, formal, and sharp, like his scent of a fee. What a dread missive is the Doctor's, reminding us of the pestle and mortar, and giving us the chills scarcely less than one of their bills or their pills! (31)

Laura Burke's essay, “Letters,” is a reflection on different types of letters and their purposes. This essay draws frequently on commonplaces to forward its argument that letters are deeply meaningful and socially situated communication. Across the three pages of her brief composition, Burke not only discusses the characteristics of the personal and professional letters mentioned above—from a friend, business man, lawyer and doctor—but also narrates the reception of letters in a range of specific contexts: an old man learning of the death of friend, a “laboring man” receiving a letter from the debt collector, a “coy little miss” spiteful that she did

not receive a letter from her suitor. She punctuates each of these scenes with apostrophe, delivering sermon-like pronunciations—“Blessed be letters!”—as she narrates these scenarios, drawing on the traditional authority of shared cultural experiences and universal “truths” rather than recounting any personal experiences. And yet, even in her use of a universal “we” that distances herself from the piece, Burke is notably writing not on “justice” or some other abstraction or topic far from her personal experience, as nineteenth-century school themes are often thought to do. She is writing about something she would have known well, and also writing about writing itself, both of which demonstrate the movement identified by Schultz and others towards personal, immanent topics drawn from students’ lives by the end of the century.

She is also writing about a topic her textbook—Quackenbos’ Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric—invited her to consider in its section on genres.<sup>5</sup> In that section, Quackenbos dedicates several pages to the conventions of letter writing and directs students to compose letters for practice. Though he does not invite students to write a piece contemplating the idea of letter writing as a whole, Burke’s piece actually echoes Quackenbos’ enumeration of the varieties or principal kinds of letters, including news letters, letters of business, and letters of friendship, among others. While demonstrating a knowledge of the different discourse styles across personal and business contexts, Burke also demonstrates her knowledge of common rhetorical strategies, such as in her use of metaphor, apostrophe, and rhyme, all of which she was reading about in her school text.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to read limited agency into Burke’s reproduction of writerly expectations. Even in her somewhat formulaic production, Burke is actively performing the “good student.” As Min Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner have recently argued, “agency is manifested not only in those acts of writing that we are disposed to recognize as different from a

norm, but also in those acts of writing that are ordinarily recognized as producing simply ‘more of the same’: conventional, unoriginal, ordinary, conformist” (584-85). They further explain that “every instance of the use of language, including what is recognized as repetition, represents an exercise of agency, a choice, whatever the level of consciousness in the making of it, and a contribution to sedimentation” (589). In this same way, reading nineteenth-century themes from a lens of continual language change and choice helps us to recover the agency in students’ rule-bound writing efforts, recovering the work of “good students” such as Burke as they align themselves with conventional compositional values and styles.

We know school leaders approved of Burke’s academic performance not only because her essay was selected for inclusion in the school board report, but also because she was hired as an assistant at Female High School the year she graduated and held the position until 1862. Born in 1844, Burke was just 16 when she graduated and began working at Female. She most likely stopped working because of her impending marriage to Edmonds J. Howard, a wealthy shipbuilder, in 1863, though she remained involved with the school as an alumna (“The Howard Family”; Annual Report [1864]).<sup>6</sup>

### Rachel H. Gibbons “Disunion”

Daily, hourly, simultaneously, from the four corners of our agitated country is echoed the word Disunion; and everybody, from the glib-tongued politician to the white-headed school-boy, is trying to excel everybody else in the ‘length, pitch, and power’ of his vociferations. (33)

In these opening lines, with the invocation of a serious political issue facing the nation on the cusp of civil war, Rachel Gibbons essay “Disunion” would have certainly grabbed her audience’s attention. Following this introduction, Gibbons even more shockingly moves from describing the potential revolution to asserting that “there are many now, not only willing but impatient to take

part in the ‘irrepressible conflict,’ and among that many, we graduates apparent stand pre-eminent, for nowhere has the subject of disunion been discussed with so much vim, as within the walls of our dilapidated school-house” (33). In the tense political context of antebellum Louisville, where the allegiances of citizens were famously divided even within families, Gibbons tells her audience that the women of Female High School had decided they “didn’t believe in unions” (34).

From references to how the war would affect national economics and commodities such as molasses, to allusions to the War of 1812, Gibbons shows she is well versed in the stakes of the debate she is invoking. She is also impressively adept at the form of delayed revelation she is practicing, as the audience comes to realize the true meaning of “disunion” in her essay: “we have met to-night with one aim, one purpose: the union must and shall be dissolved...we have decided to settle the affair by diploma-cy” (emphasis original, 33-34). The union that is breaking, in other words, is the union formed among the girls during their time at high school.

From the point of this reveal onward, Gibbons cleverly maintains the tone and language of political satire while providing humorous details about her own school days:

“As I gaze for the last time on my perpendicular, polished desk, and think how often tears and drops of ink have chased each other over its surface, I can but wonder that the final split did not occur sooner than to-night. Here by the window—I always had a propensity to get near windows—have I spent some of the most weary, not-to-be-forgotten hours of my life. When the soldiers passed they would be so near that I could hear their measured tread on the street below...but if I moved an angle of 45 degrees, I was told to complete the triangle ACB” (34).

Gibbons uses juxtaposition to highlight both the proximity and the divide between school life and the public world, identifying her desire for “freedom” as the cause of the separation, or “disunion.”

Gibbons' essay expertly weaves political commentary with a humorous treatment of her own personal experiences at high school. Even though she is not, ultimately, producing deliberative rhetoric, as she would seem to be doing at the outset of the piece, she is playing on her ability to do so if she chose. Gibbons herself recognizes the uniqueness of her apparent move into contemporary deliberative rhetoric in her statement that "one would have supposed, from the number and nature of our debates, that we had been translating the eloquence of modern legislative halls, instead of that which echoed from the Roman forum" (34). In other words, she recognizes that young women were imagined to be studying ancient rhetoric, and not engaging in contemporary political debates, and that she would be beyond the bounds of her schooled discourse in doing so. By shifting her rhetoric from the deliberative to epideictic, she diffuses the tension surrounding her display of rhetorical ability, while still demonstrating her facility with engaging the terms of contemporary politics. In particular, satire and humor provide Gibbons a way into a discussion of contemporary social issues when straight political commentary might have been beyond her reach. In using satire to describe herself and her schoolmates, she makes fun of herself, but she also makes fun of "statesmen, editors, poets, stump-orators, news-boys" and the entire masculinized public world, a marker of her sense of freedom in writing for this occasion. "Cease your clamor," she tells them, dismissing them as readily as they would have dismissed her own "crisis" upon leaving school.

Gibbons essay is a near-perfect example of Schultz's "writing at the edges of school." Drawing on the work of Anne Ruggles Gere on the "extracurriculum" of adult writing, Schultz explains, "extracurricular texts that students composed, either outside of school or at the edges of school, reveal that in these peripheral spaces, students wrote in ways that went beyond textbook directives: they assumed the persona of a writer and wrote with attendant authority about their

own experience of writing” (108-109). Gibbons’ essay is written both at and about the temporal edge of school, graduation. It is also deeply rooted in extra-curricular discourse in its almost overwhelming number of popular culture references, alongside more traditional literary sources. Without marking her references, quotes, or allusions for her audience, Gibbons could assume her audience would be in on the joke when she quoted from the Declaration of Independence, Shakespeare, or even English hymn writer Isaac Watts. She draws on these different registers of discourse strategically, as becomes most apparent in her reference to the comic magazine Yankee Notions, which she pits purposefully against more literary sources: “How many eloquent things I might say, suited to the occasion, if I only possessed the pen of Shakespeare or the ink-stand of Prentice; but, classmates, in the language of the amorous swain of six years, though ‘My pen is bad and my ink is pale, My love for you shall never fail’” (35). The “amorous swain” here referred to is a fictional young woman with very poor spelling writing to her “dere henry.” The epistolary exchanges between the young woman and her beau were featured in an 1854 issue of Yankee Notions, and this epithet became a popular signature line for letters during the Civil War as well.<sup>7</sup> Thus, even as she invites her classmates to “throw our dusty books to the four winds,” she brings the graduates and the audience together in their shared cultural knowledge, just as the common school system promised.

But as much as her speech relies on cultural references from a shared white middle class culture, Gibbons is also using the available means to assert agency in the determination of her and her classmates’ educational futures. Her essay ends with an emphasis on the individuality and varied futures of her graduating class of nine: “to-morrow will find us with separate hopes, separate ambitions, and rejoicing in the motto, ‘E pluribus nine-um.’” (36). Even in the moment of reaffirming the shared bond between graduates, Gibbons insists on the diversity of futures for

all nine of the young women graduates of Female. Unfortunately, the future of Rachel Gibbons herself seems to have been cut prematurely short, as records suggest she died in 1861, just a year after this promising graduation speech.<sup>8</sup>

Marie B. Radcliffe (Butler)- “Women and Dreams”

It is often said that a women’s [sic] dreams are architects, capable of designing only castles in the air, with moonbeams for foundations and rainbows for rafters. This may not be wholly false, but, in so far as it is true, the fault rests not in woman, but in her education. (26)

Marie B. Radcliffe was 21 years old by the time she graduated from Female and wrote the essay “Women and Dreams” for her commencement. Just as Radcliffe’s age blurs the line between our ideas of high school and college students, her essay most clearly challenges our assumptions about acceptable topics for young female writers and speakers in its forceful criticism of the limitations on women’s minds and lives at the time.

In a clear move into the realm of deliberative rhetoric, Radcliffe argues in her essay that women should be allowed greater access to quality higher education and professional opportunities. To do so, she raises popular criticisms of women’s educational potential and refutes them through appeals to logos and a shared religious ethos. Drawing on the authority of commonplace religious values, for instance, she writes: “If a woman’s mind and talents were thus cultivated and developed, then we should have fewer aimless dreamers, and more active, brave, and earnest women; and if in their ranks were seen a physician, a lecturer, a writer, an artist, it cannot be unfeminine, it cannot be wrong, for God gave them their talents, and he doeth all things well” (27). In other words, if we are to agree that God endows humans with gifts for a purpose, then extended occupational opportunities are a natural outgrowth of the intellectual development of women, and women’s work should not be confined to the home and school. Just



as extending education to women for use in the home (as mothers) enabled the argument that they were fit for the school (as teachers), so too does it enable the argument for women entering other professions. Of course, this was an implication of women's higher learning from which early reformers like Emma Willard specifically distanced themselves, and a claim that remained fraught throughout the century (Farnham 13).

If the move to extend women's occupations was not provocative enough, the models of women's achievement Radcliffe holds up—including Elizabeth Blackwell, Harriet Hosmer, and Rosa Bonheur—drive Radcliffe's progressive politics home in no uncertain terms. Blackwell was a teacher and abolitionist who in 1849 became the first woman to receive a medical degree in the US. Her professional achievement spurred national debates about women's rights and responsibilities in the pages of magazines and newspapers. If the many references from the essay of her classmate, Laura Burke, are any indicator, the women at Female were well versed in these contemporary debates, especially as they took place in the pages of popular periodicals.

By invoking Blackwell, Radcliffe was evoking this whole rich cultural debate about women's sphere. And her other examples are no less striking. Sculptor Harriet Hosmer was part of what Henry James disparagingly termed "The White Marmorean Flock" of women artists in Rome who were criticized by James and others as "emancipated" women whose femininity and sexuality were in question. Hosmer herself was a leader of this group and a self-supporting artist, as well as a notorious lesbian. The French Rosa Bonheur was one of the most famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century painters and a woman well known for her counter-culture lifestyle, especially her cross-dressing. Her decision to paint non-domestic subjects such as horses and wild animals and to don men's clothes was of such interest to Americans that an 1859 piece in Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion reported the following in "Foreign Intelligence": "This famous

painter of animals was lately present at a ministerial reception in Paris...She did not render herself conspicuous by her dress. Crinoline is unknown to her, and it is hard to say how she keeps her bonnet on her close-cut hair" ("M'lle Rosa Bonheur" 142).

"Who," Radcliffe asks, "would withhold their smile of approval" from these women and from the female authors of the day? The answer, of course, is that many did; but Radcliffe challenges her audience and asks:

Why, when a woman of genius modestly asks for the blessing of the world and a place for her name on the scroll of fame, she receives only the world's unloving frown? And when some energetic woman, conscious of genius, and stung by the world's neglect, which is worse than scorn, having pleaded in vain, at last forgets all womanly reserve and in the name of our common nature boldly demands the rights of men, then this same world says: 'Behold what a woman of genius is! how modest! how lovely!' Few can brave this, and thus many talented women live aimless, visionary lives (27).

Radcliffe is not tempered, is not hedging in the least around her belief in the fulfillment of women's capacity in education and in all areas of work, and she challenges her audience through such appeals to "common nature" to recognize the injustice of the restraints on women's work. This work, of course, can include that in the home, but we don't get to that possibility until the last half of her essay, when she acknowledges that there are also a great many dreamers with "no brilliant genius" who "wish the fire-side their only throne, and murmured blessings their only applause" (27-28). These women, too, Radcliffe goes on to say, need education to develop their minds and hearts to conduct their work and lives nobly, and to face the possibility of a change of fortune or future loneliness. Although Radcliffe knew that a majority of women would marry and focus most of their intellectual energy and attention on keeping a home, she argues that educated women can get happiness and fulfillment from their own minds that will enrich their lives at home well into old age. Those without a rich intellectual life, on the other hand, are depicted at the end of their lives "sitting by their lonely fire-sides, nursing the broken dreams that

wander like ghosts through the darkened chambers of memory, muttering the soft, sweet words whose last faint echoes died long ago when faith and love expired” (29).

While Radcliffe’s ideas may have been drawn from any number of extra-curricular sources, their mobilization in the context of Female’s commencement ceremony demonstrates a remarkable level of tolerance on behalf of both the school and the audience. A reporter from the Daily Democrat remarked that Radcliffe’s reading “was the best of the evening. It had more earnest feeling, more mature thought, than the others” (“Commencement Exercises”). One of the only criticisms was from George D. Prentice, editor of the Louisville Journal, who praises the essay while also noting that it displayed “a maturity of thought very rare in young girls. The strong-mindedness was, indeed, an objectionable feature, emanating from so lovely a girl, whose business in life is to brighten a fireside, and not to discuss women’s rights” (qtd. in Butler ix). The fact that others did not voice objection to this “strong-mindedness” and that Butler’s essay was preserved and distributed in the annual report demonstrates that such an intervention was welcomed or at least tolerated as part of the rhetorical education of Female students.

Radcliffe did go on to “brighten a fireside,” marrying the year after her graduation and raising six children with Reverend Thomas D. Butler. However, she was never one to “wish the fire-side [her] only throne, and murmured blessings [her] only applause” herself. Instead, she continued to publish frequently throughout her life, in both magazines and books, and to speak in public meetings of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and elsewhere up to the end of her life. In his introduction to a posthumously published volume of her poems and essays in 1884, Radcliffe’s husband, Reverend Thomas Butler, proudly describes Radcliffe’s active public life, relating in particular one story of her well-known rhetorical prowess:

she accompanied me to an annual meeting in the country north of Grand Rapids, where brethren and sisters spoke to me with regard to asking her to preach at the meetings. As I

had to go, after the first day of meeting, to fill an engagement at Charlotte, I told them that they had my consent for her to preach, provided she did not speak in the open air meetings. When we met again at home the next week, I learned that she had preached four successive evenings in the public hall (xiii-iv).

Hence, we learn that Radcliffe maintained her involvement with women's issues, her public writing and speaking, and her resistance to imposed social restrictions throughout her life. And it can be said to start with her time at Female. The significance of this first commencement speech is evidenced by the fact that it is referenced by Radcliffe's husband in the introduction to Poetry and Prose by Marie Radcliffe Butler, where Butler also playfully cites the critical report on her essay in the Louisville Journal. The essay and its reception clearly mattered to Radcliffe and her family. In reading it, we witness a young woman negotiating the borders of classroom and public rhetorical spaces, using her school-based knowledge and the opportunity for public engagement provided by the commencement ceremonies to make a political intervention through her writing.

## **Conclusion**

Female High School was not alone in providing such opportunities for advanced rhetorical education and opportunity to nineteenth-century women. Rather, Female is indicative of other sites of learning at the margins of institutional identities, traditions, and historical moments, where innovations were possible. Nonetheless, I argue that Female's particular identification as a high school had a significant impact on the opportunities provided there, as high schools were not subject to state accreditation procedures and the attendant debates that circulated around women's colleges, and as high school students were safely contained within a discourse of "girlhood" and a position within and for the benefit of their home communities. Graves has analyzed similar opportunities for the development of the "female scholar" in the

early years of the St. Louis high schools, which she argues was eclipsed by the ideal of the “domesticated citizen” by the end of the century. Indeed, the most exciting aspects of this account of Female were similarly short-lived, though the fate of high school instruction there is beyond the scope of this project.

Nonetheless, the opportunities for rhetorical education and practice in the early years of these Midwestern high schools complicate the picture of nineteenth-century women’s education and rhetoric provided by histories that are focused on either the North or the South, as well as those that focus on colleges and on adult women learning and speaking outside their home communities. In this way, attending to the Midwestern high school is another way to “situate [existing histories and narratives] within an expanded analytical framework”—to supplement our existing histories of women’s education through the inclusion of other traditions (Donahue 223). In particular, the opportunities for public speaking evidenced here suggest that young women may not have been as debarred from public oratorical practice as is often assumed, and that some female students who went on to colleges may not have brought strictures about gendered performance with them from high school to college so much as experienced them for the first time there.

While the nineteenth-century high school’s position in the landscape of US higher education (especially in Border States like Kentucky) has not been adequately appreciated by historians in rhetoric and composition, and the practices of high school girls and alumnae have therefore been understudied, my hope is that this project will invite us to consider whether we, too, have inadvertently dismissed these young women’s practices as those of “girls” rather than recognizing them as an important part of women’s rhetorical history in the US—and to continue to address that omission.

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, schoolgirls also had opportunities to intervene in public discourse through the Educational section of the Courier (established in 1866), which published student essays, educational news and editorials. Grammar school students used their theme writing assignments to refute the arguments of a local citizen against educating women, and their essays produced an ongoing debate in this section for the next six months. Though this engagement was similarly contained (within the Educational section), these deliberative essays also had a broad public audience.

<sup>3</sup> Six other students graduated that year as well. It is unclear why only these three were reprinted and discussed, though it is likely because they were considered the best. It should also be noted that, for whatever reason, 1860 is the only year for which student essays were included in a school board report.

<sup>4</sup> It may be of interest to the historian to note that these essays appeared in the report in a different order: Radcliffe (Butler), Burke (Howard), Gibbons. I have chosen to present the essays in order of increasingly challenging interventions to suit the argument of this piece.

<sup>5</sup> Quackenbos' Advanced Course is listed in the Annual Report of 1860 as the rhetorical text for both Female and Male during this school year. Textbook adoptions from earlier years are unavailable.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Burke read from Longfellow's "Miles Standish" at the 1864 commencement ceremony.

<sup>7</sup> Though reprints of this piece circulated elsewhere, Gibbons' reference to the "amorous swain of six years," suggests that her source is the 1854 edition of Yankee Notions. Despite the fact that the term "swain" refers to a male suitor, Gibbons is referring to the fictional author "Kathrun."

<sup>8</sup> Though it is unclear how Gibbons died, it may have been related to illness contracted at Female High School. In his report of 1862, the year after Gibbons' death, Superintendent Morris could have been referring to Gibbons when he reported that so many students were getting ill from the school, sometimes fatally, that "the statement has become very current in our community, that we are only educating young ladies to graduate and die" (Annual Report [1862] 17-18). He used this fact to lobby for a new school building for Female.

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