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ABSTRACT

The diary of Lydia Short indicates that college study at Butler University provided somewhat more positive experiences for women than scholars such as Jill Conway, Ronald W. Hogeland, and LeeAnna Lawrence found in other coeducational institutions where women still occupied their prescribed roles. The second woman to graduate from Butler University (Indianapolis, Indiana), Short's account of her collegiate experiences are more optimistic than similar accounts of women students at schools like Oberlin where women were forbidden to talk in class, read their own essays, or speak on a public platform. Through coeducation at Butler, women not only adjusted to a male model of rhetoric, but made rhetoric their own and in the process shaped rhetorical training into a liberating activity for themselves and their male classmates. Butler's Board of Directors established its coeducational policy on the principle that "The same mental training is good for both men and women...both may receive important benefits from associating in classroom work." Short's diary discusses: (1) her reactions to the traditional "woman's role"; (2) her experience in adapting her writing to male rhetorical models; (3) her own standards for critical analysis of spoken and written discourse; and (4) her experiences composing and delivering her own commencement salutatory titled, "The Power of Verse." (Contains 31 references and an appendix describing Butler's Female Collegiate Course of 1859-60.) (SAM)

Silks, Congress Gaiters, and Rhetoric: A Butler University Graduate of 1860 Tells Her Story[1]

Heidemarie Z. Weidner

My presentation deals with the diary of Lydia Short, in 1860 the second woman to graduate from coeducational Butler University, Indianapolis. Short's story indicates that college study at Butler provided somewhat more positive experiences for women than scholars such as Jill Conway, Ronald W. Hogeland, and LeeAnna Lawrence found in other coeducational institutions where women still occupied their prescribed roles. At Oberlin, for example, one woman student, struggling with her need to speak and her knowledge that such speech would be considered disobedience against the law of the church and the etiquette of 19th-century society (Lawrence 54), wrote in her diary: "I have said that I will shout or speak if the Lord leads me. He will not lead me to speak or instruct in the assemblies, because if I mistake not, he has told me, with other females not do so" (qtd. in Lawrence 54).

Lydia Short's diary entries seem to tell a slightly different, more optimistic story. Because Butler University accepted women as equals and demonstrated its progressive stance further by creating a chair in English held by women professors only, rhetorical training empowered students and created an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust between students and teachers. Through coeducation, Butler University women not only adjusted to a male model of rhetoric but made rhetoric their own and in the process shaped rhetorical training into a liberating activity for themselves and their male classmates. I will begin my discussion by briefly describing the history and environment of Butler University and its curriculum before continuing with

Short's literacy experiences as a student.

The Setting

Butler University, today a small, private liberal arts college, began in 1856 as Northwestern Christian University. Situated on what was then considered the western frontier, the institution prided itself on its "liberal and enlightened policies" (BM 1861, 326). One of the most visible manifestations of these policies was an emphasis on English education although most other American institutions still stressed the benefits of a classical program; the other manifestation, equally significant, was its coeducational program at a time when much of public sentiment argued against women's intellectual training in colleges. Lydia Short expressed this popular view in her diary: "My mother, good as she was, could never see the propriety of women knowing more than merely to read, write, and cipher a little" (161).

Two arguments supported the decision of Butler's Board of Directors to allow women to enter the new institution "on the same terms as men" (UC 1891-92, 11). One was the Christian idea of "helpmate," an idea the hardships of frontier life with its demands for self-reliance undoubtedly strengthened. The second support for coeducation derived from the .litarian belief that the minds of both men and women deserved to be educated. This creed became part of many later catalogues advertising Butler's coeducational policy: "The same mental training is good for both [men and women] and . . . both may receive important benefits from associating in classroom work" (UC 1891-92, 11).

The Curriculum

Ovid Butler, the founder of Butler University, envisioned the woman or man of letters as grounded in a "critical and thorough study of the English language," meaning the study of "composition, elocution, rhetoric, belles lettres" (BM 1857, 230). Perhaps in order to attract more women students, the Board of Directors made certain concessions to the popular sentiment of the time and began the new institution with two distinct courses, a four-year "College Course" and a three-year "Female Collegiate Course" (see handout). Yet women had the choice of attending either and accordingly received the degrees of Mistress of Arts or Mistress of Science respectively. In 1869, the Board abolished the "Female Collegiate Course" and decided "to make no distinction between male and female students, with respect to branches of study, but invite them to pursue those branches upon an 'equal' footing, and side by side make proof of the 'right' to the highest Academic honors" (UC 25).

Lydia Short: Butler University 1860

In her study of college populations, Helen Horowitz distinguishes between two groups of students dominating the 19th-century college campus--"college men and women" and "outsiders" (1-25). Short seems to fit the model of "outsider" in two ways: not only did she move out of the class her financially hard-pressed family belonged to;[3] as a woman attending a coeducational college, she crossed barriers few of her sex were to cross before the Civil War. Her education, and in particular her engagement with listening, reading, speaking, and writing--in other words, her rhetorical training--promoted a growing awareness of self and others. This awareness concerned her role as a woman, her writing abilities, her critical discrimination, and finally, her growth as

a public speaker.

The Role of Woman. According to a classmate, Short was "mentally wide-awake," "capable of appreciating good literature," and "plainly availing herself of her opportunities" (Holliday 275). Even as a child, Short felt passionately about education. Before she was ten, she had decided to go to college, firmly believing in the value of education. Neither her mother's lack of support nor her father's difficult "pecuniary affairs" (161) could dissuade Short from her goal.

Short was the only woman in a class of 14 students. Her college diary discusses at great length and to considerable depth Short's reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. The emphasis placed on the language arts seems to argue for an interpretation of rhetoric and composition as central concerns of the university's curriculum. At the same time, these subjects were embedded in and supported by the larger rhetorical interests of the community. Yet rhetorical training and support of such an education did not always change how society or how a women herself perceived woman's role, and some of Short's diary entries struggle with this paradox.

According to the American Lady Perceptor, a reader for women, "modest reserve" constitued "one of the chief beauties in a female character" (40) and "true religion" her "best acquirement" (28). Such prescribed modesty excluded laughter, liveliness, and critical outspokenness, traits a young woman's coeducational experience might encourage rather than suppress. If success in the classroom built self-confidence and independence, a young woman would exercise these characteristics off campus as well. Unlike some of the Oberlin College women, for whom social

acceptance seemed to have been crucial, Short notes her offenses--there are several of them and all of them involve laughing--while accepting them as part of her individuality: "I spoiled all the fun by laughing myself when I read anything funny. This was always a failing with me. I don't have at times any seeming dignity" (154).

More than about laughing, however, Short worried about drifting off during sermons. Her struggle and criticism, had they been known to opponents of women's college attendance, would have confirmed their arguments that women's higher education spelled the decline of religious life and the downfall of civilization. Short wrote:

> Mr. -- delivered a rather prosy sermon, on account of which quality I was utterly unable to follow the chain of his reasoning. I find myself so often guilty of inattention during divine services unless the expositions are made very forcible by a peculiar attractiveness of style. I am quite apt to give my head the inclination of looking at the parson while I slacken the rein of my thoughts, allowing them to dwell on all topics. (152)

Writing Abilities. In addition to their regular courses, students of the "Female Collegiate" curriculum had to take an extra measure of composition, a subject 19th-century culture considered particularly appropriate for the "tender sex" since women possessed a "happy art of saying the most ingenious things with a graceful simplicity" and thus a natural affinity for writing (Preceptor 27). Furthermore, writing being a more private art than oratory, composition was thought to suit women's

cultivated aversion to public intrusion.

Short's discussion of her own writing suggests yet another reason for women's perceived "delicacy." It was the belief that women's subjects, and writing about these subjects, did not count when compared to the more important matters about which men wrote and talked. Because Short shared this opinion, she discontinued her diary for a while--or, as she called them, her "pen scratchings," written "in the loosest and most careless style possible" (158). A year later, she explained that she had been "making a greater 'to do' over small matters than was necessary" (151), whereby her interpretation of "small matters" included the motion to found Butler University's first women literary society.

In the diary, Short had been happy to abandon the "good rule" of her composition exercises (158). She knew her strengths and weaknesses as a writer and her need for revision if she did not apply the favored think-write method of rhetoric exercises and thus could write: "I never write correctly offhand--my composition always needs correcting and pruning, unless I meditate deliberately on the expression and thought itself before I commit it to paper" (158). She did not truly appreciate yet the liveliness of her "loose and careless" journal style. Whether she described a visit to the State Legislature, an evening at a lecture hall, or a fire in a nearby housing district, her vivid imagery, her telling comparisons, or the rushing movement of the present tense manage to put her readers there--as the entry of March 4, 1859 shows:

> Feel well prepared for to-day's ordeal [classes]. While waiting for the hour of recitation to roll around, Hark! Fire! O, the college is on fire! What noise and confusion

the students are in, tearing out the recitation rooms by the score! No, it is not the college--good, good! 'Tis a residence a square distant. The wind blowing fiercely, the students and faculty fly to the rescue like startled rabbits, making an impromptu fire company. . . . What towering flames, how they glare! Ho! the engines are here. (147-48)

Comments on a eulogy, reflections on the baptism of some classmates, or thoughts on the evening of her graduation are dull in comparison, the rules of formal discourse having drained all lifeblood from them:

May 31, 1860

How very sage it makes one feel on attaining the climax in one's history. . . . It forms an era in the great drama of human existence, when one feels like the mariner that had been drifted by gentle gales and lured by innumerous infatuations until he finds himself decoyed into the midst of the great deep. (157)

When Short followed the "good rule," writing became much slower and tormented. Thus she agonized over her commencement salutatory for almost two months. Being so used to literary models in her rhetoric class made writing without such a model the biggest problem she faced. After studying her topic, procrastinating, talking about it with friends, Short's various invention strategies finally resulted in a "paroxysm of inspiration" (158) and a draft of the speech that would celebrate her graduation.

Critical Discrimination. The distance Short lacked to appreciate her own writing she naturally possessed when listening

to the presentation of others. Her critical analyses of speeches and sermons betray her sharp mind and the excellent training in rhetorical principles she received at Butler. For instance, if she depicted a speaker, she applied rhetorical principles of description. Beginning with a long shot, Short first described how the speaker "move[d] up the aisle and mount[ed] the rostrum." Her next look focused on his person: "He is a large man, very tall, with a well-built constitution, tho' not disposed to corpulency." Finally, she showed his head and face, tracing first larger, then smaller details: "Well-developed, tho' receding, forehead; rather pointed features, with a piercing countenance and very black hair, with short whiskers and trim mustache of the same hue" (146). Only then did Short comment on the speech itself.

Rhetoric understood as criticism lay at the heart of Short's assessment of speeches and sermons. Writing about a speaker's approach to audience, arrangement, style, and delivery became for her second nature. She ranked an oration highest if its subject was "purely practical" (152) and adapted to the occasion (156). Also, speeches or sermons must follow a plan, present ideas "correctly expressed" (152), and display clever figures of speech (146). Only this way could a speech touch the faculties of its listeners. In Short's opinion, delivery likewise needed proper attention, for only good "articulation and intonation" and effective "gesticulation" rendered a speech "masterly" (146). Therefore, the habit of applying rhetorical criticism to the speeches of others formed the basis for Short's own rhetorical practice in the literary society she helped start and reached its culmination in the salutatory she presented at her own graduation.

A Woman Speaker. No evidence exist that Butler women

students suffered the fate of those at Oberlin College who were forbidden to talk in class, read their own essays, or speak on a public platform. But until the women at Butler had their own literary society, they would lack the practice for those public occasions. In Short's college time, two male literary societies already existed, the Pythonian and the Mathesian both of which admitted women as honorary members.

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

> in mimicry went through performances similar to those of the societies, after which [she] 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, named after a famous woman writer of the time, amidst the speech making of "different persons" (149), with Butler University women students loudly claiming their right to face the "public eye."

Short's journal entry following the founding of the new society juxtaposes enthusiasm with the reality of college life and hints at the obstacles still ahead for women rhetoricians: "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 over 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). To help the "young ladies," fatherly Professor Benton, professor

of rhetoric, wrote the constitution and bylaws for the new society. Public exhibitions moved cautiously on the new path to rhetorical freedom. While the men's public performance listed five orations, three of which spoke of such male subjects as "Show Thyself a Man," "Highways to Greatness," and "Patriotism" (156), the Sigourneans showed only two orations, both bearing the vague title "Variety" (155). The rest of their 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, they debated bolder issues, a feature their society gatherings had in common with those of Oberlin College women. Topics ranged from "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."

Considering Short's affinity for critical analysis and quick repartees, it does not surprise that among the society exercises debate ranked highest with her. 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 her fallacies. (158-59)

Short's words carry no overtones of false modesty or extreme delicacy. Her language, direct and forceful, is the language of a speaker who makes her opinions known and eagerly engages in competition.

Short's topic for her commencement salutatory, "The Power of

Verse," showed the confidence of the earlier journal entry. In selecting the subject, she acknowledged her femininity but claimed the genre, which society considered her specialty, as an instrument of power. She emphasized the same point with the clothes she chose for the festive occasion. Should she wear a plain outfit in case she failed? she asked. Convinced of her success, Short flaunted her silks, flounces, lace, and ribbons, matching them with "congress gaiters tight enough to make Tarquinius Superbus feel uncomfortable" (161). If Oberlin College women, by their dress and choice of topics, indicated that "their arena would not be a battlefield" (Lawrence 81), one Butler woman at least felt good enough about herself to turn "handicap" into strength, verse into power, and to compare herself, nay even surpass, the Tyrant of Rome.

APPENDIX

BUTLER'S FEMALE COLLEGIATE COURSE

A student like Lydia Short would have taken the following subjects in the Female Collegiate Course of 1859-60. The second course of study depicts the "regular" college course, open to both men and women. Subjects marked * are those missing in the Female Collegiate Course.

FEMALE COLLEGIATE COURSE

FIRST YEAR

First Term	Second Term	Third Term
Algebra	Algebra	Algebra
Geometry	Geometry	Trigonometry
Cicero	Composition	Virgil
Composition	Virgil	

SECOND YEAR

Physiology	Natural Philosophy	Natural Phil.
Chemistry	Chemistry	Botany
Horace--Odes	German or French	German or French
German or French	Rhetoric	

THIRD YEAR

Astronomy	Logic	Bible
Mental Philosophy	Bible	Political Economy
Evid. of Christianity	Moral Philosophy	Meterology
German or French	Geology, German or French	

FOURTH YEAR--ONLY IN THE CLASSICAL COURSE

NOTES

1. The information in this essay is based on my dissertation, "Coeducation and Ratio Studiorum in Indiana: Rhetoric and Composition Instruction at 19th-century Butler University and Notre Dame." University of Louisville, 1991.
2. The North West Territory opened in 1803, but Indiana did not reach statehood until 1816. At that time, Corydon became the first capital of Indiana. In 1825, the capital was moved to its present site, Indianapolis.
3. For 19th-century colleges, the terms "science" and "humanities" differed from our usage today. Since 1800, science had been taught under the headings of "natural philosophy" and "natural history" and in general referred to "pure science," "an instrument of human understanding and contemplation of the divine" (Rudolph 104). Science also meant "any well-organized body of principles concerning any

area of knowledge or speculation" (Vesey 133), as in "the science of rhetoric." This latter definition continued, but after 1850, science became "more closely associated with specific evidence, and with evidence observed in nature" (Vesey 134). While lectures still formed part of science classes, they were complemented by work in laboratories or--in the case of a poor college--by the scientific cabinet (Power 146).

The term "humanities" as a label for certain courses did not exist in 19th-century colleges. James McLachlan uses the term perhaps to encompass rhetoric, elocution, composition, belles lettres, and English literature. Nineteenth-century students received a "literary" or "liberal" education," an education containing all knowledege--in the sense of the German Wissenschaften (McLachlan 487). Its product was the man of letters who had gone through the classical curriculum, acquired a knowledge of Latin and Greek, of higher mathematics, of rhetoric, and of the sciences and other subjects included under moral, mental, and natural philosophy. Since "liberal education was a matter of style more than it was a matter of subjects" (Rudolph 188), the humanist tradition could also exist within the new courses entering colleges in the late 19th century: modern languages, English literature, and the fine arts (Rudoplph 188).

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