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ABSTRACT

Literary societies, while dying or already defunct in Eastern U.S. schools, still played significant roles in 19th-century frontier colleges like Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, and it is the thesis of the paper that a systematic investigation of the document left by these societies, although largely neglected by historians, will have important implications for the understanding of 19th century rhetoric and composition instruction. Involving most of the students at any one college, the societies (of which the first is usually thought to be the Spy Club at Harvard, founded in 1719) usually met once a week for the purpose of orations, declamations, essays, debates, parliamentary practice, and the edition of a student paper. At Butler, belonging to a literary society was an integral part of being a student. Three typical society activities--literary exercises, the critic's report, and the literary paper--demonstrate that societies complemented regular rhetorical education and offered students the opportunity of individual growth, peer support, and training for public life. The progress 19th-century women made toward equality in higher education can often be measured by their involvement in literary societies. At Butler, unlike other universities at the time, women were able to speak in class, read their own essays, and perform on a public platform. However, no opportunity to practice for public occasions existed until the women formed their own literary society. Generally said to have been in decline, nineteenth-century rhetoric emerges from a study of literary societies as central to education and society. (RS)

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MEMBERS OF LITERARY SOCIETIES ARE EXEMPT FROM RHETORICAL EXERCISES: CLAIMING LITERARY SOCIETIES FOR THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

At 19th-century Butler University, Indianapolis, students' rhetorical education was similar to that in many other American colleges: the young men and women attended lectures in rhetorical theory and criticism and then applied rhetorical precepts in so-called rhetorical or literary exercises, a weekly practice of writing compositions and delivering speeches that were guided and supervised by the entire faculty. In the Midwest, these curricular rhetorical activities were, during most of the 19th century, supported and extended by similar, but extracurricular, exercises of the literary societies. In fact, throughout the last century, Butler University's catalogue advertised the work of such societies as part of the school's attraction. Moreover, until 1869, both administration and faculty valued the contributions of literary societies to a student's rhetorical education to such a degree that members of these societies were exempt from attendance at curricular "Exercises in Declamation and Composition" (UC 1869, 28).

One might argue that Butler University, one of the earliest co-educational facilities in the country, constituted a particular place, but my research of rhetoric and composition instruction at other 19th-century Midwestern institutions--Indiana University,

the University of Notre Dame--indicates that literary societies, while dying or already defunct in Eastern schools, still played significant roles in frontier colleges. It is therefore unfortunate that historians of rhetoric and composition have, until now and with few exceptions, neglected sources as rewarding as the documents left by literary societies. Their systematic investigation, I am arguing in this paper, will have important implications for our understanding of 19th-century rhetoric and composition instruction.

Part of a larger study, my presentation will touch on the following issues: (1) the history of literary societies; (2) claims made on literary societies by speech, higher education, and rhetoric and composition; and (3) contributions of literary society texts to the history of our discipline.

History

The Spy Club at Harvard, founded in 1719, is usually credited with being the first of numerous literary societies in this country. These undergraduate gatherings were of "moral and literary intent" and "[supplied] a want in the academic circle" while trying to "Stem That Monstrous Tide of Impiety & Ignorance" (Perrin 171-72; Halloran 159). Involving most of the students at any one college, the societies usually met once a week for the purpose of orations, declamations, essays, debates, parliamentary practice, and the edition of a student paper. In addition, societies brought famous lecturers to campus, conducted "public exhibitions" of their talents during their inaugural and spring

exercises, and enlivened commencement day. Finally, societies circumvented the dire state and inaccessibility of college libraries by creating their own resources for study and research and by accumulating well-stocked, up-to-date, and accessible libraries from which even faculty members benefitted (McLachlan "Hercules" 471; Poole 50; Rudolph "Neglect" 55).

For a long time the only "approved extracurricular activity," literary societies often provided a welcome relief from college classes (Harding 28), as well as an opportunity to practice what students were taught. Thus the extracurricular exercises served as places where college curriculum intersected with the outside world of American society, teaching students "to think, write, and speak" (Harding 1), the societies' curriculum complementing, not rejecting, the schools' (Horowitz 29).

Claims

Except for recent publications by S. Michael Halloran and Ann Ruggles Gere, and unlike their colleagues from speech and higher education, historians of rhetoric and composition have paid little attention to literary societies. In general, these groups are mentioned but briefly and usually always in connection with debate and other forms of oral discourse (Perrin, Jordan, Wozniak, Kitzhaber).

The habit of equating literary societies with public and oral rhetoric may constitute one of the reasons for their neglect in our discipline. Another reason may lie in the focus of earlier historical research on institutions, major rhetoricians, and their

texts. Such investigation dealt little with the recipients of a rhetorical education and the texts the students produced, either in or out of class. Student-related and student-generated evidence was often deemed inaccessible and thus disqualified as knowledge. In fact, Frederick Rudolph and James McLachlan, two higher education scholars, call students the overlooked voice in the history of the American college and university and advocate looking for students in the extracurriculum, the "most sensitive barometer of what is going on at the college level" (Rudolph, "Neglect" 53). McLachlan pays particular attention to literary societies. According to him, these groups were,

> in effect, colleges within colleges. They enrolled most of the students, constructed--and taught--their own curricula, granted their own diplomas, selected and bought their own books, operated their own libraries, developed and enforced elaborate codes of conduct among their members, and set the personal goals and ideological tone for a majority of the student body. ("Hercules" 472)

Contributions

Using as my example the literary societies at Butler University, I will concentrate now on two findings derived from a study of these groups: (a) their emergence as writing and speaking communities engaged in supportive peer response (Gere 1987) and their role in demonstrating the social aspect of a rhetorical education; and (b), their value in determining the participation of women in rhetorical education.

a. At 19th-century Butler University, belonging to a literary society was an integral part of being a student. Indeed, close to 100% of the students joined at least one of the institution's five societies. Students met weekly for reading of compositions and delivering of speeches in a "hall" provided by the college but decorated with furniture and carpets by the students themselves. This hall also contained the society library, a considerable number of journals, reference works, and books of fiction and non-fiction, either purchased by the members themselves or received as donations. To give an example, in 1880, Butler's five societies held a total of 1,250 books, only 50 less than the college library proper.

Three typical society activities--literary exercises, the critic's report, and the literary paper--demonstrate that societies complemented regular rhetorical education and offered students the opportunity of individual growth, peer support, and training for public life. For example, a typical meeting of Butler's Mathesian Society consisted of an address, 3 essays, 5 declamations, a regular and an irregular debate and could last up to four hours (Minutes, Nov. 2, 1866). The rival society, the Pythonians, divided its members into six classes, each responsible for a different rhetorical activity. By rotating these duties, everyone received the same training (Constitution and Bylaws). An intricate system of fines assured that every student would "come up and do his duty" (Mathesian Society Minutes, March 24, 1865). At time of college graduation, students also graduated from their society, receiving one diploma from the college, another from the

president of their literary society (Pythonian Constitution and Bylaws).

Public performances, so-called "exhibitions," for parents, faculty, and the general public, constituted the highlight of society existence and took place several times during the year. These events offered additional and more public rhetorical practice for society members. Colin E. King, a Butler student from 1877 until 1881, lists several oral and written performances for his literary society. Among them is a long "performance speech" about Gladstone for the spring exhibit of his society, composed during four arduous days, "read and criticise[d]" by his English Professor, Miss Merrill, and then rehearsed at least three times. It was evaluated as the "best speech of the evening--. . . [and] carried 'the palm'" (104-110).

As King's diary shows, students worked hard to complete exercises presented in public. Some most likely exerted less zeal when they gave an essay or a speech to their peers, or remained absent if not ready with their assignment. King talks of both instances and also of an inaugural address where he tried to impress the novitiates with his cleverness:

> My subject is wit. A writer has said that 'brevity is the soul of wit.' I think this is true + will therefore close at once, thanking you for your attention. (Nov. 12, 1980, 160)

The Critic's Report. One of the most important offices in a literary society was the position of the critic. A former student remembers his society's critics with chagrin: "The owlish critics passed on every speech revealing its weaknesses and

idiosyncracies" (Brown, Letter). Both, the critic at large, and the critic in a literary society, personified the ideal of a liberal, that is, rhetorical, education and were comparable to the orators of classical times (cf. also Matthew Arnold's concept of the critic). Ideally, after diligent study, the critics had made rhetorical principles their own and developed high standards of sensibility and taste.

In reality, of course, the critics of literary societies often fell short of these high expectations. Nevertheless, frequent articles in Butler's student paper about the duties of the critic demonstrate the seriousness with which members undertook their society exercises, practicing peer response long before current composition pedagogy discovered and claimed it. For instance, critics were urged repeatedly to use constructive criticism and to focus on thought and expression rather than on mechanical correctness. Also, these student writers encouraged critics to be "teachers--guides" and to avoid "criticism based solely on elocutionary principles" because questions such as "Is his voice clear, pure, full, resonant and agreeable?" were not particularly helpful. More than anything, students needed "criticism on the thought and style of [their] written productions" for many were "rather inexperienced in the art of writing, [and] . . . generally unfamiliar with the rules of rhetoric." Beginning writers also needed help with topics, the young men being afraid of "light topics, and the young ladies of deep ones. We are continually hearing, from not very profound youths, orations on 'The Civilizing Influence of Religion and

Commerce Compared,' and from young ladies of good sound sense, essays on 'Sunshine' or 'Shadow.'" (BC 2.3 [1886]: 5-6; 3.5 [1886]: 81-82).

The Literary Society Paper. Discussions of society exercises, advice to critics, and so-called "criticisms" appeared in the "literary" paper each literary society produced. At Butler, the Pythonians put together their Observer, the Mathesians their Review, and the Sigourneans, the Casket. Handwritten by their respective editors, who changed regularly, the papers were read at the weekly meetings. These "publications" offered everyone a chance to write a variety of forms, from editorials to criticisms to expository or creative pieces. Both the archives of Notre Dame and Butler possess several ledgers of such manuscript student papers, a much more informative source for societies' activities and concerns than the minutes of their meetings.

Editing and contributing to such a society paper was, as mentioned already, the duty of all members although frequent complaints of editors testify to less than satisfactory compliance. Likewise, the quality of contributions was rather uneven. In the Pythonian Observer, writers of burlesque alternated with those who advocated "propriety" and "literary progress." Depending on the editor and available contributions, the issues vacillated between extremes of silliness and high seriousness, between illiteracy and elegance of style and form.

Those who saw society papers as yet another means for rhetorical instruction and the acquisition of discerning taste urged that contributors observe the "rules of propriety in the use

of language and the selection of topics" to benefit the cultivation of taste and the "literary progress" of their fellow students (Observer 1858). While not all society members agreed with the assessment of one contributor, that is, that the paper constituted a "fine exercise in composing . . . of more profit than an ordinary essay" (Observer 1858), many students saw its pages as the "place for us to begin our career" and therefore urged the inclusion of "scientific subjects" and "sound mental pabulum" (Observer 1858).

Women and Literary Societies. The progress 19th-century women made toward equality in higher education can often be measured by their involvement in literary societies. In her 1990 dissertation, The Teaching of Rhetoric and Composition in Nineteenth Century Women's Colleges, LeeAnna Lawrence paints a bleak picture of the women attending Oberlin College and of their struggle to gain acceptance "in the exclusively masculine discipline of rhetoric and oratory" (50). Promised equal education by the founders of the college, Oberlin's women students found themselves in a separate, reductive Lady's Course or, if admitted to the Gentleman's curriculum, silent auditors whose writings were read to the class by the professor (61). Literary societies provided the only possibility to subvert the existing tradition; there Oberlin's women students could practice such public skills as speaking and debating.

At Butler University, we learn much about women's involvement in rhetoric and composition through the diary of the university's second woman graduate, Lydia Short. Her entries show no evidence

that Butler's women suffered the fate of women students at Oberlin. Instead, they were able to speak in class, read their own essays, and perform on a public platform. But until the women had their own society, no opportunity existed to practice for those public occasions. In Short's college time, the men already had founded two literary societies. Admitted as honorary members, the women most likely sat decoratively, admiring the literary exercises or helping the young men furnish their halls (Short 150). The Pythonian Observer, however, informs us that some of the men envisioned more substantial contributions from their women visitors. Criticizing the lack of serious subjects at society meetings, a contributor to the society paper complains that too many members want their "lady visitors" entertained, believing that women "are made up of, and consequently are delighted with the light, frivolous and funny." Women, he writes, need to object and reject the "trash everywhere prepared for them." He hopes to "see the day and shall rejoice in the sight, when the ladies shall assert their right to, and feed their mind upon as sound mental pabulum as that which satiates the loftiest intellects in the galaxy of science and literature" (Nov 19, 1858).

The new literary society for Butler women students emerged from the travesty of male rhetoric. Short, while waiting to give a declamation as part of the regular rhetorical exercises, felt bored and with some of the young women

> went into the Mathesian Hall and in mimicry went through performances similar to those of the societies, after which I mounted the rostrum, and, after making a short speech, made a

motion that the ladies . . . endeavor to form a society. (148-49)

Thus the Sigournean Society was born, amidst the speech making of excited young women (149) who loudly claimed their right to face "the public eye" (Preceptor 40).

Short's journal entries after the founding of a woman society juxtaposed elation over the new society with the reality of college life: "All the girls seem highly elated at the prospects. Geometry is awfully hard" (149). One of the young women's father answered his daughter's joy at having founded a literary society with grave disapproval: "Mary, no daughter of mine can be so bold as to belong to a literary society. I cannot have it" (Graydon 343). Another insult, surely not perceived as such, lay in the fact that the professor of rhetoric wrote the constitution and bylaws for the new women society. Also, public exhibitions moved cautiously on the new path to rhetorical freedom. While the men's public performance had five orations, three of which spoke of such male subjects as "Show Thyself a Man," "Highways to Greatness," and "Patriotism" (156), the Sigourneans listed only two orations, both bearing the vague title, "Variety" (155). The rest of the program consisted of essays and recitations on such "womanly" topics as "Prayer," "The Life Boat," and "The Aspiring" (155).

When the Sigourneans met in private, however, bolder issues were discussed, a feature their society meetings have in common with those of Oberlin women. Topics ranged from, for example, "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword" (149), or "Do Savage Nations Have a Right to the Soil?" (152) to "Resolved That Marriage Is a

Failure" and "Improvement of Woman's Condition." According to her journal, Short ranked debate the highest among the society exercises. Reflecting on it, she wrote:

> Debate is my favorite species of performance and I think it corresponds more with my tenor of mind than any other. There seems to be so much to admire, when one will boldly make an affirmation and then direct every energy to its support, or unravel the arguments of another and set forth ther fallacies. (158-59)

In this as in other statements, Short's words carry no false modesty nor extreme delicacy. Her language, direct and forceful, is the language of a speaker who makes her opinion known and eagerly engages in competition.

Conclusion

At Butler, literary societies still flourished until the end of the 19th century. Faculty and students alike considered them "needful in this day of college specialization" because they could function as a kind of "co-ordinating course" and "clearing house" to unify the multitude of individualized courses students of the 1890s were taking. Perhaps one of Butler's former students expresses the value of such societies best:

> I deem these societies of first rate importance in the university . . . and I believe the modern system has lost a valuable factor in their abandonment. . . . The work done furnished an experience and equipment that every [person] was the stronger for having. It broadened intelligence, taught

[us] the forms of expression and the ability to meet [others] in discussion, and developed powers that enhanced [our] success in life. (Holliday 114)

As these brief excerpts of a study of literary societies show, the documents of these groups contain a wealth of relatively unmined (by composition scholars, that is) information. A systematic investigation of these colleges within colleges will reveal that literary societies

(1) formed writing and speaking communities that engaged in supportive peer response (Gere 1987);

(2) demonstrated the social aspects of rhetorical education by practicing for and engaging in 'real life' situtations, involving an audience of peers as well as audiences from the college and the larger community;

(3) recognized the value of reading and research by establishing libraries that often surpassed university collections in quality and quantity;

(4) anticipated and stimulated future curriculur developments, such as literature courses in which students read the actual works; writing conferences; peer response; and writing across the curriculum.

Such findings will have important implications for our understanding of 19th-century rhetoric and composition practice. Generally said to have been in decline, 19th-century rhetoric emerges from a study of literary societies as central to education and society, carried to a great extent by the energy and enthusiasm of the students who studied and practiced it.