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Peopling the Cloister: Women's colleges and the worlds we've made of them

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Peopling the Cloister:  
Women's Colleges and the Worlds We've Made of Them, 1837-1937

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty  
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Doctor of Philosophy

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Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines ten of the United States' leading women's colleges within the dual contexts of their development and ever-fluctuating public image. It traces their struggle to become liberal arts institutions on a par with the most prestigious men's colleges, as well as the mainstream public's uneasy fascination with them and habit of both honoring the colleges as beacons of ideal womanhood and damning them for the non-normative social, political, and sexual ideologies they supposedly promote.

American cultural discourse has long connected education and citizenship, and women's education has never been free of the larger debate over women's role and authority in American life. The public has long taken for granted its right to inspect, comment upon, and police that education. Added to this proprietary sense is an ingrained cultural ambivalence toward educated women, and both a fascination with and skepticism of autonomous women's environments. As a result, few institutions have felt the weight of public scrutiny as acutely as women's colleges. As wealthy colleges associated with the privileged classes that long dominated American politics, they are literally part of the elite. But as women's institutions, predicated on the belief that women are capable of and entitled to the same education as men, they are not only fundamentally different from the status quo, but potentially at odds with it as well.

Focusing on the years between Mount Holyoke College's founding in 1837 and its centenary in 1937, this dissertation discusses the first four generations of women to pursue higher education—the "Seminary" (1837-65), "first" (1865-90), "second" (1890-1920), and "third" (1920-40) generations. It also examines the external social and political forces that made higher education for women both increasingly attractive and increasingly suspicious, and the volatile tides of public opinion that the colleges had to navigate.

Between 1837 and 1937, these elite colleges emerged as the nation's most visible seats of women's autonomy, and thus as a prime location for anxieties about American women. The colleges captured public attention because of the audacity of their ambition to offer the same education that had for centuries represented masculine education and power. They kept that attention because of the inherent mystique exercised by an all-female community and because the public has always sensed the contradiction that lies at the colleges' core: They are simultaneously bastions of privilege and potential engines of radical change. Neither image is more or less accurate than the other and both have profoundly shaped the colleges' actual experiences as well as popular understandings of them. The national conversation about these colleges has served as a forum in which Americans have debated not only the role and purpose of the educated woman, but also issues of women's citizenship, their expected contributions to society, and even the very definition of desirable, normative womanhood.
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To my fellow Smithies, and especially the residents of Albright House, 1998-2002
Introduction

Between the founding of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1837 and its centennial celebrations as Mount Holyoke College in 1937, the elite women's colleges, and especially the high-profile northeastern institutions known as the “Seven Sisters,” emerged as the United States' most visible and influential seats of women's autonomy, and, by extension, as a prime location and repository for mainstream anxieties about women and their ever-changing place in American life. The national conversation about these colleges, conducted in both the mainstream press and popular culture, has served as a forum in which Americans have debated not only the role and purpose of the educated woman, but also larger issues of women's citizenship, their expected contributions to American society, and even the very definition of desirable, normative, American womanhood itself. Given that only a small percentage of American women have attended women's colleges—and a smaller percentage still one of the elite institutions best known to the general public—the interest they provoke and the amount of influence they have long wielded in American culture is remarkable.¹

The elite women's colleges captured public attention—virtually from the moment Vassar College was founded in 1861—because of the audacity of their ambition to offer to women the same liberal arts education—the so-called “higher learning”—that had, for centuries, represented masculine education and masculine power. They kept that attention mainly because of the inherent mystique exercised by an all-female community, but also because the American public has always sensed the contradiction that lies at the colleges’ core. The elite women's colleges are simultaneously bastions of privilege and engines of potentially radical social change. Neither image is really more or less accurate than the other,

¹ The 1870s, the first decade for which information is available, was the last, and possibly the only, decade in which a higher percentage of American women were enrolled in women's colleges than in coeducational institutions—6,500 out of a total of 11,100 college women. Over the course of the first three generations of women's higher education, the women's colleges' share of the female student population plummeted from 59.9% in 1870 to 17.7% in 1940. See Mabel Newcomer, A Century of Higher Education for American Women (Washington, DC: Zenger Publishing Co., Inc., 1959, p. 49).
and both have profoundly shaped both the colleges' actual experiences and popular understandings of them. As wealthy institutions associated with the privileged class of white, native-born Protestants that dominated American politics and culture until, at least, the middle of the twentieth century, the colleges have been, quite literally, part of the "elite." They are part and parcel of normative American society, an indisputable wing of the "establishment," and, as we shall see, at times they have been explicitly deputized as guardians of the status quo. At the same time, as academically "elite," female-dominated institutions, predicated on the belief that women are capable of and entitled to the same education as men, they are, by their very nature, not only fundamentally different from that status quo, but, always, potentially at odds with it as well.

The aim of this dissertation is first, to explain how and why these colleges made such a mark on the American popular imagination, and, second, to examine the ways in which the popular narratives constructed about them have reflected broader social concerns about American women. Ever since the 1780s, American cultural discourse regarding (white) women has drawn a firm connection between issues of education, motherhood, and citizenship. As a result, the question of women's education has never been free of the larger debate over women's role and authority in American life. Because the institutions that educated women, and the ways in which they did so, were so strongly and widely linked with the national well-being, the general public has long taken for granted its right to inspect, comment upon, and, if necessary, police them—and no institutions have felt the weight of this public scrutiny as acutely as the elite women's colleges.

As a major component of this project is the role the idea of the women's colleges, just as much as the colleges' actual experiences, has played in American culture, it made sense to focus my analysis primarily on the most widely known of those institutions, namely, the "Seven Sisters"—Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley. To these I have added Goucher in Maryland, Mills in California, and Agnes Scott in Georgia. Goucher is included in part because it is so often excluded from histories of the
leading women's colleges; a bizarre given that, at least in its early years, Goucher arguably had more in common with colleges like Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley, than did Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, and Barnard. Mills has intrigued me because of its position as California's only independent, secular, women's college, and because it, like Goucher, has received little scholarly attention. With Goucher, either in the mid-Atlantic or the upper South (a regional uncertainty that has surely played some part in historians' confusion over what to do with it), I decided to add a final college in the deep South. I selected Agnes Scott because of how closely its founders and early leaders patterned its development on the northern women's colleges, especially Vassar and Wellesley, and, by so doing, the remarkable speed with which they were able to bring Agnes Scott up to accepted, and accreditable, leading college standards.2

Many other institutions would have served as valuable points of reference or comparison, and were omitted primarily because of space and time constraints. Chief among these are Stephens in Missouri, one of the Midwest's few remaining women's colleges, and Elmira in upstate New York, which was the first extant women's institution (though it is now coeducational) to grant the bachelor's degree. Because of the very different cultural imperatives and development of women's higher education in the South, I have not attempted an examination of the region's numerous women's colleges. However, because of the South's particular confluence of gender, race, and class ideologies, I believe they are ripe for further analysis.3

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2 The principal history of the elite women's colleges is Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Alma Mater: Image and Design in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). It examines the "Seven Sisters" and the three twentieth-century women's colleges they inspired, Bennington, Sarah Lawrence, and Scripps, but omits Mills and Goucher.

Historians of women's higher education have struggled with both periodization and terminology, agreeing that widespread availability began in the 1860s—the decade that saw both the founding of Vassar College and the first Morrill Land-Grant Act, but disputing how to address either the educational advances that preceded it or the generations of students that followed. The hundred-year span of this project encompasses approximately four generations: The "seminary generation" refers to the years between the founding of Mount Holyoke in 1837 and the opening of Vassar in 1865. From there I have largely adopted the approach and terminology used by Horowitz in *Alma Mater*, Lynn D. Gordon in *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, and Diana B. Turk in *Bound by a Mighty Vow: Sisterhood and Women's Fraternities, 1870-1920*, all of whom agree, for the most part, on the idea of the first (1865-1890), second (1890-1920), and third (1920-1940) generations of college women and women's college education. The first generation of students are generally considered to have been the most serious and ambitious, highly conscious of their status as pioneers and of the responsibilities that status entailed. The second generation was numerically much larger, marked by a growing affluence and class-consciousness, and notably politically active. The third generation, ushered in by the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, was defined by a greater enthusiasm for mixed-sex socializing, declining interest in social and political causes, and increased tensions and even hostilities with the faculty. These labels are not perfect, but I have used them partly for simple clarity, and partly because they do accord, roughly, with the three major phases of public opinion about the women's colleges considered in this project: the amused curiosity of the first generation, the growing anxieties of the second, and the backlash of the third.

This is not a comprehensive history of the elite women's colleges, but rather an examination of the construction and understanding of the idea of a women's college and of the multiple images of educated womanhood it evokes. Moreover, as this project engages

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only a handful of liberal arts colleges, colleges that are not only small and restricted almost entirely to one region of the country, but also that have historically been dominated by privileged, native-born, white, and usually Protestant, women, I make no claim that it is representative of either the development or experiences of women's higher education in the United States. Nevertheless, I believe that the role that these colleges, and more particularly the public conversation about them, has played in our culture has had implications for all American women. The normative construction of womanhood, to which this conversation has so heavily contributed, produced a reality which all American women have had to navigate, not one restricted only to the privileged women at its core. Fundamentally, this national conversation has been about questions of women's participation and influence in both public and private life, about defining the parameters of women's citizenship, and determining the point at which the educated woman ceases to be a source of support to mainstream society and starts to become subversive. By simultaneously examining the cultural imperatives fueling the nineteenth-century surge in women's higher education, the aims and development of the elite women's colleges in their critical first three generations, and the mainstream public's contemporaneous reactions to them, we can gain a much fuller understanding of the figure of the educated woman and her ambiguous and contested place in American life.

Chapter one, "'The Convent at Saint Lyons': Higher Education for Women in the Era of Manifest Destiny," examines the careers of pathbreaking female educators Mary Lyon and Catharine Beecher within the context of the antebellum-era conversation about women's education, dreams of "Manifest Destiny," and the virulent anti-Catholicism of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. Mainstream discourse had linked women's education with the political and moral well-being of the nation since the 1780s, but by the antebellum years, many educators worried that the nation as a whole was losing interest. The spread of Roman Catholic convents, and the fact that many of them operated girls' schools that, especially along the frontier, educated just as many Protestants as Catholics, lent a renewed sense of urgency to
the question of (Protestant) women's education. I argue that Lyon, Beecher, and women educators like them were able to capitalize on these fears to gain critical public support for their fledgling women's seminaries, while at the same time, appropriating elements of the convent that they themselves found attractive. Despite their genuine opposition to Roman Catholicism, Lyon and Beecher clearly found much to admire within the general design and idea of the convent. The idea of an autonomous women's institution, one that nurtured women's talents and did not see marriage and motherhood as the sole avenue of female respect and usefulness, fit perfectly with their own vision for women's education. That two leading Protestant women educators of this era, and especially Lyon, whose Mount Holyoke Female Seminary exercised unsurpassed influence on the subsequent development of mainstream women's higher education, modeled their own seminaries in part on the very institutions they were meant to be guarding against, is both ironic and serves to foreshadow the conflicted place the elite women's colleges would come to occupy in American culture.

Chapter two, "The secret garden of the mind: Claiming a Man's Education," spans the approximate half-century between Mount Holyoke's opening in 1837 and the closing of the colleges' pioneering first generation. I discuss how, despite the very real educational gains made by (white) women in the wake of the Revolution, the classical curriculum—the ultimate symbol of masculine learning and cultural authority—was largely still restricted to upper- and middle-class men. The elite women's colleges' determination not only to offer but require of their students the same "masculine" course of study was the ground on which they staked their claims as academic pioneers, and which made them such an immediate public sensation. This chapter also examines the practical difficulties of turning this audacious vision into a reality, as the colleges had to confront the fact that very few mid-nineteenth-century American women were properly prepared for so rigorous a course of study. Despite the myriad frustrations it caused, and the fine line they had to walk to accommodate this reality without compromising their stated aims, the colleges never wavered in their determination. They recognized not only that the presence or absence of the classical
curriculum was enough to "make or break" a college's reputation, but also, more importantly, that their students would not be fully accepted as the intellectual peers of men so long as they had not been seen to conquer all the fields of study from which they had been historically excluded.

Over the course of the second generation, the mainstream American public became increasingly suspicious of the elite women's colleges. Chapters three, four, and five look at this change in attitude and the consequences it had for the colleges' subsequent development and reputation, by examining the continued controversy over their curriculum, the growing conviction that somehow they "unsexed" the young women in their care, and that they exposed and sought to convert students to radical social and political ideologies. While often considered something of a golden age for the women's colleges, this generation was marked by anxieties brought about by the emergence of the "New Woman," the increased presence of women in the professions, the declining birthrates of the native-born white population, and subsequent fears of "race suicide." These concerns, combined with broader fears about the decline of white, native-born, Protestant social and political hegemony, convinced a growing number of Americans that the elite women's colleges, once tasked with upholding that very hegemony, were now just as likely to threaten it.

In chapter three, "'Totally Ignorant of the Things They Should Know': Domestic Science, Professional Training, and 'Womanly' Education," I continue my examination of the colleges' curriculum, and the endless debates it provoked, within the context of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century emergence of the domestic science movement. The concerns about the women's colleges, and especially the suspicion that they were actively encouraging their students to pursue non-traditional life paths, prompted an increasingly loud call for the colleges to "feminize" their curriculum by adopting studies associated in one way or another with women's traditional, domestic work. I examine the process in which the colleges, very briefly, considered this idea, the reasons behind their vehement rejection of it, and, finally, the effect this rejection had on their increasingly mixed public reputation.
Chapter four, "'Grinds,' 'Queer Girls,' and 'Intellectual Monstrosities': Andromaniacs, Inverts, and the 'Unsexing' Power of Women's Colleges," examines what may be the oldest and popular charge leveled at the colleges: that they somehow "unsex" their students, rendering them either somehow "unfeminine" or explicitly "masculine." The definition of "unsexed" varies, but it has always reflected the suspicion that higher education will interfere with a woman's ability and desire to live a normative woman's life. In the nineteenth century, the specter primarily invoked was that too much study would rob a woman of her looks and charm, as well as, potentially, her physical health and reproductive capacities. By the early twentieth century, as more women claimed the privileges of men, either by pursuing a profession, agitating for the vote, or eschewing marriage in favor of independence, and as the mainstream American public became more familiar with the concept of female same-sex desire, this narrative expanded to include women who were thought to have deliberately rejected normative womanhood. These women might forego marriage and motherhood in favor of "selfish" independence, or they might reject men entirely and focus their romantic and sexual attentions on other women. Returning to the image of the convent, I discuss the deeply-held Anglo-American Protestant suspicion of autonomous women's institutions and the non-normative social and sexual behaviors that supposedly flourished there, and argue that by 1900 the elite women's colleges had supplanted the convent as the principal location of these social anxieties. Additionally, I look at elements of the colleges' woman-centered culture and the ways in which the increasingly public discussion of lesbianism began to undermine it in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Chapter five, "'Those wild, perverted, female Bolsheviks:' Equal Education, Equal Rights, and the Myth of the Radical Women's College," looks at the colleges' reputation as hotbeds of social and political radicalism, how this reputation came about, and the ways in which it affected the colleges' public standing in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. By virtue of their dedication to women's equal and thus "masculine" education, the elite women's colleges unintentionally fostered a public expectation that they would support radical positions in
other areas as well. In the early twentieth century, elements of both the political left and right shared this assumption, with suffragists, in particular, expecting to find support within the colleges, and conservatives blaming on them many of the perceived ills brought about by the "New Woman." By the late 1910s, this assumption had grown so strong that it created an opportunity for political reactionaries and anti-feminists to paint the colleges as bastions of socialism, militant feminism, and other ideologies perceived as dangerous and subversive.

Chapter six, "Of all the fool things in the world': Modern Life, Modern Womanhood, and the 'Relevance' of Women's Colleges," serves primarily as an extended epilogue, looking at the colleges' experiences during the third generation, and in a social and political climate unfriendly to most of what they were thought to represent. Facing an unprecedented number of challenges—the popularity of coeducation, their own growing reputation for fostering lesbianism and general "sex antagonism," and renewed attacks on the content and aims of their curriculum—the colleges spent the 1920s and 30s fighting to maintain their much-cherished place at the vanguard of women's education. By perusing aggressive and virtually nonstop fundraising campaigns and increasing students' social and curricular freedoms, the colleges were largely successful in defending their niche within the world of higher education, and in many ways ended the third generation stronger than they had ever been before. But this new security came at a price: In order to increase their appeal to mainstream society, they had to become, essentially, more like that mainstream, a decision that entailed the sacrifice of much of the woman-centered environment that had made them so unique in the first place.

To understand both what was so pathbreaking and so provocative about the elite women's colleges, one must also understand what the "higher learning"—meaning the liberal arts and especially the classical studies at their core—symbolized within Anglo-American culture, and, just as critically, women's long history of being denied access to it. Described
by one historian as “those subjects of general interest and importance that were considered the indispensable intellectual equipment of an educated person,” the liberal arts were not only the virtually exclusive province of men, they had, for centuries, epitomized formal higher education as well.5

Moreover, if the liberal arts defined higher education, then the study of Latin and Greek, and to a lesser extent, higher mathematics, defined the liberal arts. Other subjects were important to be sure—by 1800 the standard college curriculum also included logic, history, moral philosophy, and, increasingly, a little science and modern languages—but these took a backseat to what were commonly referred to as the “classics” or the “classical course.” Without this foundation, one early nineteenth-century college president maintained, no learning was even sound, to say nothing of complete.6 The study of the ancient languages in particular so dominated and epitomized popular conceptions of college education, that their inclusion or exclusion would be a critical issue at American colleges—male, female, and coeducational—well into the twentieth century.

Firmly associated with the social and intellectual elite, liberal arts education—often referred to as a “gentleman's education”—was frankly elitist, understood as not only male, but as the special province of those elite men who intended to enter government, the clergy, or the professions. Years of study, often from private instructors, were required before young men could even enter college. Among the middle classes, sending a son to college was a decision not made lightly, and it was not unusual for only the eldest or most promising son to receive extended schooling.

Once they entered college, these elite young men were initiated into a rarefied, cloistered, and virtually all-male world. There they acquired the knowledge, naturally from male teachers only, and cultural cachet that would enable them to move confidently in public life. They also clowned, played, bullied, and hazed, forging social networks and, often,

6 Ibid., pp. 45, 53.
enduring friendships. In reality, the colleges were never devoid of women. In *Yards and Gates*, a collection of essays about women and gender at Harvard, historians draw attention to the women—from domestics to prostitutes to professors' wives and daughters—who moved in and out of the college world. But, in an important sense, none of these women mattered. They existed on the margins of college life and did not take part in the crucial and symbolic educational process that imbued young men with the ability and the right to participate in and direct public affairs. The "real" college world, the one that mattered, was for men only.

In both the colonial and early national periods, women were shut out of this rarified college world not so much because they were seen as less intelligent than men (though there was that, too), but because American life, in both the colonial and early national periods, was so thoroughly gendered. Men's and women's roles were understood as complementary but distinct, and education was meant to reflect that. Women's education was practical above all, with emphasis placed on skills they would need in their future lives as wives, mothers, and homemakers. This was true for women of all social classes, the only real difference being what kind of skills were considered necessary for elite versus non-elite women. Elite women had more formal education than their less privileged sisters, but most of this extra schooling was also gendered and focused on ornamental or "decorative" skills, such as music, singing, dancing, painting, and perhaps a little conversational French or Italian—skills that were supposed to make them more desirable marriage partners and to reflect positively on their families' means and social position.

In terms of what might be called "academic" education, elite women were likely to be literate and to know at least the rudiments of arithmetic, but anything beyond that was almost

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entirely dependent on a woman's particular circumstances. If she was fortunate enough to have access to a village school, and the schoolmaster or mistress was so inclined, her education might go beyond the norm. By the mid-eighteenth century, urban girls might attend "venture" schools—described by education scholar Margaret A. Nash as "small, private, and often temporary establishments"—that taught any subject for which there was a market, but usually limited to whatever knowledge the proprietor had to give. Venture schools could be single-sex or coeducational, and a few even offered Latin and Greek, but their content and quality varied widely. The existence of such schools offers tantalizing hints that there were some parents who either desired more advanced education for their daughters or at least did not object to it, but they cannot be seen as either a reliable source of schooling or indicative of what was broadly understood as appropriate learning for women.

If a girl was very lucky, came from a well-to-do family, and had a brother who was being tutored for college, she might share in some of his lessons. A very few, like Theodosia Burr, might have had fathers who both recognized their daughters' intellectual potential and had the means to have them privately tutored in a wide range of subjects. But these women were the exception; most had neither the necessary means nor the time that could be spared from household duties and devoted to extensive study. Even in well-to-do, intellectually inclined families, it was unusual for women to be as extensively or carefully educated as their brothers. In the 1770s, Philip Vickers Fithian tutored both the sons and daughters of Virginia planter Robert Carter III, but only the boys studied classics. Even the oldest girl, Fithian recorded, focused on "Reading the Spectator; Writing; & beginning to Cipher." Judith Sargent Murray, who would become one of the foremost advocates of women's education in the Early Republic, had devoted parents, but they refused to allow her to sit in

on her brother's lessons and insisted she spend her time cultivating more feminine skills.13 These stories were surely played out in countless other Early American households.

Intermittently, more advanced education for women might become fashionable, but such trends did not alter the basic cultural premise that education should be dictated by the sexes' different roles in society. Sarah E. Fatherly argues that substantive, academic education for women became more popular among wealthy eighteenth century Philadelphians because it provided the opportunity for women to lay claim to the culture of reason popularized by Enlightenment thinkers and, perhaps more importantly, provided another way for the colonial elite to imitate the customs of the English gentry. The vogue for educating girls in history, literature, philosophy, natural sciences, and sometimes even the classics, eventually spread, to some extent, to the elite in surrounding New Jersey and Delaware.14 But it is important to recognize that this trend primarily served a social function, and in that sense belongs on the same spectrum as dancing, painting, wax-working, and other kinds of "decorative" education. Some individuals may well have embraced it because they believed that elite women were entitled to and capable of substantive education, but the main social rationale had more to do with defining and shoring up class status than cultivating a new philosophy of learning. Moreover, even elite women's access to this education was constrained by family circumstance—women whose fathers and husbands were uninterested in this trend had little recourse. Ultimately, socio-economic status was not enough to fully trump entrenched gender mores. Class privilege made more extensive, academic education a possibility for a woman, but it did not guarantee that she would receive it.

For most elite women, formal education ended, more or less, at the same place where men's began. To a large extent, this was the logical result of Anglo-American culture's carefully defined roles for men and women: Men were patriarchs, masters, and in the case of

13 Sheila L. Skimp, Judith Sargent Murray, A Brief Biography with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), pp. 11-12.
the elite, often predestined for political leadership, and so they had to be educated accordingly. Women, at every stage of life and across all social ranks, lived lives devoted to the care and service of their families, and to domestic matters more generally. They learned by example from their mothers and other women in their communities, and arguably, had no practical need for much formal education.

Practicality alone did not exclude women, even elite women, from extensive formal study. After all, they had no more real need to know how to paint and dance than they had to learn about Classical Greece and Rome. The difference was, when it came to the skills that "finished" an elite woman's education, upper-class culture valued ornamental accomplishments, but, with the exception of intermittent fads or the eccentricities of particular families, considered most academic knowledge not only irrelevant but undesirable. Colonial American culture featured a strong bias against educated women and the notion was deeply-entrenched that too much education would make a woman unruly, careless of her obligations to home and family, and unsuited to matrimony. Pointing to a European culture that defined formal education in exclusively male terms, Kerber writes, "[a]cademic study, a meritorious male pursuit, seemed self-indulgent when found among women...Americans of European descent inherited the image of the learned woman as an unenviable anomaly and kept alive the notion that the woman who developed her mind did so at her own risk."15

Nevertheless, for all the cultural cautions against educating women, the two generations following the Revolutionary War, approximately the late 1780s through the late 1840s, were a fertile time for women's education. For the most part, the new nation was dominated, politically, economically, and culturally, by a white, native-born, Protestant middle class that considered itself the proper embodiment of American life and assumed the responsibility for modeling that behavior to everybody else. Charged with fulfilling the promise of the Revolution, extending their culture and religion across the continent, and faced with assimilating growing numbers of immigrants, they felt they had their work cut out

15 Kerber, pp. 190-91.
for them. Women were not merely helpmeets in this endeavor; they had a critical and very
specific role to play. Uneasily aware that history featured no successful experiment in
republicanism, and mindful in particular of the excesses and corruption that undermined the
Roman Republic, the founding generation feared for the future of the new nation and many of
its leading thinkers and politicians cast about for a solution. Eventually they decided that the
best way to ensure virtuous and civic-minded generations to come was to raise virtuous and
civic-minded children—and the best way to do that was to instill in American mothers a
serious education, a cool-headed, rational approach to life, and a sense that they too had an
important role to play in the republic's future. This strategy, which Kerber has termed
"Republican Motherhood," suddenly gave the question of women's education a new
relevance and urgency, and before long a glut of girls' academies and boarding schools
popped up along the eastern seaboard. Many of these schools were staffed with women of
dubious educational qualifications and most faltered within a few years, due to low
enrollment and lack of resources. Some offered a rigorous curriculum similar to that at boys'
college preparatory schools, others little more than the old "ornamental" course that stressed
social accomplishments like music, dancing, French, and fancy needlework, and most
probably fell somewhere in the middle. Comparatively few thrived in the long term, and all
wrestled with what has been the most fundamental and enduring question in American
women's education: just what should girls learn, and why?

Many women seized upon the opportunities offered them by the ideology of the post-
Revolutionary era, using their newly acquired educations to push for various social ends or to
claim a larger place in the national conversation. As Mary Kelley argues in Learning to
Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic, "they took for
themselves the right to instruct all males in republican virtue...Still more important, they

16 For a discussion of Republican Motherhood and efforts to improve female education, see Linda Kerber,
Women of the Republic, particularly chapters 7, "'Why Should Girls Be Learned or Wise?': Education and
Intellect in the Early Republic," and 9, "The Republican Mother: Female Political Imagination in the Early
Republic."
took the stage as actors in a role that until now had been played exclusively by men—the making of public opinion." Nevertheless, the ambition behind Republican Motherhood had been less to advance the position of American women than to stabilize and perpetuate the existing society. In theory applicable to all women, in reality, it was white women and girls of the upper and middle classes who were the primary targets and beneficiaries of these broadening educational opportunities. Most advocates of women's education were uninterested in significant social transformation. A better education, they argued, one that cultivated intellect and character and not just the traditional "feminine arts," equipped women to better judge their suitors, be better partners and helpmeets to their husbands, and maintain the family household and business interests in the event of widowhood. While there were those who saw improved women's education as more than a way to safeguard the status quo, Republican Motherhood was largely a conservative social strategy.

The emphasis on improved education for women continued throughout the early nineteenth century, but it took on a new character in the 1820s and especially the 1830s. Many educators, religious leaders, and social reformers began to consider seriously some form of higher education, though most were not yet thinking in truly collegiate terms. When Oberlin College, a coeducational institution that offered the bachelor's degree to women, opened in 1833, most Americans considered it undesirably radical. Not only did admitting women to colleges and universities—terrain that had been for centuries most definitely male—clash with the growing ideology of "separate spheres," northerners were not prepared to equip women to compete professionally with men. Furthermore, despite very real improvements in education, few American women were yet sufficiently prepared to embark upon truly college-level work—a problem with which educators would have to contend for


18 Farnham argues that northerners resisted admitting women to colleges and universities as long as they did because they feared that "a college education would become the means for mounting an attack on the sex segregation of the professions, in contrast to the Southerners' desire for a classical education as a marker of gentility." See Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, p. 2.
the rest of the century. But even if most Americans were not yet ready to extend college education to women or to accept coeducation beyond the elementary level, support was growing for improved education, and in lieu of colleges, they turned to female seminaries to do the job.

For the antebellum white middle-class, particularly in the North and West, improved women's education met a variety of needs. Practically, a changing economic landscape and a new system of household labor were disrupting traditional life patterns, especially for "middling" farmers and artisans, and made investing in a daughter's education an increasingly wise and attractive course.19 Teaching, at the elementary and eventually secondary levels, opened up to women as men moved into other fields and cultural attitudes increasingly emphasized the "natural" aptitude of women to educate small children.20 Many jobs in the industrializing economy required at least basic literacy and arithmetic skills, and a growing population and expansion westward meant more students and schools—all factors which increased the demand for teachers. Some women remained unmarried and taught for decades, gaining a small measure of financial independence, but they were in the minority. Most taught only for a few years before marrying. For them teaching was a way to contribute to the family economy and to pay for the household goods they would need later in life—their educations became their dowries.

Ideologically, perhaps, the imperative toward women's education was even stronger. As the middle class amassed greater influence in the early nineteenth century, they looked for ways to differentiate themselves from both the upper and working classes. Education, for daughters as well as for sons, increasingly became part of this self-definition, as the willingness and ability to spare daughters from household labor and send them to school

indicated gentility and financial mobility. Furthermore, like their parents in the post-
Revolutionary generation, they recognized the role women played in maintaining a moral and
thriving society. Religious revivals and an emerging theory that defined women as purer,
more pious, and ultimately more moral than men, furthered the idea that women had a role to
play in public life, albeit of a muted, subservient kind. But above all, by the 1820s and
certainly by the 1830s, this white, native-born, Protestant, middle class felt itself under siege
from a growing ethnic and religious diversity and an increasingly politicized and demanding
working-class. Improved education for Protestant women was key not only to the
perpetuation of their culture and influence but also to that culture’s expansion across the
continent.

Advocating a better education for at least some women and waxing optimistic about their
beneficial role in society were not, however, the same as fully embracing the idea of the
educated woman. Anglo-American culture had a long tradition of ridicule, contempt, and
even fear of learned women. Despite the post-Revolutionary emphasis on women’s
education, these attitudes were still very present in the young republic. Newspapers, Kerber
writes, “often printed articles insisting that intellectual accomplishment was inappropriate in
a woman, that the intellectual woman was not only an invader of a male province, but also
somehow a masculine being.”21 Others argued that education, particularly the classical
studies that were the hallmark of college training, would endanger a woman’s religious faith
—no small consideration for a society in which piety and morality were so deeply invested in
women. Education was also widely believed to make women argumentative and by turns
contemptuous of and incapable of mastering domestic tasks. All in all, too much education
stripped women of their most important qualities and spoiled them for married life, which
was a problem, given that society had difficulty envisioning any positive alternate life path.
The spinster was, at best, a figure of pity and ridicule; at worst, she was seen as bitter and
prone to making trouble. Even in the 1830s, half a century after Americans first articulated

21 Kerber, p. 198.
the national importance of educating women, these prejudices remained strong.

The women's seminaries and the colleges they gave rise to came out of this elite, nativist, deeply-chauvinist, and very conflicted culture. Unlike their predecessors in the post-Revolutionary era, these institutions were meant not only to guard the republic against itself, but to guard it against an increasingly visible other, and they had to perform these important tasks without endangering, or seeming to endanger, the purity, morality, and domesticity that made women such critical actors in the first place. Educators, students, and their allies did not always agree on how best to fulfill this mission and some harbored more ambitious and transformative visions for the educated woman than others, but on that one point they all agreed.
Chapter One

“The Convent at Saint Lyons”:
Higher Education for Women in the Era of Manifest Destiny

“Female Character, and of course, female education, lie at the foundation of all that is precious and vital in the social system.”
—Reverend Samuel Miller, 1838.1

“The only effectual way to prevent the increase of conventual seminaries, is to found Protestant schools, which shall possess greater advantages than convents can offer for the education of young ladies.”
—American Ladies’ Magazine, November 1834.2

The Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which served as a model for the elite women’s colleges and eventually became Mount Holyoke College, inspired convent comparisons from the start. Before it even opened, a critic damned it as a “Protestant nunnery” that would isolate its students from the world, fail to educate them in “all which is most attractive in female manners,” and render them unsexed and charmless.3 To students at neighboring Amherst College, “The Convent” was for decades a recognizable allusion to the secluded women’s institution in South Hadley.4 Mount Holyoke’s own students invoked the

comparison as well. In 1845, Lucy Putnam unhappily described herself as an “inmate of the Mount Holyoke Convent;” seven years later, Susan Lennan wrote to a friend that she was “in a sort of nunnery.”

That anyone, let alone some of its own students, would compare Mount Holyoke to a Roman Catholic convent was provocative, to say the least. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the education of Protestant women was aimed in part at maintaining the social and political hegemony of the native-born, white, Protestant middle class, and in training its young women to be virtuous wives and mothers. By the antebellum years, girls’ schools were frequently idealized as centers of evangelical revival as well. Founded by pathbreaking educator and “Congregational revivalist” Mary Lyon, dedicated above all to the education of female Protestant teachers and missionaries, and located, physically and ideologically, at the crux of rural New England’s Calvinist revival, Mount Holyoke could not have been a more thoroughly Protestant institution. And yet this hugely influential seminary bore more than a passing resemblance to a convent, and one that went beyond the superficial and obvious similarity in demographics.

Mount Holyoke’s founder, faculty, and trustees might not have appreciated the comparison, but it is nevertheless a fruitful one. Both Mount Holyoke (and the female seminaries founded in a similar mold) and convents were at the vanguard of women’s education in antebellum America. Both were administered by women who, for a variety of reasons, did not conform to the normative standard of American womanhood. Both played significant roles in the professionalization and controversial “femininization” of teaching.

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5 Lucy Putnam to Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Clarke, 11 October 1845, quoted in Jo Ann Campbell, “'A Real Vexation': Student Writing in Mount Holyoke's Culture of Service, 1837-1865,” *College English*, Vol. 59, No. 7 (Nov. 1997), p. 770.; Susan Lennan to Emily L. Whitten, 8 January 1852, Mount Holyoke College Archives, (MHC).
And, finally, both had to confront accusations that they produced women somehow "unfit" for American life and the ideal of American womanhood.

An examination of the place convents and convent education occupied in antebellum American life can do much to illuminate the environment in which women's higher education as a whole emerged, as well as some of the ways women's educational institutions were understood by the mainstream American public. Because convents and women religious occupied so widespread and well-established a place in the Anglo-American cultural imagination, and because their presence and influence in antebellum America was growing noticeably, critics of other women's institutions found in them a convenient and accessible metaphor through which to express their anxieties and disdain.\(^7\) For many Protestant female educators, convents represented both a threat and an inspiration. They deeply disapproved of Catholicism and sought to halt its spread, but they also found the idea of an autonomous women's community attractive and sought to replicate some aspects of the convent in their own institutions.

The similarities between the women's college and the convent underline the extent to which the women's colleges, starting with Mount Holyoke, existed both inside and outside of the dominant American culture. Americans have never quite been sure of the kind of power the educated woman might wield. On the one hand, she might use her education to perform her normative, feminine, woman's role more efficiently and prove a force for national stability; on the other, she might act to transform American society in radical, unexpected, and unwelcome ways. The American Protestant caricature of the convent depicted it as an agent of disruption, a place where sinister foreign elements could seduce and manipulate impressionable American girls and, through them, subvert "true"—i.e., virtuous, democratic,

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and Protestant—American culture. The women's colleges at the center of this study, and the
seminaries, like Mount Holyoke, from which they evolved, were established by the culturally
dominant, white, native-born, Protestant, middle class with the deliberate goal of reinforcing
its national hegemony and guarding against external and internal threats. But from the start
there were skeptics and critics ready to attribute to these institutions the same negative
influences. For the most part, such charges were unfounded: The majority of students, and
their parents, were more interested in what education could do for them personally than in
envisioning the long-term, societal implications of enhanced women's education, and most
educational leaders were more interested in social stability than in social transformation. But
there were certain, influential exceptions, such as Mary Lyon, who saw in the women's
seminary, and later college, both an alternate social order and the actual engine from which it
might arise.

Mary Lyon, in common with many antebellum-era female educational leaders, was a
beneficiary of the post-Revolutionary movement on behalf of women's education. Born in
1797 into a Massachusetts farming family of limited means, Lyon managed, when she could
be spared from household duties, to attend a term here or there at various district schools.
Her early education had a definite patchwork quality to it, but she seems to have made a
strong impression on those around her, and one local teacher, John Porter, remembered her
gifts and was instrumental in arranging her first teaching position. With her wages, Lyon
was able to enroll in a local academy to improve her qualifications, particularly in Latin—

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8 See Susan M. Griffin, Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge
Convent Tales by Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk (West Lafayette: NotaBell Books, Purdue University
Press, 1999).
9 For a discussion of Republican Motherhood and efforts to improve female education, see Linda Kerber,
Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Early America (Chapel Hill: The University of North
Carolina Press, 1980, for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia), and
in particular chapters 7, “Why Should Girls Be Learned or Wise?”; Education and Intellect in the Early
Republic,” and 9 “The Republican Mother: Female Political Imagination in the Early Republic.”
10 Elizabeth Alden Green, Mary Lyon and Mount Holyoke: Opening the Gates (Hanover: University Press
long a symbol of a “gentleman’s” education and an infrequent addition to the curriculum at even the most advanced female seminaries. She continued this pattern of alternate teaching and formal study for nearly a decade, forging friendships along the way with teachers and academically inclined ministers, many of whom would later play an important role in Mount Holyoke’s founding, development, and early success. Eventually this path led to the Ipswich Female Seminary and the guidance and friendship of its head, Zilpah Grant.

Grant’s influence on Lyon, on Mount Holyoke, and thus on the many women’s seminaries and colleges that followed in its wake, was tremendous. She impressed upon Lyon the importance of discipline, inspired her to persevere with unruly students and not lose patience, and provided unwavering love and support as Lyon grappled with depression and sought to quell her religious uncertainties. But Lyon was not entirely satisfied. The seminary, dependent on tuition fees for its survival, by necessity catered to the daughters of the well-to-do and was all but inaccessible to straitened New England farm girls, such as she herself had been. Her desire, in the words of one biographer, was for a “permanent institution for the education of young women, where expenses should be so moderate as not to debar those of limited means, and advantages so great that the wealthy could find none superior elsewhere.” Notwithstanding this discontent, when, in 1832, Lyon took the first steps toward founding her own school, Grant’s companionship and the success of the school at Ipswich did much to nurture both Lyon’s ambitions and her self-confidence.

Zilpah Grant may have been the most critical, immediate influence on Lyon, helping her to hone her talents and focus her ambitions, but the spiritual and intellectual implications of Lyon’s own religious faith should not be underestimated. Religion scholar Joseph Conforti has argued that while women’s historians have restored Lyon to her proper place in the

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13 Ibid.
pantheon of path-breaking American educators, insufficient attention has been paid to her religious beliefs and the role played by her faith in determining Mount Holyoke’s curriculum and culture. It is not enough to place Lyon within the general context of the Second Great Awakening, when many women, inspired by widespread revivals and renewed focus on individual faith and salvation, increasingly took on important roles within various Protestant communities. By and large, these women did not portray themselves as having “left” their appropriate feminine realm, but rather as having “extended” it into areas of public life badly in need of women’s particular brand of compassion and maternal solicitude. While their actions certainly pushed against the accepted bounds of female behavior, their language sought to reassure critics—and possibly themselves—that there was nothing transgressive or radical to them. Lyon stands out because she saw no reason to blunt her beliefs or the impact of her actions by wrapping them in the language of domesticity. Bucking the national trend, she not only left the Baptists for the Congregationalists, but also embraced the rigorous “New Divinity” Congregationalism preached by Jonathan Edwards’ rural New England disciples. Linking her religious beliefs—predicated on the doctrine of “disinterested benevolence,” which emphasized morality, self-denial, and service to the greater community—with a plan for social action, she found in Edwardsean Congregationalism, “the inspiration and legitimation for ‘manly’ self-assertion and self-expression” on behalf of her vision for Mount Holyoke. Conforti concludes, “Teacher, preacher, and proselytizer at Mount Holyoke, Lyon became a highly successful, if unordained, Congregational revivalist.”

Just as critical as Lyon’s religious views was the cultural climate in which Mount Holyoke was founded. As enormous social, political, economic, and technological transformations reshaped virtually all aspects of life in the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans struggled to define and then bring about their vision of what the young nation

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18 Ibid., p. 70.
should be. Large numbers of immigrants from Ireland, and to a lesser extent, from the
German states, as well as the annexation of parts of Mexico, significantly altered the ethnic
and religious demographics of the young nation. Protestant leaders, especially those of
English descent, feared their society was in danger of being overrun by an “alien” population
and religion. The expansion of Roman Catholicism, and especially of convents and convent
education, first along the eastern seaboard and then into the American frontier, was a
significant goad to educational reformers like Mary Lyon. The cultural demands of the post-
Revolution era—which paved the way for the ideology of Republican Motherhood—
combined with the growth of Catholic institutions to convince many American Protestants
that there was a religious as well as a social and political imperative to improving female
education.

Antebellum Americans agreed with their parents and grandparents that women had a
critical role to play in the nation’s development, though they differed somewhat in their
understanding of women’s essential nature, talents, and what constituted “appropriate”
behavior for them. The shifting ideal of the American woman in the first half of the
nineteenth century has been studied intensively by historians and does not need here to be
related in its entirety. In essence, by the antebellum era, the ideal of the Republican Mother
was less in evidence, though she had not disappeared so much as been recast as the Victorian
“True Woman.” This woman drew her influence from and confined her attentions to the
domestic realm, leaving the rough world of politics and the marketplace to men. What
Barbara Welter famously called the “Cult of True Womanhood” articulated a prescriptive
ideal predicated on a strict division of the sexes and a firm understanding of the areas
properly within a woman’s purview: home, morality, family, and faith. Women, whose purity
was protected by their seclusion within the home, were tasked with creating an oasis of
domestic calm and piety where their men could renew themselves. In this way, the new
nation could grow rich and flourish—speeding the triumph of American values across the continent—without endangering the character and welfare of its citizens.19

The components of this ideology, which historians have rather awkwardly clustered together under the term “separate spheres,” certainly bore little resemblance to the realities of African-American, working class, rural, and immigrant life, but some historians see this model as too simplistic even for the white, Protestant middle class that so eagerly trumpeted it. Historian Mary Kelley takes exception to the public sphere/private sphere binary and focuses instead on a third space, “Civil Society,” in which middle- and upper-class white women were permitted to exercise a public role. Utilizing their new educations and taking advantage of the greater morality with which antebellum ideology imbued them, women inserted themselves into the national conversation and, as readers, writers, editors, and members of voluntary associations, operated as “opinion makers,” and helped create and perpetuate this idealized version of womanhood. They managed to avoid accusations of unwomanly behavior by arguing that they were still focused on appropriately domestic concerns, and ones that needed to be present in this “Civil Society.”20 Kelley’s argument highlights the importance of education to the antebellum middle class, and offers a more nuanced view of separate spheres and the actual function of the True Woman ideal, but still functions within the premise that antebellum Americans considered certain roles and behaviors inherent to sex and looked askance at any person, and especially any woman, who seemed to transgress these vital boundaries. Successful social institutions had to operate within this context, and perhaps none felt that burden so acutely as the women’s seminaries and colleges, which were ostensibly tasked with instilling these behaviors and producing these paragons of American, womanly virtue.

Dedicated to high standards of female education, catering to the daughters of middling New Englanders as opposed to the merchant elite, and founded, led, and dominated by vigorous spinster, Mount Holyoke was both very much within the post-Revolutionary tradition of improved education for American women, and a radical step beyond it. Even among the rarified circle of schools for young women that offered a truly advanced, nearly collegiate level education, Mount Holyoke stood out. Mary Lyon fully shared the contemporary view that native-born, Protestant women had a particular role to play in the destiny of the new nation, but the women she envisioned moved freely in the world and were distinctly less sheltered and more assertive than the mainstream ideal. Her calling was to produce women teachers who would set off across the American continent and around the world to undertake what she saw as the twin pillars of God’s work—the promotion of evangelical Christianity and the spread of secular education. Lyon was adamant that, for this vision to be realized, ministers had to work with, and respect the contributions of, this new generation of female teachers, writing, “Fill the country with ministers...and they could no more conquer the whole land and secure their victories, without the aid of many times their number of self-denying female teachers, than the latter could complete the work without the former.”

That many Mount Holyoke graduates, even among those who did eventually marry, spurned conventional domesticity, was clear. In line with Lyon’s view that conversion was a woman’s most critical duty, it was not long before Mount Holyoke gained a reputation for producing missionaries and missionary wives. A 1930s graduate, and a member of a prominent missionary family, recalled that the “young ladies of Mount Holyoke made good wives for generations of ministers, missionaries, and missionary teachers. The school...had well-earned the sobriquet, ‘rib factory.’”

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Although the number of its early missionary alumnae was not huge, no other institution was as closely associated with women missionaries as Mount Holyoke. When Lyon died in 1849, twenty-seven alumnae had become missionaries in foreign countries, and eight had become missionaries to American Indian communities. The next year, the total rose to forty. In 1859, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions listed sixty Mount Holyoke alumnae on its rolls, and Baptist and Presbyterian mission boards listed others. In 1887, fifty years after Mount Holyoke’s founding, one-fifth of all women then serving as American board missionaries were Holyoke alumnae.23

Missionary work was a highly respected vocation, especially in nineteenth-century New England, where young female missionaries who died in the course of their religious duty were considered martyrs and achieved something resembling cult status at home. In some circles, women were seen as even more naturally suited to the missionary life than men because their lifelong socialization as wives and mothers had already trained them in Christian self-sacrifice and benevolence. In fact, “Christian self-sacrifice,” in the words of historian Amanda Porterfield, “was one area in which American women in the nineteenth century could compete with men and win.”24

But even supporters of women’s education and missionary work could find unnerving Lyon’s emphasis on turning out teachers and missionaries first and wives and mothers second, her uncompromising commitment to realizing her vision for the nation, and her advice to her students that they should do whatever was necessary to accomplish their benevolent aims. Mount Holyoke’s popularity indicates that enough New Englanders were willing to countenance the idea that some women of exceptional piety or talent might acceptably deviate from female norms, at least temporarily, but the seminary seemed almost too “good” at producing such women. It was not the only institution that produced teachers and missionaries along with pious wives and mothers (though it did produce a disproportionate number and, by mid-century, had become the place to go if one aspired to a missionary future), but, as Dana L. Robert writes, “Critics of the school noticed that Mount Holyoke graduates often married later than other women or not at all, and they left the school

23 Porterfield, p. 6.
24 Ibid., p. 5.
with a narrow, pious zeal to change the world.” Furthermore, while Lyon was an innovator, not a revolutionary, the radical potential of her ideas was very real, and sympathy with her overall aims was not necessarily the same as agreeing with every aspect or wanting one’s own daughter to be an agent of Lyon’s vision.

Nor was Lyon, for all her political savvy and fundraising skill, fearful of stepping on the toes of even her own allies. Though fully committed to perpetuating the hegemony of her own white, broadly middle-class, evangelical community, she did not limit her transformative vision to the unconverted living far away or to Catholic immigrants closer to home, and she was willing to challenge her own society when necessary. She seems to have particularly objected to many of the changes to New England life wrought by the economic transformations of the market revolution, even though many of those same changes were responsible for much of the wealth and donations upon which her seminary depended. Conforti notes that Lyon, in common with other adherents of New Divinity ideals, was uncomfortable with many of the ways the modern economy was reshaping New England and that the marketplace’s individualist ethos was the antithesis of her communitarian view. He emphasizes that at Mount Holyoke, “Daily life...was organized as a traditional subsistence family economy, a communal alternative to the commercial order that Lyon saw emerging around her.”

Lyon was not simply harkening back to the past, she was offering a blueprint for the future, and thus an implicit criticism of the present. In her study of Mount Holyoke’s religious culture, Porterfield argues that Lyon deliberately established a different way of life at her school, “creating a religious community that was deliberately and systematically modeled on the social order of the kingdom of God,” and one that “promoted Christian benevolence among her students and faculty...[and] institutionalized it as a principle of

25 Ibid., pp. 93, 97.
26 Conforti, “Mary Lyon, Mount Holyoke Seminary, and Female Piety, 1830-1850,” p. 98.
social cohesion.” In fact, she adds, Lyon went further than most in her critique of society, because, by establishing a school that emphasized activism as much as it encouraged piety and learning, she paired her criticism with a concrete plan for social action. Even among supporters of women’s education, not everyone agreed with Lyon’s aims, and among those who did, many were uncomfortable with her ambitious and aggressive style.

If Lyon’s criticisms of American society, willingness to transgress the bounds of “woman’s sphere,” and explicit rejection of the notion that marriage and motherhood was a woman’s highest calling placed her outside of the mainstream, that is not to say that she rejected the ideologies underpinning either Republican Motherhood or True Womanhood. Indeed, Lyon did recognize their value and spoke with great reverence of women’s domestic role, but she also believed that women who confined their pious and benevolent influence to the home failed to realize the extent of their potential, and, as Porterfield puts it, “[a]lthough Lyon agreed…that domestic skill and organization were essential aspects of women’s work, she regarded disinterested benevolence rather than domesticity as the chief organizing principle of Christian culture.”

According to Conforti, “For Lyon, domesticity did not provide a morally and spiritually adequate outlet…Mount Holyoke was not designed to prepare women for ‘republican motherhood’; she rejected women who confined their disinterested benevolence to ‘their own family circle.’”

Lyon put her beliefs into practice by prioritizing the admission of women who already had teaching experience and wished to enhance their credentials. In her 1837 *General View of the Principles and Designs of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary*, she made her priorities very clear, “It is to be principally devoted to the preparing of female

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28 Porterfield, p. 32.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 23.
teachers. At the same time, it will qualify ladies for other spheres of usefulness." Put simply, a woman’s devotion to domestic life was not enough; her duty lay as much outside the home as within. “Republican mothers” and “true women” were all very well, but Mount Holyoke was most interested in producing a different kind of woman.

Lyon’s vision for her students was not the only thing that made Mount Holyoke stand out; its rigorous curriculum and innovative organization set it apart as well. When it opened in 1837, Mount Holyoke did not yet offer a fully collegiate course on par with the best men’s colleges, but its program was among the most advanced of any other female academy, seminary, or even nominal woman’s college in the country, and it expanded rapidly over the next few decades. The seminary’s physical design and daily organization was even more unusual. From the very beginning, all Mount Holyoke students and female teachers, including Lyon herself, lived together in one building. This was highly unusual among early nineteenth-century American schools in general and practically unheard of in female seminaries; typically students boarded with local families if the school was at a distance from their own homes. Parents approved of this practice because it was inexpensive, and, more importantly, because it kept the daughters within a family household structure where they would remain engaged in family life and not be fully absorbed by their academic experience. Previous educators who tried to alter this tradition met with mixed results: Lyon’s contemporary Emma Willard drew up plans for boarding facilities at her own seminary as early as 1818 and had some measure of success in implementing them (though the first boarders did not arrive until more than a decade later), but change came slowly and well into the 1830s the practice remained very much an exception to the rule. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the insistence that students board with Lyon, an unmarried woman, and

34 Horowitz, p. 25.
her female colleagues, likely raised a few eyebrows, but its success attests to the appeal of Mount Holyoke's overall program.35

Lyon wished to recreate a familial setting for her students and went to great lengths to cast her seminary in a domestic light. The school building she designed was meant to resemble a family home. When she implemented her controversial plan for daily domestic work, she likened it to the household chores necessary to every family and assured students they would be assigned work with which they were familiar from home.36 Less immediately obvious but critical to Lyon’s vision was her determination to reinvent the teacher/student relationship along the lines of the mother/daughter bond. Historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz writes, “Mount Holyoke designed its seminary building as a well-governed home, its internal organizations allowing the oversight within a strict family and its associations confirming the link between mother and teacher.”37

But Lyon did not look only to the family model in her determination to transform her students. According to Horowitz, she was also inspired by contemporary breakthroughs in the treatment of the mentally ill, and in particular a new design and concept of the asylum. One of Lyon’s sisters suffered from mental illness and was in and out of institutions throughout her life, providing Lyon with a glimpse of changing treatments and theories. By the antebellum years many American asylums operated on the belief that a combination of benevolent oversight and rigid schedule could impose a degree of order and peace on disturbed minds. Horowitz points out that Zilpah Grant employed a broadly similar model in her academies and that Lyon was deeply influenced by them. Grant’s rigid system of schedule and discipline enabled Lyon to make peace with her unhappy and chaotic early life, helped bring about her religious conversion, and enabled her to plot a rational course of

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35 Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976, pp. 91; 292-293n. Sklar further suggests that Willard’s success—slow as it was—may have been due in part to her status as a married women, which may have reassured parents of the stability and suitability of the home she offered to her students. Certainly the attempts of the eminently respectable but unmarried Catharine Beecher to create a boarding department at her Hartford school in the 1820s met with resistance and ultimately failure. Sklar, pp. 91-93.
36 “Prospectus of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, 1837,” reprinted in Hartley, pp. 189-90.
37 Horowitz, p. 25.
development first for herself and then for the educational system she envisioned. By keeping her students in a strongly controlled environment, where they were largely cut off from other influences and made to concentrate on faith and schooling, Lyon could shape not just the minds but also the hearts of her students and best prepare them for the future.

That the students lived with their teachers and that every effort was made to establish bonds of affection and respect between the faculty and their charges aided in the creation and maintenance of the most pervasive, and at times surely stifling, aspect of Mount Holyoke life: the endless system of rules and the constant surveillance under which students lived every moment and aspect of their lives. As mentioned above, Lyon’s aim was to transform her students utterly, to take the young women in her charge and produce self-aware individuals, imbued with religious fervor and a spirit of benevolence, dedicated to education, and eager to spread Lyon’s vision to the greater world. Dozens of carefully articulated and frequently explained rules ensured that students knew what was expected of them. Constant access to her students allowed Lyon to maximize every moment and, just as critically, kept her students isolated from any pernicious outside influences.

Lyon’s plan put students under surveillance not only from the faculty and fellow students but also from themselves. Following a system Lyon and Zilpah Grant had pioneered in Ipswich, Mount Holyoke students were required to meditate carefully on their own behavior and recount their transgressions before the whole school, a process that one historian has called “quasi-inquisitional” and a reminder that “conscience, New England-Puritan style, could be a fearful task-master.” A student’s poor behavior “was made all the more conspicuous by her obligation to remain standing after those who had not been guilty of the exception in question were allowed to take their seats.”

38 Ibid., pp. 14-17, 21.
39 Ibid., pp. 22-25.
40 Cole, p. 76.
41 Ibid., p. 77.
This combination of self- and community-enforced discipline also served to inhibit the emergence of any kind of student culture or competing ethos that might have undermined Lyon’s efforts. Contemporary male seminaries and colleges—such as Mount Holyoke’s close neighbor Amherst College—featured subtle and sometimes outright battles for student control over a variety of areas of academic life. Such autonomy was impossible at Mount Holyoke. Every moment of the day was carefully scheduled. When students were not at recitation, they were either studying in mandatory silence or performing their daily quota of domestic work. Roommate pairs were customarily assigned with an eye to grouping more sober and mature students with livelier, less reliable ones, and room assignments were shifted frequently to prevent pairs of students from becoming too attached.42 As Horowitz writes, “The single structure, designed like a house with a central entrance and stairwell, contained all components for learning, working, and living. It held no places for retreat, no interstices for freedom.”43

Mount Holyoke was a success from the start. In its first twenty-five years, it expanded its curriculum, lengthened the full course from three years to four, extended its reach beyond New England to the mid-Atlantic and Midwestern states, and nearly tripled its enrollment from 80 to 235.44 Lyon died quite suddenly in 1849, but seminary life continued without skipping a beat. Through a combination of vision, unceasing effort, shrewd selection of teachers and administrators, and constant fundraising, Lyon had ensured that her school, unlike so many others, would endure past her own lifetime.

A large number of students fulfilled Lyon’s vision of teacher-missionaries, spreading education and Evangelical Christianity throughout the nation and the world. By 1849, nearly forty students had become foreign missionaries, and by 1887, “there were a hundred and

42 Horowitz, p. 24.
43 Ibid.
44 Green, pp. 173, 219; Horowitz, p. 25.
seventy-five living in eighteen countries." It was even more influential in the educational world, inspiring a number of "daughter" seminaries and colleges across the country, including Mills in California. Other teachers and supporters of women's education took notice as well, though there were detractors as well as admirers among them. According to scholar Louise Porter Thomas, "[p]rincipals, trustees, and benefactors were continually writing to Miss Lyon, requesting all manner of information about her unique school, to apply in founding their own." And when, by the middle of the century, the time came to establish genuine women's colleges that would offer the traditional "masculine" curriculum and award the bachelor's degree, the leaders took many of their cues from Mount Holyoke.

Mount Holyoke may have been the most innovative step in women's education during the antebellum years, but Mary Lyon was not the only female educator concerned with training women for lives of public as well as private usefulness, who saw the combination of secular education and evangelical religion as the key to doing so, who wished to offer women the liberal arts curriculum traditionally reserved to male collegians, and for whom marriage and motherhood were not necessarily the only or even the highest state to which a woman might aspire. Two of her contemporaries, Emma Willard and Catharine Beecher, were also hugely influential educators who did much to expand women's educational and professional opportunities. While the schools they established, unlike Mount Holyoke, did not evolve into liberal arts colleges, they nonetheless represented important moments in the development of women's higher education and provided significant influences and points of reference for Mary Lyon's fledgling seminary.

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45 Louise Porter Thomas, Seminary Militant: An Account of the Missionary Movement at Mount Holyoke Seminary and College (South Hadley: Department of English, Mount Holyoke College, 1937), p. 34.
46 Ibid., pp. 81-82.
47 Ibid., p. 76.
48 Ibid., pp. 77-78; Horowitz, chapters 2, "More Lasting than the Pyramids: Vassar," and 3, "That Beauty Which is Truth: Wellesley."
Emma Willard, whose Troy Female Seminary was established nearly two decades before Mount Holyoke and was one of the most successful seminaries of the nineteenth century, was probably the first person to offer young women a curriculum largely similar to that offered at the best men's colleges. Though she carefully avoided the use of the word "college," she clearly conceived of her seminary, and of other schools like it, as the female equivalent. She was an early advocate of educating women to be professional teachers and was possibly the first person to lobby a state legislature for public funds to support women's education.\textsuperscript{49} She failed to secure this public support, but she continued to publish her ideas, keeping before the public her belief that women's education was a matter of national importance.\textsuperscript{50}

In her study of Willard, historian Anne Firor Scott argues that the key to Willard's effectiveness was the combination of her genuine embodiment of many of the ideals of antebellum "True Womanhood" with a determination to advance women's rights and educational opportunities than can only be labeled "feminist."\textsuperscript{51} Addressing the New York State Legislature in 1821, Willard diplomatically explained that the kind of schools she envisioned should be called seminaries because "the absurdity of sending ladies to college, may...strike every one, to whom this subject shall be proposed," and assured her audience that "the seminary here recommended, will be as different from those appropriated to the other sex, as the female character and duties are from the male."\textsuperscript{52} She went to great effort to distinguish her enterprise from any kind of women's college, yet her seminary strongly resembled one, and when, in the 1830s, a nearby university was having difficulties, she told at least one person that the trustees would do better to turn it over to women teachers and

\textsuperscript{51} Scott, p. 5.
create a “Female University.” Willard accepted the contemporary belief of women’s essential difference from men, considered educating young women to be virtuous and patriotic mothers to be her primary goal, fully embraced the ideology of “separate spheres,” and offered at her school many of the “ornamental” subjects scorned by educators like Mary Lyon and Zilpah Grant. But she also argued that educating women citizens was a cause worthy of public investment, was among the first to explicitly advertise teacher training as an important component of her school, and was so committed to producing teachers that she offered tuition loans to young women who would promise to teach for a period after graduation. All of her students were required to pursue a liberal arts course, which included the study of Latin—a program very similar to what was then offered at men’s colleges, and at much the same academic level. Willard’s school was a tremendous success and quickly gained a reputation for academic rigor and excellence not found at many other women’s seminaries. When Mary Lyon published Mount Holyoke’s first curricular, she invoked the Troy Female Seminary as an example of the course of study students might expect. Willard, who, unlike most professional female educators of the period was married and a mother, embraced the trappings and ideals of conventional womanhood far more enthusiastically than did Lyon, but her purpose in doing so was no less transformative and her influence was in many ways just as far-reaching.

Catharine Beecher, whose first and most successful school, the Hartford Female Seminary, was founded in 1823, right on the heels of Willard’s institution, spent half a century analyzing women’s influence in society, expanding their options, and articulating a role for single women, in particular, to play. Very much part of the white, Protestant, middle-class culture that dominated American life in the antebellum era, she fully supported its continued social and political hegemony. Not only did Beecher have no quarrel with the

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53 Solomon, p. 22.
54 For Lyon and Grant’s disapproval of this branch of the Troy curriculum, see Green, p. 65.
55 For Willard’s public emphasis on both domesticity and teaching, see Scott, pp. 3, 5. For Troy’s nearly college-level curriculum, see Kelley, pp. 89-90, Scott, pp. 7-8.
antebellum article of faith that men and women possessed different talents and should occupy separate spheres of influence, she was one of the leading theorists of domesticity in nineteenth-century America. The subject of domestic economy—the forerunner of domestic science and home economics—was to a large extent Beecher’s own brainchild. Her influential *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), went through four printings in its first two years alone and was reprinted almost annually for fifteen years. Part practical compendium of household information—ranging from modern and efficient housing designs to explicit, common-sense instructions on childcare—and part vehicle for Beecher’s ideas on the critical importance of the home, it helped, in the words of her biographer, Kathryn Kish Sklar, “[establish] her as a national authority on the psychological state and the physical well-being of the American home.” But despite her endorsement of women’s essential subordination to men, which, Sklar argues, she accepted because it conveyed a necessary stability on American life and not because she felt women were any less competent, Beecher truly believed that separate meant equal, that domestic concerns were as paramount as political and economic ones, and that it was critical that women be able to exercise their influence in equal proportion to men.

Throughout her life, Beecher employed a variety of methods to disseminate her ideas and influence American, and especially white, middle-class, Protestant American, society. She published more than thirty books and essays on topics ranging from education and pedagogy to religion and politics, and penned textbooks on mental and moral philosophy, arithmetic, and domestic economy, but she was most interested in women’s education and the social uses to which it could be put. Born in 1800, Beecher had, like Lyon, benefitted from the post-Revolution advances in women’s education, but she came from a more genteel, privileged world. The daughter of Lyman Beecher, one of the leading ministers and social critics of the first half of the nineteenth century, and educated at Sarah Pierce’s rigorous,

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56 Sklar, pp. 151-55.
57 Ibid., pp. 155-63.
well-regarded, and socially prestigious academy in Litchfield, Connecticut, Beecher came early on to link education with social influence. Furthermore, as the eldest child in one of America’s most influential families and the daughter of an intelligent, erudite man who valued his daughter’s mind and talents, she determined at a young age to live a life of some kind of public service and accepted as a matter of course that her opinions would be listened to.

Between 1823 and 1850, Beecher founded two female seminaries, in Hartford and Cincinnati, and oversaw the transformation of a third, in Milwaukee, from a seminary to the beginnings of a college. She moved progressively westward to capitalize on new opportunities but also because she believed that, in common with many middle-class Protestants of the time, the struggle for the social, religious, and political identity of the new nation would take place primarily on the frontier. In 1834, Lyman Beecher made a famous speech, later reproduced in print, in which he called upon educated New Englanders to move to the frontier and essentially save westerners, whom he considered deficient in education and piety and vulnerable to Catholic exploitation, from themselves.58 His speech was controversial and offended many people, and though his daughter usually expressed her opinions in more temperate tones, she largely shared this view and considered Protestant woman teachers critical to this endeavor. Over time she narrowed her ambitions to “founding colleges in the West to train women for their threefold profession as teachers, healthkeepers, and homemakers,” and had a fair amount of success, though not as much as she hoped, in raising funds for her endeavors.59 Beecher fully embraced the Republican Motherhood ideal of the post-Revolutionary era that women needed to be well-educated so they could produce upright citizens, but she also construed women’s influence, and perhaps even motherhood itself, more broadly. Eventually, she came to focus on the critical role the female teacher could play in American life, and linked teaching and womanhood so completely that,

58 Ibid., pp. 116-17.
according to historian Mabel Newcomer, "[s]he believed that no woman was qualified to be a homemaker unless she had had experience first as a teacher."

Being unmarried, Beecher felt keenly the restrictions, in both opportunities and respect, that American culture placed on single women. If an unmarried woman enjoyed *feme sole* legal status and a greater degree of control over her own person and property, she was also considered an anomaly in her society, subject to condescension, pity, ridicule, and scorn. When Beecher was in her early twenties she observed that if an unmarried woman did not want to remain quietly at home, or could not afford to do so, school teaching appeared to be the only respectable alternative. Her own initial boredom and discontent with teaching were evidently so plain that her father questioned her commitment to it and wondered if she was simply hoping something better might come along. But gradually, Beecher began to see teaching as a critical avenue through which women could hone their talents and exert social influence. When she opened her first school in 1823, the Hartford Female Seminary, she viewed it as an opportunity to, as Sklar writes, "assert social, religious, and intellectual leadership" and "continue the intellectual progress she had begun" earlier in life. Beecher, who did not lack for self-confidence, did not feel that all women's talents were equal to her own, but in a more limited form, social influence, professional respect, and intellectual growth was the vision she had for female teachers, and she systematically set out to increase their numbers, improve their qualifications, and send them where they most needed to be.

62 Sklar, pp. 52-53.
64 Sklar, p. 59.
The first half of the nineteenth century saw what has been called the “feminization of teaching,” and Catharine Beecher was one of, if not the most, important forces behind it.

By the time of her death in 1878, Beecher had founded three schools—the last grew into Milwaukee-Downer College and survived into the twentieth century when it merged with the University of Wisconsin—contributed greatly to the idea of professional training for women teachers, and begun to think about the idea of a women's college that would emphasize teacher training and domestic economy. Many of her ideas fell out of favor in her own lifetime, and her dedication to domestic economy and separate-spheres ideology can make her seem outdated to modern scholars and feminists, but the radical elements of her ideas should not be overlooked. She believed that women had an equal, critical role to play in public as well as private life, and that they could reach the apex of their usefulness and talents without necessarily being married. In nineteenth-century America, these beliefs placed her outside the mainstream, however much Beecher portrayed herself as the epitome and arbiter of American womanhood and representative of the white, evangelical, middle class.

There was much on which Beecher and Mary Lyon did not see eye-to-eye. Lyon deliberately paid her teachers a low wage, not because she did not value their labor, but because she wanted to keep expenses low and genuinely believed that female teachers should put self-denying benevolence ahead of personal gain. Beecher believed good wages were critical to attracting good teachers and in raising the prestige of female teachers, and that women’s professions would never gain the same respect as men’s if they were not similarly compensated. Lyon was dedicated to producing missionaries who would serve abroad as well as at home. Beecher was largely uninterested in foreign missions and preferred to focus on the de facto missionary actions of the Protestant teacher rather than on missionaries per

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66 Mary Lyon to Catharine Beecher, July 1, 1836, quoted in Hartley, p. 91.
Lyon would have agreed with her mentor Zilpah Grant that Beecher was too focused on educating daughters of elite families and on instilling upper-class standards of behavior. Beecher was frankly elitist in her worldview and unapologetic in her “scheme of combining middle class evangelical enthusiasm with upper class style of leadership.” Beecher objected to the system of domestic work Lyon pioneered at Mount Holyoke—most likely because it offended her sense of gentility—and was not shy in saying so. This plan might also have offended Beecher because, while Lyon was adamant to include domestic work to keep down costs and make Mount Holyoke accessible to less well-to-do students, domestic studies, which is to say Beecher’s own field of domestic economy which she was busily putting together in these years, was omitted. In the mid-1830s, when Lyon first contacted Beecher for advice in planning Mount Holyoke, she was largely ignored. Instead Beecher directed Lyon to come visit her and focused most of the letter on ways Lyon could promote Beecher’s latest book. Later, when Mount Holyoke was getting on its feet, Beecher notably failed to promote it.

But this personal coolness should not obscure how much they actually had in common. If Lyon objected to Beecher's elitism and was not prepared or willing to incorporate domestic economy into her curriculum, she clearly had great respect for Beecher’s other ideas and accomplishments. As she had with Willard’s school, Lyon invoked Beecher’s well-known Hartford Female Seminary as a model for many elements of her own institution, and the fact that she approached Beecher for advice in the first place indicates a level of approval and respect. Furthermore, Lyon, with her advanced liberal arts curriculum

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67 Porterfield, pp. 22-23.
68 Sklar, p. 93.
69 These philosophical differences may have been amplified by personal tensions. In the late 1820s, Beecher had offered teaching positions first to Lyon and then to Zilpah Grant. The offer to Lyon may not have been very serious in the first place and was possibly just Beecher’s opening gambit to lure Grant away from her own successful school, but in any event, Lyon quickly it down. After protracted discussion and fervent attempts at persuasion from both Beecher and her father, Grant declined, bluntly declaring that the Hartford Female Seminary was too elite and “worldly,” and that her priorities were definitely elsewhere. This failure, and its wording, must have stung, and sent Beecher into a period of melancholy. See Sklar, pp. 92-93.
70 Green, pp. 156, 344.
71 Lyon, “Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, September 1835,” reprinted in Hartley, p. 141.
and emphasis on teacher training, surely began at some point to entertain collegiate ambitions for Mount Holyoke. In 1822, one of her earliest mentors, Joseph Emerson, had predicted that female academies and seminaries would continue to improve and that it would not be long before at least some of them were “as important as are now our colleges for the education of our sons” and Mount Holyoke already offered one of, if not the most, advanced curricula for women, with plenty of people considering it to be the equal of many prestigious men’s colleges. Certainly, Beecher was similarly ambitious, having moved by the 1850s beyond seminaries to dream of women’s colleges. She wanted to prepare women for what she called their “true profession”—teaching and homemaking, and understood early on the importance of establishing professional standards if such work was to be taken seriously. Her plan for the Milwaukee Female College, which included three semi-autonomous departments—general education, pedagogy, and domestic economy—each with its own endowed chair, looks a lot like a women’s university. The fact that neither the college, normal, nor domestic economy training more broadly, developed the way Beecher had envisioned, does not lessen the transformative potential of her ideas.

Neither Lyon, nor Willard, nor Beecher entirely rejected the ideal of the woman’s sphere or the importance of domesticity, but they did all want to extend that sphere and improve the options and position of women, married and unmarried, within it, and they linked improved education very explicitly with this aim. Their vision of the educated woman included a level of independence and engagement in the public realm that was out of step with most of their contemporaries’, foreshadowing the mixed and contested place the educated woman, and the college woman in particular, would occupy in American life.

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72 Joseph Emerson, “Female Education: A Discourse Delivered at the Dedication of the Seminary Hall in Saugus, January 15, 1822,” quoted in Solomon, In the Company of Educated Women, p. 20; According to historian Mabel Newcomer, in the antebellum era, “Most of the academies and seminaries were offering a high school education at best; but a number of them clearly achieved junior college status. Mount Holyoke Seminary [SIC] gave courses comparable to those offered at Amherst, using the same texts. One Amherst student of the early period is on record as testifying that in many ways it was equal to Amherst.” Newcomer, p. 11.
73 Newcomer, p. 11.
Seminaries like Mount Holyoke and the potentially transformative ideas behind them were accepted in part because Protestant Americans were very much aware of another model of female education in their midst, and many of them did not like what they saw. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Roman Catholic convents expanded rapidly and educated a growing number of girls, including many non-Catholics, despite being continuously under assault in the press and from the Protestant pulpit. The mere existence of these convents had a significant impact on the Protestant women's seminaries and the liberal arts colleges that grew out of them. They presented a direct challenge to educators like Lyon, Beecher, and Willard, as well as, paradoxically, an opportunity and even something of a helping hand. Convents also provided a useful counterpoint or ideological context in which Protestant Americans could articulate many of their anxieties about their changing society. Criticism of convents and women religious served as a kind of barometer (as will be discussed in chapter four) for what Protestant Americans would tolerate in their own women.

Due to virtually every aspect of its makeup, the convent fit awkwardly into the landscape of antebellum America. Most obviously it was a Catholic institution in a nation that was still overwhelmingly Protestant and increasingly anti-Catholic. Many Americans also associated convents and the women who populated them with Continental Europe and with a foreign, aristocratic ethos ill-suited to the new republic. In her study of the idea of the nun in American culture, Mary Ewens writes, "[t]o those whose forebears came from post-Reformation England, where Catholic Spain and France were hated enemies, all monasteries had been dissolved, and Catholics disenfranchised, she symbolized all that was considered foreign, threatening, and evil in the Catholic church and in the civilization of the Continent." Perhaps even more disturbing than its associations with the Old World, the convent symbolized a model of womanhood and degree of female autonomy out of step with the patriarchal values and separate-spheres ideology of Anglo-American culture. According

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75 Ewens, p. 4.
to historian Maureen Fitzgerald, towards the end of the eighteenth century—just as the United States came into being and began to chart its desired course—changes "in Vatican practice created a way for Catholic women to exploit convent life as a means to public power. Although restrictions on nuns' practice of convent life remained,...Catholic women transformed this opening into a cultural and political mechanism for collective organization and public authority." Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, p. 18. An institution that not only tolerated, but also appeared to promote female autonomy and a role for women in the public sphere, that sought to perpetuate the Catholic faith in the new nation, and that increased its influence through the education of Protestant women, the convent disconcerted many Americans. Though the anti-Catholic discourse of the antebellum United States drew on many sources of inspiration and attacked multiple groups, "communities of women religious," as historians Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith explain, "often took the brunt of anti-Catholic prejudice." Carol K. Coburn, Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 43.

Despite this inauspicious environment, the Roman Catholic Church in general and convents in particular grew rapidly in the early nineteenth century United States. As historian Joseph G. Mannard writes, "The growth of convents in American society profoundly alarmed many Protestants, not simply because nuns were Catholic and often foreign-born, but also because their vocation seemed in various ways to challenge the 'cult of true womanhood' and the ideal of 'Republican Motherhood.'" As Catholics, non-normative women, and often foreign-born, nuns were doubly, and sometimes triply, removed from the Protestant, native-born, female norm and not the company that many Protestant Americans felt impressionable young girls should keep. That nuns lived their lives outside the confines of traditional domesticity was bad enough; that many orders operated schools for young girls—many of which enrolled as many Protestant students as Catholic—was downright

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76 Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, p. 18.
78 According to Ewens, "in the period between 1790 and 1829 twelve communities of nuns founded convents in America, and one already established came into the Union after the Louisiana Purchase," Ewens, p. 32. For later growth, see Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, and Coburn, Smith, *Spirited Lives*.
frightening. Mannard continues, "By renouncing marriage and motherhood for themselves, by allegedly proselytizing Protestant children and attempting to enlist Protestant daughters into their ranks, nuns appeared to endanger the essential links between family, church, and state enunciated in the ideology of domesticity." 80

The growth of Catholic influence was the subject of much angst-ridden discussion in antebellum Protestant circles, and the Church’s increasing influence in women’s education was especially considered especially deplorable. In a widely circulated 1837 sermon, a Presbyterian clergyman implored Protestant parents to be sensible of the dangers of Catholic-run institutions, warning that “Catholic establishments for female education are greatly disproportioned to the wants of their own people; and are avowedly adapted to attract the daughters of Protestants. This is, perhaps, the most artful and efficient system of proselytism that can well be imagined.” 81

Statements like that, and earlier ones in a similar vein, had consequences, the most dramatic of which came in 1834, when a Protestant mob burned a convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. They had been influenced by a number of recently published and reissued sensationalist stories featuring escaped nuns and horror stories listing the abuses and "outrages" to which Protestant girls were subjected in convent schools, as well as years' worth of anti-Catholic sermons. More immediately, they had been inspired by the story of a recent "escape" from the Charlestown convent and enraged by the rumor that the young woman in question had been returned there against her will, but Ray Allen Billington argues that the burning may have been planned well in advance and that it reflected long-simmering anti-Catholic fears just as much as momentary hysteria. 82 In fact, scholars have argued that anti-Catholic sentiment served a useful social purpose for the young nation: As the United States grew in area and population, and as economic and demographic changes produced new

80 Ibid., pp. 306-07.
81 Samuel Miller, "The Dangers of Education in Roman Catholic Seminaries," May 1838.
diversity, social upheaval, and worsening sectional tensions, nativist propaganda, Jenny Franchot argues, "indirectly confirmed the purity and unity of Protestantism," and perpetuated the comforting myth of a single, truly American culture.83 And as Tracy Fessenden observes, "the discourse of anti-Catholicism...served from the seventeenth century onwards to underpin the social, political, cultural, and economic dominance of North Atlantic Protestants in the United States."84 It had long been an article of faith in Protestant American culture, and in the English culture upon which it was based, that both the dogma and structure of Roman Catholicism were inherently at odds with political liberty and social progress. In earlier centuries, the need to "save" the native peoples of the New World from the twin evils of their own pantheism and the aggressive missionary efforts of the Spanish and French was an early argument mounted on behalf of English colonisation. In the nineteenth century, the perceived superiority of Protestant religion and culture was one of the reasons invoked to justify American expansion into Mexican territory. As improved education for women was considered to be the key to securing the future of the republic and maintaining a moral and prosperous society, granting so much influence over that education to the Catholic Church was deeply troubling to many Americans.

Though vastly overblown, nativist claims of growing Catholic influence were not unfounded. Catholic women religious spent the post-Revolutionary and antebellum years "establishing numerous convents, schools, and charitable institutions in America," reaching deeply into everyday life.85 That convent-operated schools were actually more likely to educate upper- and middle-class Protestants than the working-class Catholics for whom they were at least nominally intended was especially troubling.86 An 1834 article in the *Christian

85 Mannard, p. 305.
86 Regarding this curious situation, Mannard explains, "Convent academies closely paralleled the genteel education offered in secular female academies of the pre-Civil War years and often were more accessible financially and geographically. This fact explains why many Protestant families entrusted the training of their daughters to Catholic sisters despite the warnings of convent critics," p. 320.
Secretary pointed to the growth of Catholic schools in the West and the ample funding they received from European monarchs and religious orders and concluded that it was “beyond the possibility of debate, that the hierarchy of the Romish church do expect their religion to be extended in the Mississippi valley.” More temperate articles claimed that it was only to be expected that the Catholic Church should seek converts and suggested that, instead of simply lamenting the situation, American Protestants do something about it. In a fear that would echo through generations of hand-wringing about women’s colleges, many Americans fretted that the same womanly influence that made the educated, white, middle-class, Protestant woman such an asset to her society, could, in the hands of “improperly” trained women, spell disaster for the nation.

The fact that growing numbers of American girls were being educated in convent schools was very clear, and it was not lost on Protestant educators like Mary Lyon, Emma Willard, and Catharine Beecher. In fact, the increase in the number of convent schools in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was one of the reasons many Protestant American reformers advocated so strongly for more, and better, female academies and seminaries. Ewens argues that “[t]he excellence of Catholic schools was used as an impetus to spur Protestant efforts to combat Catholicism.” The reformer and editor Sarah Josepha Hale, one of the most influential women in antebellum America and later a key player in the establishment of Vassar College, made this point very explicitly, opening an 1834 article in the American Ladies’ Magazine with “Yes—convents are increasing, and they will increase rapidly unless the Protestants exert themselves to establish permanent Female Seminaries.”

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87 “What Catholics Expect From Their Schools,” Christian Secretary, 13, 25, July 5, 1834, (APS Online), p. 97.
89 Mannard, p. 311; Porterfield, p. 40.
90 Ewens, p. 144; Other scholars have questioned the truly superior quality of education at the convents, arguing that they tended to emphasize the “ornamental” accomplishments like music and needlework; most likely the quality varied widely—depending on the qualifications of the nuns—as it did at Protestant schools. See Mannard, “Maternity...of the Spirit.”
Like Willard, Hale deplored the fact that state legislatures seemed uninterested in funding such schools, despite the obvious benefits they would confer, and lamented that "not a single public seminary has ever been established, endowed and devoted solely to the education of female youth!"\(^{92}\) This lack of attention to female education and its negative reflection on the American public was bad enough, but Hale argued that her countrymen's dangerous inattention was compounded by the significant strides the Catholic Church was making in the same field. She even hinted that it verged on the hypocritical to object to the spread of convent education when Protestants were doing so little to actually inhibit or combat it, lecturing her readers that:

The Catholics have endowed private seminaries, or convents, and they are reaping the reward of their efforts in their increasing influence. Shall we blame them for this? Surely not. If Protestant Christians do not provide for the culture of the female mind, the Catholics ought at least to be undisturbed while laboring in the neglected field. Nor can their errors in education be exposed while the Protestants delay to form a standard, and show examples of the superior advantages which the pure and enlightened Christianity of the reformed church might introduce into female schools.\(^{93}\)

Hale doubtless meant to be provocative, and to shame her readership into recognizing and addressing the severity of the situation. Arguing that "[t]he Great West is the arena where the struggle between the Protestant and Catholic principles is mainly to be carried on," Hale accused her countrymen of endangering the divinely mandated expansion of American culture—including "American," i.e., Protestant, religion—across the continent.\(^{94}\) Protestant families on the frontier who sent their daughters to convents for their education could hardly be blamed for this decision when there were so few Protestant seminaries in the West and those that did exist were often shoddy operations of dubious quality.\(^{95}\) Catharine Beecher frequently made a similar point. She took readers to task for their lack of support and when her own seminary in Cincinnati closed—to be taken over by a Catholic girls' school—she

\(^{92}\) Ibid.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., pp. 560-61.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., p. 561.
\(^{95}\) Ibid.
was forced to conclude that Catholics simply cared more, whatever their motives, for women's education than did Protestants. But Protestant society did not turn an entirely deaf ear; state funds did not materialize, but Lyon, Beecher, and Willard all had significant success in soliciting funds from private donors. Beecher considered herself particularly skilled at fundraising, but it was Lyon who successfully raised an endowment for her school, helping establish for Mount Holyoke a permanence that Beecher's projects lacked.

The growth of convents and apparent intent of the Catholic Church to proselytize, especially among women, through education, were significant goads to Protestant educators and their supporters, but the relationship between convents and Protestant seminaries like Mount Holyoke went deeper and was more complex. As autonomous female institutions, and ones that made room for single and professional women, they would come to inspire many of the same anxieties as the convent. If the American public, at virtually all levels of society, had its uses for educated women, it also had a deep-seated suspicion that educated women were unpredictable and potentially uncontrollable, and this ambivalence toward female educational institutions and the women they produced would only increase over the years.

E.A. Andrews' oft-quoted dismissal of Mount Holyoke as a "Protestant nunnery" that would administer inferior education, remove impressionable young women from the family home and isolate them in a mentally unhealthy environment, where they would be encouraged to adopt masculine behaviors and neglect all that was feminine and alluring, was only the first of many such scathing critiques.

The similarities in daily life between Mount Holyoke and the convent school were striking—and, as discussed at the start of this chapter, not lost on either the students or the

96 Burstyn, p. 395.
97 Legislatures proved unwilling to fund their endeavors, but Lyon and Willard, and Beecher in Milwaukee, were able to secure funds from the towns in which their schools were situated. For Lyon, see Horowitz, pp 19-20; For Beecher, see Sklar, pp. 217-224; for Willard, see "Emma Hart Willard, in Famous American Women: Biographical Dictionary from Colonial Times to the Present, Robert McHenry, ed. (Merriam-Webster Inc., 1980), p. 446.
general public. The system of strict rules, schedule, and self- and communal reporting that distinguished Mount Holyoke among Protestant seminaries was frequently found in convents as well. Lyon’s students, like the inhabitants of a convent, were ministered to and led by unmarried women who disregarded many aspects of conventional femininity and who, simply by existing, offered the young women in their charge an example of an alternate life path. In an era that proclaimed “domesticity” as the only acceptable lifestyle of respectable, “true women,” students at Mount Holyoke and convents alike understood that they had at least one other viable course. The fact that so many Americans used convent metaphors when discussing Mount Holyoke points to a lack of other models for autonomous female institutions as well as the concern that the seminaries, despite their mission to produce paragons of Protestant womanhood, would also not fully fit into mainstream American society.

But more striking than the day-to-day similarities are what might be called philosophical similarities. Lyon and Beecher were genuine in their opposition to Catholicism and committed to halting its expansion in the United States, but they were decidedly more ambivalent about the convent itself. As an educational competitor and vehicle for what was to them a false religion, it was objectionable, but the actual concept of an autonomous female institution, and one that did not see marriage and motherhood as the sole avenue of female respect and usefulness, was something else entirely. In Spirited Lives, Carol Coburn and Martha Smith describe the convent as a place for women to “write, learn, think, and experience the divine through their ‘woman-focused’ lives in one of the few spaces available to them outside of marriage and motherhood—a setting that had the power to teach, nurture, and build a female power base.”99 This does not sound so very different from either Lyon’s or Beecher’s vision.

Beecher was often quite clear about her grudging regard for convents. As Joan N. Burstyn writes, “Beecher’s anti-Catholicism was muted by her respect for the way the

99 Coburn, Smith, p. 10.
Catholic church treated women."100 Unlike Protestant societies, which limited a woman's influence and value largely to her role as a wife and mother, Catholicism provided an avenue for unmarried women to develop their talents and be of genuine service to their communities. Beecher spent most of her life articulating and defending the important role unmarried women, properly trained and educated, of course, could play in American life, and could not help but see the utility and promise of the convent. Protestant society needed some sort of similar institution and over the course of her life Beecher came to see it in the female seminary and, eventually, women's college.

When Beecher began planning in the 1840s and 50s for the Milwaukee Female College, her design further reflected this admiration and envy of convents and her intent to duplicate their influence. She picked an urban site because she felt, as Sklar writes, that women's colleges should "create urban centers of female influence. The woman's college in the city replaced the rural missionary teacher as the chief agency by which Catharine sought to have women exert their social influence."101 The similarities between Beecher's vision and the convent were not lost on her contemporaries. In 1851, observing Beecher at work in Milwaukee, Frederika Bremer referred to her as a "kind of lady-abbess."102 Key to her plans was the construction on campus of a home for herself where, in Sklar's suggestive phrase, "like a Catholic nun or Mother Superior," she could direct college affairs, implement her ideas for domestic economy and teacher education, and live, and eventually retire, in comfort and security.103 This house was presumably meant to pass eventually to her successor, herself likely an unmarried, female educator, and Beecher's attachment to this plan was so intense that when the college's trustees balked at financing the house, she cut her ties with the school completely.

100 Burstyn, p. 395.
101 Sklar, pp. 221.
102 Fredrika Bremer, The Homes of the New World, quoted in Sklar, p. 220.
103 Sklar, p. 220.
Mary Lyon was less explicit, but she too seems to have had a grudging admiration for at least the idea behind the convent, and she was certainly fully committed to the idea of an autonomous woman’s community. She surely cannot have missed how greatly her school’s organization and ideology—not just the communal environment, strict discipline, religious emphasis, but also the replication of the mother-daughter bond and the tendency to recruit favored students to stay at the school and teach in their turn—resembled that of the convent. As early as 1832, when plans for Mount Holyoke were still very much in the embryonic stage, Lyon described her vision for an institution that would “exert an extensive and salutary influence on female education, and on religion, from generation to generation,” that would be “designed exclusively for older young ladies preparing to teach, and soon to go forth and exert an influence in a variety of ways on the cause of education and religion,—a place of resort, where those from different parts of the country, designing to spend their lives in doing good, might come together, receive instruction…and exert over each other’s views and feelings an extensive and powerful influence.”

Lyon’s belief that women had a higher calling than just marriage and motherhood, Beecher’s determination to elevate the status of single women and introduce professional standards and respect for traditional woman’s work, and the grudging regard both felt for the institution of the convent are all early indications of the ambiguous position the women’s seminaries, and later colleges, would come to occupy both inside and outside of the white, Protestant, middle-class establishment. Simultaneously agents of white, middle-class, Protestant hegemony and cultural reproduction, and, like the convents with which they had so much in common, a vaguely mysterious “woman’s world,” not fully under the control of the mainstream, they could potentially wreak havoc, at any moment, on the very society they were meant to promote.

104 Mary Lyon to Edward Hitchcock, February 4, 1832, reprinted in Hartley, pp. 32-33.
“The secret garden of the mind”: Claiming a Man's education

“Now neither reason nor experience lead us to believe that learned women are agreeable either to their own sex or to the other.”


“I only want your own good, Leslie. You have got a few silly ideas into your head, about matters which only very clever men understand. Now, if you would only go back to Miss Pink's tenth class, instead of studying at Radcliffe a lot of impossible subjects!...You don't realize, dearest...it isn't quite proper for you to be so—so advanced.”

—The Bloom of Youth, 1916.

In 1875, Smith College, though designed for several hundred students, opened with just fourteen. The small number was not due to lack of demand, but to the fact that only a tiny fraction of applicants could pass the rigorous entrance examinations, which were based on those of neighboring Amherst College. In 1884, the young dean of Bryn Mawr threatened to resign before the college even opened if the trustees did not raise admissions standards to match those at Harvard, arguing that it was “useless...to have excellent professors if the students still need schoolmasters,” and making clear that without such a change their new college would be scorned as little more than a girls' boarding school. In 1889, when the newly founded Barnard College held entrance examinations for its inaugural class, founder Annie Nathan Meyer was horrified to discover that the Columbia University

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1 “Rasselas,” “To the Editor of the Christian Observer,” The Christian Observer, Conducted By Members of the Established Church, April 1807 (APS online), p. 243.
professor whose responsibility it was to set the mathematics exam had allowed his teaching assistant to substitute the test used by Columbia's male undergraduates for a specially designed, presumably less demanding, version for Barnard applicants. Barnard had proclaimed from the start that its entrance requirements would be identical to Columbia's, and it was only after considerable argument that Meyer was able to convince the instructor in question to set the promised, Columbia-style, exam.5 Taken together, these examples convey what was the single most sensational aspect of the new women's colleges—their determination to offer to women the same rigorous liberal arts education available at the best and most prestigious men's institutions—as well as the very real hurdles they faced in translating their ambition into reality.

Vassar is often described as the first woman's college in the United States, a distinction that is both true in spirit and demonstrably false. Founded in 1861, it is nearly a quarter of a century younger than Mount Holyoke, but Mount Holyoke did not formally transition from seminary to college until 1888. Vassar was also preceded by three decades' worth of institutions that called themselves women's colleges, but were at best secondary schools, often inferior to the higher grade female seminaries. It also followed Mary Sharp College in Tennessee and Elmira College in upstate New York, both of which conferred the bachelor's degree and were recognized, by contemporaries and historians, as true colleges, offering a curriculum and level of instruction on par with men's institutions. But for all this, Vassar fully deserves its reputation as a pioneer, introducing as it did a new kind of women's educational institution—a genuine liberal arts college that would unflinchingly stake new ground in women's education, and explicitly inform the public of its aims.

The intent behind this new breed of women's colleges had been simple enough: the founders and early leaders of Vassar, Smith, Wellesley, Goucher, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, Barnard, and a little later, Mount Holyoke, Mills, and Agnes Scott Colleges, wanted to make available to the young women in their charge what they, and the general American public,  

understood as a genuine college education, meaning the same classically-based, liberal arts
curriculum provided at the best and most prestigious men’s institutions. The curricula of
these new colleges were not uniform, but generally speaking, they consisted of Latin and
Greek language and literature, higher mathematics, English grammar, composition, and
literature, history, philosophy, the natural sciences, German, and French. Though many
graduates became teachers, formal pedagogy was only intermittently included, nor was there
any preparation for women’s other expected life path, housewifery.

The colleges all recognized their debt to Mount Holyoke, but with only a few
exceptions, primarily at Wellesley and Bryn Mawr, the philanthropists, educators, and
clergymen behind these new institutions neither shared Mary Lyon’s transformative, even
potentially radical, vision of educated womanhood nor had any desire to replicate the kind of
institution that produced it. They believed in women’s intellectual abilities and felt keenly
that they should have access to the same level and kind of education available to their
brothers, but their general vision of college-educated women—a handful of lifelong teachers
to be sure, but mainly exceptionally well-educated wives and mothers—was generally quite
conservative. Nevertheless, without even really meaning to, these men and women ushered
in a truly radical moment for American women, or at least, for those women fortunate enough
to access college education. In their determination to offer women a “real” college
education, they did more than merely duplicate the accepted men’s curriculum, they contested
the gendered assumptions that lay at the heart of American education, claiming that what
served for men’s intellectual development was equally suited, and suitable, for women’s.
Above all, by arguing that there was nothing inherently male about either knowledge or the
rarified world of the university that had traditionally housed and nurtured it, they laid claim
to critical components of masculine power. In a society dominated by middle-class notions
of clearly defined roles and distinct spheres of influence for men and women, an institution
like Vassar or the other elite women’s colleges that followed in its wake could not fail to
attract attention.
Renown and even notoriety quickly followed, as did criticism and eventually backlash. Even before Vassar officially opened in 1865—and well into the twentieth century—the elite women's colleges would be accused of “slavishly” adopting the standards and subjects of men's colleges, without giving due consideration to either the fact that their students were women or that they were women who would live in the modern world. These criticisms quickly found a niche in popular culture. As early as the 1870s, when only Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley were in operation, jokes poking fun at college women who read multiple languages but were mystified by housework and utterly devoid of common sense, had become a staple of the American popular press. One story concerned an honors graduate who tried and failed to make simple pies, then “burst into tears and sobbed out: ‘they educated me to be an idiot instead of a woman!’” Another advised a recent Vassar graduate, who wished to continue her studies in metaphysics, to instead “take a course of boil a potatoeology and cookiphysics.”

Though all of the colleges drew a sharp distinction between offering women what was widely-understood as a masculine education, and educating women to be like men, this distinction was usually lost on their critics. The sheer brazenness of the colleges' experiment fascinated, exhilarated, and often unnerved the public, blinding many people to the finer details. The curriculum was always more modern and dynamic than many of their critics recognized, and the colleges worked endlessly to blend the traditional liberal arts approach with new studies in the natural and social sciences. Nor were considerations of sex entirely absent from the curriculum-planning process, though the presidents, trustees, administrators, and faculty would never come to an agreement on where realistic considerations of sex ended and a dangerous “feminizing” of the curriculum began. As we shall see, mindful that even supporters of women's education could be squeamish about so masculine a course, and that plenty of parents wanted their daughters' schooling to go hand-in-hand with traditional

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6 The New Hampshire Sentinel, Keene, NH, 1 May 1879, printed originally in the Detroit Free Press; The Columbus Daily Enquirer-Sun, Columbus, GA, 24 December 1881. This joke was reprinted at least once, appearing two years later in The Grand Forks Herald, Grand Forks, ND, 5 September 1883.
feminine accomplishments, most of the colleges, however grudgingly, provided for at least a little of the fine arts study that had for centuries been the hallmark of an elite woman's education.

Nevertheless, the defining characteristic of the new women's colleges was how closely they patterned themselves on the most prestigious men's colleges, and nothing exemplified this more than the traditional (i.e. "masculine") curriculum at the heart of their programs. Despite the often harsh criticism it engendered and, in the early years, the very real difficulty in finding enough qualified women students to not only sustain the colleges but to foster further growth, the colleges never wavered in their dedication to the liberal arts or their determination to equal the standards of the best men's colleges. They understood very clearly that, as the president of Bryn Mawr put it in 1901, there was "but one best education," and that for better or for worse, it was comprised by the "masculine" liberal arts. The only way for women to prove themselves the intellectual equals of men, and for the new women's colleges to prove themselves colleges in fact as well as in name, was to first to emulate their standards, and then triumph over them.

As discussed previously, the generation following the American Revolution saw a significant expansion in educational opportunities for white women, and especially for those of the upper and middle classes. Much of the new nation's emerging social theory was devoted to the role women might play in maintaining a healthy and virtuous republic, a role that was understood as distinctly female and thus in need of a distinctly female education. American women were still to be domestic beings, as opposed to actors in the public world of politics and the marketplace, but the influence they exercised via the private world of the home, and particularly as mothers, was considered anew. If they were to raise generations of virtuous, civic-minded sons, went this new theory, their own educations could no longer be

so superficial and haphazard. An education that trained women’s minds and cultivated their reason, was what was needed now. Furthermore, the experience of the Revolution, during which women had had to take on unprecedented responsibilities, convinced many Americans, of both sexes, that women were intellectually capable of more rigorous education, as well as merely in need of it. Long seen as unimportant and even harmful, educating women was reinvented as something of a patriotic duty. But if American men were prepared to partner with their wives in establishing and maintaining the republic, the constraints placed on that education illustrate just how limited that partnership was meant to be. Substantive schooling was increasingly made available to (white) women and non-elite men, but classical learning, the education most associated with intellectual and political power, continued to be reserved for the male elite.

To meet the new patriotic imperative of women's education, dozens of girls' academies and seminaries along the eastern seaboard—especially in New England and the mid-Atlantic—either opened or sought to revise their programs. Though less popular, the number of coeducational schools grew as well. The curricula and quality of these schools varied widely, with even the best usually offering rudimentary education as well as more advanced topics. According to historian Thomas Woody, “up to about 1800, English grammar, arithmetic, geography, some history and a modern language generally marked the limits of the highest schools for young ladies. Reading, writing, and some ornamental studies rounded out the course.”

Even Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy, which began as a venture school in 1792 and is regarded by most historians as the Early Republic's first truly advanced girls' school, offered little more than this in its early years, and did not begin to

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9 Many of these institutions were entirely new, but a number of the older “venture” schools sought to transition into the era by improving their standards and multiplying their offerings. See Kim Tolley, “Mapping the Landscape of Higher Schooling, 1727-1850,” in *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States, 1727-1925*, Nancy Beadie and Kim Tolley, eds., (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002), p. 26.

overhaul its curriculum among more "masculine," liberal arts lines until 1814.11

The Revolutionary era, despite its commitment to education as the means of turning an unruly populace into sober, virtuous citizens, and expanded general educational opportunities for white men and women, did little to dislodge the higher learning from its rarified perch. It was not that republican ideology left the elitism of classical education untouched, the explicit association of a particular kind of learning, traditionally confined to the social elite, with political power, did strike many Americans, even among the elite, as fundamentally un-democratic. As historian Frederick Rudolph explains, in an monarchial society, classical education had formed part of a larger social vision, "a certain clarity of purpose—the training of a governing class—that could not be so easily adhered to in the nineteenth century."12 But, if anything, this criticism served only to enhance the mystique of classical education. Overall, the popular association between the classical curriculum, the world of the university, and the governing and professional classes, remained strong. This was partly because many of the oldest colleges refused to alter the fundamentals of their curricula, while the burgeoning system of public education did not provide for classical training, effectively continuing to restrict the higher learning to the upper and middle classes, but also because centuries' worth of experience and custom was difficult to overcome.13 Americans might debate both the utility and the republican credentials of classical education, but not the way in which it symbolized higher education itself.

More than anything else, it was this association between classical learning and masculine, political power, that, despite the era's very real progress in some areas of women's education, made the idea of schooling women in the classics seem to many people, male and female, to be as unnecessary, absurd, and potentially dangerous, as ever. In her study of

women and classicism, Caroline Winterer observes, “Few intellectual enterprises have been
wrapped in paranoid rhetoric for so long as classical study, a branch of learning that seemed
to possess infinite capacities to illuminate, refine, and ennoble men, and an equally
dependable ability to corrupt women.”14

Due to the growing availability of translations, Winterer argues, educated women in
eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century America were more conversant in classical culture
—or at least in certain aspects of it—than is usually assumed.15 Some of the early girls'
schools did assign classical literature in translation, but translations did not carry the same
cultural cachet. Many people held them to be inherently inferior to the original, and would
have agreed with an 1806 piece in The Literary Miscellany that “whatever in the classics can
give pleasure to taste and refinement...must be derived from the originals...Ancient
authors...must speak to us in their own language...and we must be masters of that language,
or we cannot feel the spirit of their discourse.”16 True classical learning was vital for men,
but, if women insisted, the ersatz version would do for them.

Women who nonetheless insisted on mastering Latin and Greek were often met with
ridicule and scorn. “Rasselas,” an 1807 correspondent to the Christian Observer, informed
women, with more than a trace of condescension, that any of them “wishing to be mistress
of the learned languages’ should understand that a single page of their Bibles contains lessons
of morality more striking and sublime than all the writing of Plato or Seneca can furnish.”17

The pervasive difference between men’s and women’s education, and the fact that, as
“Rasselas” implied, some knowledge was widely considered appropriate for women
(religious, practical) and some (academic, abstract) was not, conveyed a strong message

14 Caroline Winterer, The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900
15 Winterer, chapter 1, “The Female World of Classicism in Eighteenth-Century America,” in The Mirror of
Antiquity.
16 “On the Importance of Acquiring the Ancient Languages,” The Literary Miscellany, vol. 2, no. 1,
December, 1806, p. 44 (APS online). For the debate over translations, see Siobhan Moroney, “Latin, Greek
and the American Schoolboy: Ancient Languages and Class Determinism in the Early Republic,” The
about women's place in American life. "Rasselas" himself acknowledged that fashion and
tradition were such that ignorance of the "learned languages" did more than simply exclude
women from the study of the classics, that indeed "all modern productions are universally
either decorated or defaced with classical allusion and quotation, down from a speech in the
House of Commons to a lottery advertisement."\(^\text{18}\) Scholar Siobhan Moroney paints a similar
picture, arguing, "[a]n overview of the early republican period...reveals dozens of articles
either primarily focusing upon or substantially concerned with the classical languages, and...
to a much lesser extent, the classical tradition."\(^\text{19}\)

The availability of classical knowledge in translation makes women's general
exclusion from the study of classical languages all the more telling. Classical education was
a gateway into the highly literate governing society and culture of the Early Republic, but
clearly the way in which that learning was accessed mattered as much as the knowledge
itself. To link education with citizenship, but then continue to keep even the most privileged
women at a remove from the traditional heart of male learning and the very education that
defined a learned and cultured male citizen, was a not-so-subtle reminder to women that they
still belonged on the periphery of public life. They were to be content with their increased
access to learning, and expanded and honored role as mothers of virtuous citizens, and not
presume to trespass any further into masculine domains, including higher education. As
historian Linda Kerber observes, "It was not only Latin, but all serious study that was an
exclusively male puberty rite."\(^\text{20}\)

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, American cultural norms
maintained that most truly advanced education, as well as entire fields of knowledge, was the
still the proper domain of men, but the growing numbers of girls' schools and, in the northern
states, the changing needs of the culturally ascendant middle class, were, very slowly, altering

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
\(^{19}\) Moroney, "Latin, Greek and the American Schoolboy," pp. 295-96.
\(^{20}\) Kerber, p. 196.
the reality. In his examination of women's education in the United States, Thomas Woody compares the curricula of 55 girls' schools operating between 1749 and 1829 with those of 107 such schools operating between 1830 and 1871. Of the first group, only 24 percent offered Latin. Greek was even less common, offered at only 11 percent. But in the second group, 59 percent offered Latin and 29 percent Greek. Among the other subjects widely associated with higher education, both higher mathematics and moral philosophy became more common as well.21

But Woody's numbers do not tell us how many students enrolled in these advanced courses, or even whether such courses were required or optional, and a look at the popularity of some other subjects is quite revealing: Between 1749 and 1829, 89 percent of these schools offered simple reading and 86 percent arithmetic, as compared to the 25 percent that offered logic and the 2 percent that offered trigonometry. Drawing was more than three times as popular as algebra.22 For the generation of women that came of age at the turn of the nineteenth century, advanced education was becoming more popular and somewhat more available, but at most schools mediocre standards clearly prevailed.

But there was a small but growing number of educators who cherished more ambitious aims. The years between 1810 and 1840 witnessed the birth—and in the case of the Litchfield Female Academy, the radical rebirth—of the nation's most advanced and influential female academies and seminaries, as a handful of institutions closely patterned their courses of study on those at boys' college preparatory schools, and few of the most ambitious and brazen even sought to emulate the male collegiate course.23 By 1814, the aforementioned Sarah Pierce—with some help from her college-educated nephew—had

21 Woody, p. 418.
22 Ibid.
23 "Seminary" and "Academy" are not synonymous terms, though they were sometimes used interchangeably and had more in common than not. In essence, both were privately operated institutions and usually quite expensive. By the 1810s, seminaries were popularly associated with older women students, often headed for teaching, and more focused on academic than ornamental accomplishments (though plenty of academies operated on this plan as well). By the 1830s and 40s, a seminary was generally understood to be a place where women could receive an especially advanced education. In terms of actual curriculum, an antebellum seminary education can be seen as roughly equivalent to a high school, or in the case of the best ones, about the first half of a college course.
radically revised the Litchfield curriculum, shifting its focus onto "the subjects then being taught at the male colleges." Educational standards were not fully up to collegiate levels, but students were now "expected...to command mathematics, moral philosophy, logic, the natural sciences, and Latin," as well as subjects like English and history. The old ornamental subjects did not disappear, but they increasingly took a backseat to academics.

Pierce's school proved an inspiration for some of the more ambitious and visionary female educators, among them Catharine Beecher, whose rigorous and influential Hartford Female Seminary opened in 1823. A Litchfield alumna, she would go on to become one of her century's most influential female educators, and a lifelong champion of both liberal education and professional training for women. Beecher followed her mentor's lead in blending women's traditional "ornamental" education with an increasingly rigorous and varied academic course. Emma Willard's Troy Female Seminary (founded 1819) was more advanced still. Willard modeled Troy's curriculum as closely as possible on those of the best male colleges, and though she prudently avoided using the term "college," she clearly envisioned her seminary as its female equivalent. Willard's sister, Almira Hart Phelps, brought the Troy model to her own school—the Patapsco Female Institute in Maryland—and published a series of important and influential textbooks on botany, chemistry, and natural philosophy. Phelps's textbooks were a great financial success and the fact that they, though expressly written for women scholars, appear to have been widely used by men as well, indicates the esteem in which they were held. Zilpah Grant's work at the Adams Academy (1823) and the Ipswich Female Seminary (1828) made her one of the most sought after female educators in the nation and eventually inspired her protégée, Mary Lyon, to found the

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24 Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, p. 39. Kelley adds that Pierce's nephew, John Brace, who was a critical partner in the new curriculum's development, taught using the same texts he himself had studied at Williams College, indicating that, at least in some areas, Litchfield's curriculum may have approached the collegiate level as early as the 1810s. Kelley, p. 39.

Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1837.26

These well-known and well-regarded institutions acted, in Woody's words, as "living criticisms of the practices followed by others," and their success encouraged other schools to likewise improve their standards and quality of instruction.27 Certainly, advanced education became more popular at academies and seminaries with each passing year. Again, according to Woody's surveys, algebra, geometry, and trigonometry all jumped in popularity from the colonial and early national periods. Political science, a subject barely on the radar before 1830, was by 1871 offered at a full third of the schools. The natural sciences truly exploded, both aiding and aided by the widespread perception that women, because of their supposed greater "natural" connection to the earth, were particularly well-suited to study science. Natural philosophy (physics) grew in popularity from 50 percent between 1749 to 1829, to 90 percent between 1830 and 1871; chemistry from 30 percent to 90 percent. Geology and physiology became vastly more popular as well.28 Many of these fields were developing rapidly in these years and were excitedly followed by colleges and universities. Their presence at so many female academies and seminaries, and especially at the schools that sought to purchase "scientific apparatus, including telescopes and cabinets stocked with various specimens," reveals a determination to strengthen their programs and offer as advanced study as their resources permitted.29

The growth in availability of Latin and Greek, noted previously, is less startling in

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27 Woody, p. 441.
28 Woody, p. 418. Algebra grew from 15% in Woody's first sample to 83% in his second, geometry from 27% to 79%, trigonometry from 2% to 40%. Geology and physiology, both offered at only 2% of the schools in the first sample, grew to 60% and 55%, respectively, in the second, Woody, p. 418; For the popular association between women, the natural world, and hence the natural sciences, see Rossiter, p. 7.
absolute numbers, but given the potent symbolism of the classical languages, no less important. At some point, probably starting in the 1820s but not really picking up until the 1830s and 40s, two of the three classical linchpins—Latin and higher mathematics—became not only socially acceptable for (some) women, but socially desirable as well. This significant shift in attitude was likely the result of several factors. The proliferation of girls' schools produced few institutions which could claim high academic standards and fewer still that came anywhere near to male collegiate standards; the more rigorous and ambitious schools may have added Latin and mathematics as a way of distinguishing themselves. Certainly there was no shortage of people who considered Latin indispensable to a good education and a growing number who would have agreed with Abbot Academy teacher William Russell's 1843 statement that "the general adoption of Latin, as a prominent object of attention in female schools of a high order," had become "one of the most auspicious symptoms of liberal feeling, as regards the education of the sex."30

Looking at the mass of girls' schools in the first half of the nineteenth century, the growing number of coeducational academies, and the steady rise in academic standards, it is clear that mainstream ideas about women's intellectual ability and what constituted an appropriate education for them had changed since the colonial era. Nineteenth-century America's sharpening class lines was likely the most significant factor behind this burgeoning, if muted, acceptance of an increasingly advanced and expanded female curriculum. Just as elite eighteenth-century Philadelphians had seen women's education as a way of marking kinship with the English gentry, middle-class nineteenth-century Americans recognized its social value as well. Historian Mary Kelley argues that education, in both the early national and antebellum periods, was critical to "consolidating and elaborating a social identity that distinguished a woman from the lower orders," and that "[i]t was no coincidence that the appearance of the middling classes as a force with which to reckon," occurred at

much the same time as (elite) girls' formal education was taking on more of the characteristics of boys' schooling.31

As the middle classes sought to distinguish themselves from both "the practices of aristocratic luxury and the vulgarity of the lower orders," education that emphasized seriousness of character and self-discipline became especially prized.32 I would argue that Latin, especially, came to surpass, or at the very least rival, dancing and fancy needlework as the mark of a rarified education. In her study of women's education in the antebellum South, Christie Farnham notes that, despite the South's very real educational lag behind the North, elite southern girls were far more likely to study Latin and even Greek than their northern counterparts. The reason behind "this seeming anomaly is to be found in the Northerners' fear that a college education would become the means for mounting an attack on the sex segregation of the professions, in contrast to the Southerners' desire for a classical education as a marker of gentility."33 To some extent, this may be applied to the tumultuous antebellum North as well. Latin may have been a traditional gateway into the virtually all-male world of higher education and the professions, but in the antebellum era, even in the North, very few women were as yet clamoring to enter that special realm. Teaching was the one profession into which women were making significant inroads, and it is perhaps telling that as late as 1839 one of the most highly regarded teacher-training schools—Zilpah Grant's Ipswich Academy—did not even offer Latin.34 In the antebellum years, it seems, the idea of young women learning Latin might have seemed largely harmless because it was not expected that they would do anything with it.

While it is important to recognize the changes that were at work, it is also important not to overstate them: Latin was becoming more common in some girls' schools, that is not to

32 Kelley, 25.
34 "Catalogue of the Officers and Members of the Seminary for Female Teachers, at Ipswich, Mass., for the year ending April 1839," (Salem: Register Press, 1839), Education Subject Collection, (SSC).
say it was becoming truly popular, at either private or public institutions. Very few schools actually required it and it is impossible to gauge its demand among those that simply offered it. Designate public schooling for girls was just getting underway in these years, and there was little support for educating them in the classics. In 1826, the trustees of the High School for Girls, meant to be Boston’s flagship public girls’ school, omitted Latin and Greek as studies necessary to their goal of “placing women in respect to education, upon ground, if not equal, at least bearing a near and an honorable relation, to that of men.” It seems that only the strong-arming of Mayor Josiah Quincy secured Latin even a place as an elective. By the 1840s, some private schools had incorporated it as a regular elective, but the practice of offering Latin for a supplementary fee was probably more common. Moreover, just a quarter of the schools Woody surveyed offered any mathematics more advanced than geometry, and Greek remained virtually unknown.

In Women’s Education in the United States, 1780-1840, education scholar Margaret A. Nash contends that the educational trends of the period indicate a growing belief in educational equality for the sexes, and claims that historians have overstated the extent to which nineteenth-century Americans gendered education. Drawing attention to the “contemporaneous ideologies emphasizing women’s capacity for rational thought and higher learning,” Nash argues that few schools “of the early national or antebellum eras taught courses directly related to wife- or motherhood...Rather, most educators believed that a general liberal arts curriculum, similar to that of men, was good preparation for any life role.”

Nash’s argument, however, rests on unsubstantiated assumptions that a belief in women’s intellectual equality, and equal commitment to their educations, was widespread.

35 An Account of The High School for Girls, Boston...February, 1826 (Boston: Thomas B. Wait and Son, Printers, 1826), pp. 5, 12 (SSC).
36 Two examples of this were the Mount Vernon Female School in Boston and the Bradford Academy in Bradford, Massachusetts. See “Catalogue of the Mount Vernon Female School, January 1831,” pp. 9, 12; “Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Bradford Academy, Bradford, Massachusetts, October 1839,” pp. 8, 10 (SSC).
38 Nash, pp. 9, 10.
that girls and boys who studied the same subjects, even at the same schools, did so in equal depth or to as advanced a level, and that the absence of explicitly domestic studies is the same thing as a lack of emphasis on female students' domestic futures. As Kelley points out, while, by the 1840s, "increasingly...the idea of female intellectual equality went uncontested; its corollary, the principle that women should have educational equality, remained controversial in some circles."\textsuperscript{39} The new emphasis on female learning clearly coexisted with, not replaced, the older, well-established prejudices against educated women and the widespread assumption that most women were not the intellectual peers of men. The vastly inferior public investment in girls' education, so lamented by prominent women like Emma Willard, Sarah Josepha Hale, and Catharine Beecher (see chapter one), indicates a far from equal commitment, while the abovementioned battle over the classics waged at Boston's High School for Girls implies that even many supporters of women's education were not willing to educate women in the same ways as men, and certainly not at public expense.

More importantly, Nash overlooks the normative gendered expectations that remained at the heart of women's (and, for that matter, men's) education. Men and women, at least among the more privileged classes, might indeed be studying more of the same subjects, but the expectations—of their teachers, parents, and society as a whole—of what they would do with that knowledge remained very different. Men continued to study the liberal arts as a general preparation for professional or political careers, purposes that, for women, would have struck most Americans as absurd. Arguments in favor of improving women's education were still likely to be predicated on the idea that education would make women better wives and mothers, just as they had been in the immediate, post-revolutionary era. Teaching was considered an acceptable woman's profession in large part because of the rapidly spreading belief that women, due precisely to their inherent maternal qualities, were naturally suited to educating children. Even Mary Lyon, whose Mount Holyoke Female Seminary was so radical in part because it argued that a woman's highest service to her community was not

\textsuperscript{39} Kelley, 91.
necessarily dependent on marriage and motherhood, nevertheless framed her ideal vision for women in very specifically female terms. This does not mean that there were no Americans who championed women's education for its own sake, and indeed, as Nash makes clear, that one of the chief rationales for female education in this period was its potential to shield middle-class women from "vicissitudes of fortune." But the fact that improvements and expansions in women's education were so often defended in either conservative and very feminine terms, or promoted as ways of protecting women who, for one reason or another, could not count upon their families for support, is telling. That a growing number of privileged women were joining their brothers in studying mathematics and moral philosophy, and even Latin and Greek, was not enough to render that education free of gender expectations and biases.

Moreover, even if some parts of elementary and secondary education were becoming more gender-neutral in these years (both in terms of curriculum and in the growing popularity of coeducation) there is no getting around the continued gendering—both literally and discursively—of higher education. By the 1830s, there were voices clamoring for post-secondary education for women, but most were careful to speak of a particular kind of woman's higher education, similar in some ways, perhaps, but still very different from the "real" college course and world of men. The college was considered a masculine province, just as it had been for generations past, and women who sought to encroach upon this masculine ground did so at their peril. Oberlin College's pioneering 1837 decision to admit female students was viewed by most Americans as socially and pedagogically radical and did not inspire many other institutions to similar action. When public universities, mostly in the Midwest, began admitting women in the 1850s and 60s, most did so grudgingly, and in such small numbers that women students existed on the periphery of college life and made little significant immediate impact. Some male students and professors were openly hostile, others

40 Nash, pp. 64-68; Mrs. Townshend Stith, *Thoughts on Female Education* (Philadelphia: Clark & Raser, printers, 1831), p.29, quoted in Nash, p. 64.
simply ignored them; either way, women students were hardly invited in as equal members of
the community.41

Even radical Oberlin did not treat its students equally and had trouble viewing women
as true collegians.42 Though its leaders believed in the importance of educating women for
useful and benevolent lives, they were also motivated by the hope that the presence of
women would inspire male collegians to more respectable and godly behavior. As one
historian put it, at antebellum Oberlin, “educating women was at best secondary...The
presence of young women...was essentially for the well-being of men.”43 While the college
did admit women to the full, classically based, course, it is worth noting that it also designed
a special, less demanding, “ladies' course,” and strongly encouraged women to enroll in that
instead. Finally, women were not allowed to participate in college life on equal terms with
men—as future woman’s rights leader Lucy Stone learned when she was denied permission
to deliver her own commencement address. The college felt it would be immodest for a
woman student to make a public speech, and instead insisted she have a man read it aloud for
her (she refused).44

When Emma Willard presented her plan for girls' education to the New York state
legislature and appealed for public funds, she emphasized that she wished her school to be
the most advanced available, but nevertheless chose to call it a seminary because, as she
assured the gentlemen of the legislature, she recognized the widespread belief in the
“absurdity of sending ladies to college.”45 The weight given to the sort of label an institution
bore may strike modern observers as trivial and hair-splitting, but its significance was real.

41 See Barbara Solomon, In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education
in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 51-53; Christine D. Myers, University
Coeducation in the Victorian Era: Inclusion in the United States and the United Kingdom (New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 10-16.
42 See Ronald W. Hogeland, “Coeducation of the Sexes at Oberlin College: A Study in Social Ideas in Mid-
43 Ibid., p. 166.
44 Jane S. Sutton, The House of My Sojourn: Rhetoric, Women, and the Question of Authority (Tuscaloosa:
The University of Alabama Press, 2010), pp. 77-79.
45 Emma Willard, “A Plan For Improving Female Education,” included in Woman and the Higher
As with classical study, higher education more broadly was clearly a matter of form as well as content, and to admit women as equal participants remained beyond the comprehension of most Americans.\footnote{It is true that by the 1840s, there were a number of women's educational institutions that called themselves colleges. Some attempts have been made to argue that these schools were the equal of contemporary men's colleges—see Farnham, \textit{The Education of the Southern Belle}—but most scholars of women's education agree that, notwithstanding their names, these institutions fell short of collegiate standards and that some of the more rigorous female seminaries, such as Troy and Mount Holyoke, may have offered a more advanced curriculum and one more in line with the accepted undergraduate course. See Horowitz, \textit{Alma Mater}, pp. 28-29.} It is probably not a coincidence that it was in these years, when female higher education was becoming increasingly popular, that the word "seminary," which previously had largely the same vague meaning as "academy," came particularly to denote an institution of higher education for women and often one especially committed to training teachers—a non-threatening way to advertise and describe advanced female education.\footnote{For the tactical use of the word "seminary," see Anne Firor Scott, "The Ever Widening Circle: The Diffusion of Feminist Values from the Troy Female Seminary, 1822-1872," \textit{History of Education Quarterly}, vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 1979), p. 6.} Willard's diplomacy and Oberlin's struggles to fully equate "woman" with "collegian" are but two examples of how strongly mid-nineteenth century Americans continued to gender not only education but to some extent knowledge itself, and how the college—the world that dispensed critical learning and initiated elite men into prominence and power—remained inseparable in the public imagination from that very masculine knowledge.

When Mary Lyon founded the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1837, she was determined to offer a finer education than women could obtain anywhere else. In this, she was largely successful, and Mount Holyoke was almost certainly the nation's most advanced female institution until at least the early 1850s, when it was probably overtaken by Tennessee's Mary Sharp College. Like Willard, Lyon called her school a seminary, not a college. This was partly out of prudence, but also in recognition that, however advanced, Mount Holyoke was not yet up to collegiate standards. Lyon's determination and struggle to bring Mount Holyoke's curriculum in line, as much as possible, with collegiate as opposed to
merely seminary standards, does more than represent an important moment in the history of women's higher education; it also emphasizes the continued power of the classical curriculum to confer popularly-recognized collegiate status. A comparison of Mount Holyoke's early curriculum with that of neighboring Amherst College is especially illuminating, both because Amherst was a men's college of high repute and one to which later women's colleges like Vassar and Smith would regularly compare their curricula, and because many Amherst undergraduates felt that Mount Holyoke students were better educated than they were themselves. But one was a college and the other was not and, to a critical extent, the curriculum is what made the difference.

In keeping with educational custom, Amherst's admissions requirements and prescribed curriculum were heavily weighted with classical studies. Applicants were required to prove proficiency in Latin and Greek grammar, as well as Latin composition, have studied a significant amount of classical literature, and be thoroughly familiar with the Greek New Testament. For non-classical studies, there was a mastery of arithmetic and some degree of English grammar, but nothing else was required. During the four-year course, nearly half of the students' time was devoted to the classics. Some texts in ancient history, philosophy, and literature were studied in translation, but these were outnumbered by language classes by more than 3 to 1. 48

As early as 1837-38, Mount Holyoke's first year of operation, its admission requirements were virtually identical in mathematics and English grammar, and, unlike at Amherst, applicants were also expected to be familiar with modern geography, U.S. history, and to have done some preparatory work in logic. 49 Remarkably, once enrolled, students at both institutions pursued similar, and in some cases identical, required courses in ancient

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48 Amherst College Catalogue, 1839-40, pp. 17-21, Amherst College Collections Online, Five College Archives Digital Access Project.

49 Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (MHFS) Catalogue, 1837-1838. Five College Archives Digital Access Project. Mount Holyoke's catalogue specifies the math textbooks applicants should have completed, whereas Amherst only says "Arithmetic." I am inferring an equal level of required preparation because both institutions started their students with algebra and then moved to geometry, and employed the same textbooks.
history, astronomy, botany, chemistry, geography, geology, logic, philosophy (mental, moral, and natural), political economy, and rhetoric. By the 1840s, both schools required natural theology and "Evidences of Christianity"—a subject much in vogue in the mid-to late-nineteenth century—as well. Very frequently, both institutions used the same texts, adding credence to the idea that they were studying at much the same level.

There were differences of course, and important ones: Mount Holyoke students had earlier and wider opportunities in ecclesiastical history, English literature, and modern history—subjects well established in the female curriculum and safely at a distance from the classics. Their Amherst counterparts had to study either French, or by the 1840s, German, while at Mount Holyoke, French was not even offered until 1845 and German not until 1871 (and even then only as a supplementary course available at extra cost). Mount Holyoke required no modern language study at all until 1876. Given that mathematics was second only to classical languages in its vaunted place in the classical curriculum, it is worth noting that a higher degree of mathematics study was required of Amherst men than of Mount Holyoke women, though, as mentioned above, both groups were for several years admitted with the same level of study. By the 1840s, calculus was required at Amherst, while nothing more advanced than geometry was prescribed at Mount Holyoke until 1855. This pattern would continue, but it seems that, in the 1840s and 50s, while Mount Holyoke was typically behind Amherst in mathematics, it was not hugely so. A greater gap began to open up in the 1860s and 70s, as Amherst continued to increase its mathematics offerings and requirements, while Mount Holyoke held its steady. It is unclear why Mount Holyoke stopped trying to catch up, but it may have had something to do with the emergence of Vassar, Wellesley, and, especially, nearby Smith, all of which offered more advanced study. In any case, Mount Holyoke catalogues from the late 1870s reported that supplementary instruction in more advanced mathematics was available to qualified students, but, tellingly, calculus did not

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50 Amherst College catalogues, 1839, 1846, 1865; Mount Holyoke Female Seminary/College catalogues, 1837-1876.
appear formally in the curriculum until 1888, the year the school received its college charter.51

Such a comparison indicates that, for the most part, when studying the same subjects, Mount Holyoke and Amherst students pursued them at largely the same level, and in some ways the curricula were more similar than different. This similarity is all the more striking when one considers that Amherst's course was four years, whereas Mount Holyoke's was for some time only three (though there was an optional fourth year), and that, after all, Mount Holyoke was not a college, just an increasingly good facsimile of one. The classical curriculum aside, Mount Holyoke's three-year course already looked very much like Amherst's, the fourth year—made mandatory for graduation in 1861—allowed for Latin, French, and, eventually, more advanced mathematics, and came close to matching a true college course. That the real difference came down to the classics highlights, first, the remarkable strides made by women's education in general and Mount Holyoke in particular, and second the very real extent to which the presence or absence of a classical curriculum continued to define the American college.

Mary Lyon grasped this fully and intended from the very start to establish Latin, at least, as an important discipline at Mount Holyoke. She herself had been an enthusiastic Latin scholar, famously memorizing the entire Latin grammar over the course of one weekend, and felt, unlike her mentor Zilpah Grant, that Latin was an important accomplishment for educated women in general and women teachers in particular.52 But Lyon moved cautiously, as it seems that, in the early years, the trustees and other members of the community did not share her enthusiasm and refused to countenance a Latin requirement. The 1840 catalogue did express the seminary's desire to implement one eventually, but added,

52 For Lyon's Latin skills, see Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, p. 13. For her insistence that Latin was necessary to a woman's education, see Elizabeth A. Green, *Mary Lyon and Mount Holyoke: Opening the Gates* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1979), p. 204.
meaningfully, "it is supposed that the views of the community will not at present allow it."\textsuperscript{53}

It is unclear whether this opposition stemmed from a general sense that Latin was either too unnecessary or too rigorous to be required of women, or if the perceived demand was so slight that such a requirement might have hindered the seminary's growth, but given the attitude of the times, both of these considerations seem likely. Either way, the opposition Lyon faced must have been significant, as she was not one to shy away from what she considered an important issue and had demonstrated many times her willingness to engage in unconventional, or at least unconventionally female, behavior.\textsuperscript{54}

In the end, Mount Holyoke offered Latin as a supplementary subject, at extra cost, for most of its first decade, while Lyon did her utmost to encourage student interest. In the 1837-38 catalogue, she advertised Latin at the top of the page, ahead of both the required preparatory studies and the regular seminary course.\textsuperscript{55} Two years later, she went a step further, adding to her general endorsement the opinion that "[t]his is very desirable for all who expect to complete the regular course," and explaining that she hoped in the near future to extend the entire seminary course so as to include extensive Latin study. She concluded that "[i]t is hoped that the improvement of the pupils, and the expectation of friends will soon justify such an addition."\textsuperscript{56} According to historian Elizabeth Alden Green, Lyon championed Latin aggressively, "persuading students who had never considered it before that they really did want to study the subject."\textsuperscript{57} By 1840, with approximately one quarter of her students taking Latin, Lyon no longer minced words, proclaiming, "the study of Latin is earnestly recommended by the trustees and teachers. This is important, not only for the knowledge itself, but also as a means of gaining that mental discipline necessary to pursue to higher English branches with benefit."

In requiring Latin, Lyon laid claim to one of the traditional marks of college

\textsuperscript{53} MHFS catalogue, 1840-41, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{55} MHFS catalogue, 1837-1838, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{56} MHFS catalogue, 1839-40, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{57} Green, \textit{Opening the Gates}, p. 204.
education, hinting that a woman's education, like a man's, would not be complete without it, and expressing the hope that "parents, who expect to give their daughters a thorough and extensive education, will consider the importance of this subject, and make provision for their studying Latin." By 1845, Lyon felt confident enough to require at least elementary Latin for graduation, explaining that only when "thoroughly prepared" in the beginners texts of "Andrews' and Stoddard's Grammar, and Andrew's [sic] Reader," would students be permitted to "proceed to the study of the common classical works used in other institutions." Her efforts were very successful; only one year later she was able to make proficiency with those same beginners' texts a requirement for admission, not graduation.

In less than a generation, Mount Holyoke had strengthened its curriculum to the point where it equaled Amherst's in more subjects than it did not, and even surpassed it in a few. But despite those accomplishments, neither Mount Holyoke nor any other similarly excellent female seminary could successfully challenge the equation in most Americans' minds between "college" and "male," not so much because its curriculum lagged behind, but because of the specific subjects in which it did so. The United States at mid-century was a nation increasingly friendly to advanced education for women, but, by and large, one that still could not conceive of bestowing upon women the knowledge, the experience, or the symbolic cultural power inherent in a "real" college education. The college world was a fraternity all its own, a time-hallowed preserve of masculine identity, masculine knowledge, masculine privilege, and masculine society, where the elite white men who regarded leadership and public power as their birthright were trained. To either admit women to that fraternity or countenance their acquiring too many of its trappings was more than undesirable; it was inconceivable. Mount Holyoke might have been the best seminary in the antebellum United States, comparable and even superior in some ways to men's schools, but

58 MHFS catalogue, 1840-41, p. 8. I've inferred the approximate twenty-five percent from the 113 total students enrolled at the seminary and Lyon's statement in that year's catalogue that nearly 30 were taking Latin. Ibid., pp. 7-8.

59 MHFS catalogue, 1845-46, pp. 11-12.

60 MHFS catalogue, 1846-47, p. 12.
it simply came on the scene too early to be embraced as a college.

A generation later, in the 1860s and 70s, when first Vassar, and then Smith, Wellesley, and the other elite women's colleges, emerged, they were understood as something entirely new in women's education. The most obvious and important innovation was the curriculum itself. From the start, these were meant to be genuine women's colleges, not only offering the bachelor's degree, but offering to women students the same curriculum available to their brothers at the most prestigious men's institutions. Because college was so firmly understood as a quintessentially male experience, this determination to, in effect, create a "man's college" and offer a "man's education" to women was what made the elite women's colleges so immediately sensational. In particular, it was this sense of novelty that helped to establish and bolster Vassar's not-entirely-accurate reputation as the first woman's college.

Mary Sharp College, founded in Winchester, Tennessee in 1852, appears to have been the first woman's college truly worthy of the name. Its curriculum was based on those at Amherst and the University of Virginia, and it granted, after successful completion of a four-year course, the bachelor's degree. But Mary Sharp was also small, little known outside the South, and irreparably damaged by the experience and aftermath of the Civil War. Lacking resources and sufficient well-prepared students, it closed and reopened repeatedly for the rest of the century, finally closing its doors for good in 1896.

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61 Solomon, 24; As early as the 1830s, a number of women's educational institutions, primarily in the South and Midwest, had called themselves colleges. Some of them did eventually grow into true colleges—in terms of curriculum, quality of instruction and academic resources—but most historians agree that in the antebellum years (and, indeed, for most of the nineteenth century), these schools were essentially academies and seminaries, a few more or less on a par with the better northern schools, but most not. See Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, pp. 28-29. Farnham disputes this, arguing that many southern schools had as wide an array of subjects as their counterparts in the North and that the southern schools' emphasis on the fine arts should be counted in their favor, since it, in some ways, presaged the later emphasis on fine arts for all American college women. This argument, however, fails to take into consideration the ways contemporary Americans, both educators and the general public, conceived of what did, and did not, comprise a college course. See Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*.

Elmira College, founded in 1855 and accredited by New York State educational system, likewise predates Vassar. In her study of the elite women's colleges, historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz writes of Elmira that “[i]ts creators copied the design of Mount Holyoke so closely and had such modest resources, however, that the claim is tenuous.” Unoriginality of design, however, does not detract from Elmira's legitimate collegiate status, but Horowitz's larger point is important: because Elmira's general design so closely resembled the seminary model, and because it lacked the resources to truly make a splash or rival, in terms of faculty and equipment, the prestigious, older colleges, it did not strike the public as anything very unusual. Furthermore, unlike Vassar, Elmira did not market itself aggressively and thus failed to capture and hold the public's attention in the same way.

Vassar and the colleges that followed built strongly upon the accomplishments of earlier institutions and educators, but they were also genuinely innovative, and, critically, they had the funds other institutions had lacked, allowing them to project an air of permanence and to try and compete with the men's colleges. They also matched their bold plans with even bolder words, proclaiming themselves, loudly and convincingly, to be something entirely new in the world of women's education. The number of independent women's colleges and coordinate institutions—such as Hardin and Lindenwood Colleges in Missouri and Sweet Briar in Virginia, that would later conceive of and advertise themselves as the “Vassar of the West” or the “Vassar of the South,” attest to Vassar's unrivaled public prominence. That some of these schools, like Milwaukee-Downer College for Women, actually predated Vassar and then sought to, at the very least, channel its image, is even more telling.

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63 Taylor, pp. 36-38.
64 Horowitz, Alma Mater, p. 29.
66 For Milwaukee-Downer, see Henry Starkey Fuller, School: Devoted to the Public Schools and Educational Interest, published weekly by The School News Company, New York, vol. XXX, no. 38 (May 22, 1919), p. 399.
But if these new elite women's colleges were committed to their vision, they were also a little unnerved by their own radical aims. As Horowitz explains, Vassar's early leaders took great pains to construct college life in such ways as to protect and foster the gentility and femininity of their students, a plan meant to reassure themselves as much as the public, and these tactics were adopted and improved upon by the later colleges. Their dedication to women's intellect and right to equal education was wholly genuine, but, for the most part, they were not aiming to radically transform women's lives and social roles, nor could they be entirely certain that they were not, truly, opening Pandora's Box. The tricky task the colleges set themselves was to create institutions—in their physical and social construction, but especially in their curricula—that would combine the highest intellectual (i.e. "masculine") education with the best elements of normative American womanhood. It would not, as they quickly found, be easy.

Given the new colleges' entire raison d'être, the establishment of an extensive liberal arts course built upon a strong classical foundation was a foregone conclusion. In his 1863 "Report on Organization" to the trustees, Matthew Vassar wrote that students "must hold converse with the mighty minds of Greece and Rome...not only through the passages of history, but through the languages in which the choicest literature of the world is embalmed." At his inauguration in 1875, L. Clark Seelye, the first president of Smith, refused to debate whether or not the study of Greek was appropriate for women and said instead, "I would simply justify its place in our college curriculum upon the relation which it has had and ever must have to the growth of the human intellect. On this ground alone I maintain it must always be a prominent study." He added that he had "said nothing concerning the study of the Latin, because its place in female education is not so often

67 Horowitz makes this point about Vassar (Alma Mater, pp. 28-29), but her discussions of Wellesley and Smith make clear it can be equally applied to those colleges as well, see "That Beauty Which is Truth: Wellesley," pp. 42-55, and "To Preserve Her Womanliness: Smith," pp. 69-81.
disputed," but lest there be any doubt, reminded his audience that "[t]he two languages are so closely connected with human thought that the study of either cannot be omitted without serious loss in any institution which aims at the higher mental culture."69 A decade later, Bryn Mawr's first president, James E. Rhodes, made much the same point, explaining that Latin not only "is the mother of three of the great languages of Europe...and is largely incorporated in our own," but also "enters into scientific terminology," and as such "should retain a place in any scheme of collegiate education." As for Greek, along with its being a gateway to European culture as well as to intensive study of the New Testament, Rhodes invoked the honored place it had always had in higher education, saying "[w]e thus keep faith with those older colleges who...regard a knowledge of Greek as implied in that degree."70

Starting with its first class, Vassar applicants were required to command roughly the same amount of Latin as applicants to Amherst, and then continue with it for at least another four semesters. Wellesley students also had to pass an entrance examination in Latin. Its level of difficulty is unclear, but given how closely Wellesley's founder, Henry Fowle Durant, looked to Vassar for inspiration, the requirements were probably quite similar, and, as at Vassar, Wellesley undergraduates were prescribed a further two years of Latin study.71 Smith's entrance requirements in Latin were even stiffer, surpassing Harvard's and even rivaling Yale's, the college widely known to have the strictest and, as far as its critics were concerned, most old-fashioned admissions standards.72 Radcliffe opened in 1879 with a two-tiered system of entrance examinations so complex that deciphering the regulations should have been sufficient accomplishment for admission. Its Latin requirement was more lenient, but Radcliffe also offered a sort of advanced entrance examination, more on par with Smith's,

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70 Address at the Inauguration of Bryn Mawr College, by President Rhoads and President D.C. Gilman of the Johns Hopkins University, Bryn Mawr, 1885 (Philadelphia: Sherman & Co., 1886), pp. 11-12.


72 Horowitz, Alma Mater, p. 78.
which allowed a student to proceed directly to more advanced Latin study upon matriculation. Goucher, founded in 1885, had the same admission requirement in Latin as Smith but mandated only one year of further study. Barnard, founded in 1889 as a women's college within Columbia University, had identical Latin requirements, both for admission and graduation, as Goucher.

The story behind Bryn Mawr's entrance requirements is especially illuminating. The trustees initially set them at the level of Vassar and Wellesley, but M. Carey Thomas, who was Bryn Mawr's first dean and second president, and whose entire career was underpinned by the desire to prove that women possessed the same intellectual capacities as men, felt these were too low. Thomas drew a straight line between the standards of the women's colleges and their chances of rivaling the best men's institutions and bluntly told the trustees that Bryn Mawr had to match, and then triumph over, the accepted "masculine" standards if it was ever to be judged a success. She persuaded them to change their minds, partly by threatening to resign, and when Bryn Mawr opened in 1885, its entrance examinations looked more like Radcliffe's and Smith's.

As President Seelye had said in his Smith inaugural, the study of Latin had grown common enough for girls over the course of the nineteenth century that its place in the new women's college curriculum was less controversial than it would have once been. Greek,

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76 Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 194. Horowitz says that Thomas considered Smith's entrance requirements, as well as Vassar's and Wellesley's, to be too low and argued instead that Bryn Mawr imitate Radcliffe, but my own research indicates that Smith's and Radcliffe's standards were actually more similar than different. Thomas did not much care for Smith or its male-dominated faculty, which may have influenced her view of its standards. For Thomas's disapproval of Smith, see Finch, Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr, pp. 140-42.
however, was another story, and its implementation was less smooth and, in some quarters, less enthusiastic. Perhaps not surprisingly, Vassar, leading the way, had an especially difficult time. In his "Report of Organization," discussed above, Matthew Vassar made clear that he expected Greek as well as Latin to be among the required studies, but in the early years, Greek was merely optional. Given its time-honored place in the male college curriculum (Amherst, Harvard, and Yale all still required it both for admission and graduation), and Vassar's oft-professed determination to offer women the same level of education, this is a curious omission.\footnote{77 "Vassar Female College—Report on Organization, 1863," p. 5; "Catalogue. Vassar Female College, Poughkeepsie on the Hudson, 1865-66," MHS; The Harvard University Catalogue, 1875-76 (Cambridge: Charles W. Sever, 1875), pp. 42-44; Study of Latin and Greek, The Handbook Series, Lamar T. Beman, ed. (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1921), pp. 17-20.} That it was left out of the admissions requirement is one thing; in its early years Vassar was plagued with literally hundreds of applicants who were largely unprepared for college-level work, and given the paucity of Greek study at most girls' schools, Vassar may have anticipated that a Greek admissions requirement would present a problem. What is harder to understand is why elementary Greek was also omitted from the required course of study. It may have been that the trustees feared parental objection or a lack of sufficient student interest. Unfortunately the number of early Vassar students who elected Greek is unclear, but the course proved popular and the college eventually made it mandatory. But it is likely that the trustees were motivated to require Greek less because of student popularity than as a way of further distinguishing Vassar, in fact as well as in name, from female seminaries. As discussed above, as late as the 1880s, M. Carey Thomas was dismissive of Vassar's admissions standards, which continued to exempt Greek. It is not difficult to imagine that Vassar officials grasped that as long as it differed from Harvard, Yale, and the others, and graduated students with no Greek at all, many educators and members of the public would doubt Vassar's college \textit{bona fides}. In any event, things quickly changed, and by 1871 Vassar required not one but two years of college Greek.\footnote{78 "Catalogue. Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, 1871-72," p. 18-19, (MHS).}
affected the curricular decisions of the colleges that followed, but each new woman's college
did pay close attention to the experiences of its predecessors, and it is suggestive that, from
the start, the four colleges founded in the 1870s and early 1880s—Wellesley, Smith,
Radcliffe, and Bryn Mawr—all required Greek for either admission or graduation or both.
Given Vassar's difficulties, they might have gone another way, but they likely grasped just
how vital Greek's inclusion would be to establishing their own reputations, and that for the
time being, at least until the women's colleges were secure in their standing, it could not
prudently be omitted. Radcliffe's requirements were, not surprisingly, virtually identical to
Harvard's. As with Latin, Radcliffe students had to pass a somewhat elementary entrance
examination in Greek. They could then elect the more advanced Greek examination, and
thus enter college with more advanced standing, or they could wait until they had
matriculated, but either way, Radcliffe was determined that, by graduation, its students would
be as well-acquainted as their Harvard counterparts with Greek language, composition, and
prose.\textsuperscript{79} At Wellesley, Greek was an entrance prerequisite for more than a decade, despite the
fact that it complicated the admissions process enormously and was, apparently, quite
unpopular among much of the faculty and many of the trustees.\textsuperscript{80} Perhaps this accounts for
Wellesley's curious Greek requirement, which was the precise opposite of Vassar's: students
had to prove at least some facility with Greek in order to be admitted, but once enrolled,
further study was optional, and doubtless this was one of the reasons Bryn Mawr's M. Carey
Thomas thought so little of Wellesley's overall standards. Bryn Mawr did not require Greek
for admission (though it did Latin, French, and a third language of the student's choice), but it
was mandatory for graduation. The 1886 catalogue informed parents and prospective

\textsuperscript{79} Private Collegiate Instruction for Women in Cambridge, Mass., Courses of Study for 1880-81, pp. 8-9; 

\textsuperscript{80} Palmieri, \textit{In Adamless Eden}, p. 43. According to Palmieri, in the late 1880s, the Greek requirement was
one of the causes of contention between faculty factions. By 1890, the "New Guard" faction, led by
Wellesley's charismatic former president (and arguably most powerful trustee), Alice Freeman Palmer,
triumphted, and Greek disappeared as an admission requirement but remained an elective study. See
Palmieri, chapter 3, "The Perilous Transition within Wellesley's Academic Life."
students very bluntly that "[n]o student will be graduated who does not...possess a reading knowledge of Latin, French and German and some acquaintance with Greek." In fact, Thomas thought Bryn Mawr's standards were still not high enough, and was humiliated to learn that many of the Smith faculty felt "that Bryn Mawr could hardly be accounted a college at all since the entrance requirements...were so low." Given that Bryn Mawr's admissions process was anything but easy, and that Greek was the principal difference between the colleges, the power of Greek study to "make or break" a college's reputation was clearly very real.

Smith's admissions requirement in Greek was the steepest of all—rivaling Amherst's and apparently surpassing Harvard's—and was the precursor to further prescribed study. The college was proud of its high standards, and, as noted above, could be more than a little haughty about it, but this superiority came at a price: Smith's first class comprised a mere fourteen students—nobody else could pass the entrance examinations. The specific nature of the early admissions problems is unclear, but given the troubles all of the colleges had, and would continue to have, with Greek, it is safe to assume that Greek was the principal stumbling block.

In fact, however much that they were the colleges' most distinguishing characteristic and vital to their mission to provide the best liberal education for women, these daunting admissions requirements, and the rigorous courses of study to which they were the prelude, caused problems from the very start. There were simply not enough sufficiently and systematically prepared women students. This problem was most acute for the older colleges, but it would vex all of them to one extent or another. In an early history of Vassar, James Monroe Taylor and Elizabeth Hazelton Haight glossed over the fact that the college's early standards were not quite what they had promised to be by explaining that, with the chaos of getting the first real woman's college off the ground and the diversity of Vassar's

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82 Finch, Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr, pp. 140-41.
83 Horowitz, Alma Mater, p. 78.
first class of three hundred students, "no satisfactory entrance requirements could be set and
only a tentative course of study could be stated," but that within the decade, Vassar had
worked matters out and "a strong college curriculum was established and the entrance
requirements were on a par with those of the universities for men." 84

Taylor and Haight were not being entirely truthful, though their reluctance to admit
frankly that early college could not put its high standards fully into practice is
understandable. As we have seen, Matthew Vassar had made his wishes clear, and when the
college opened in 1865, among its requirements were extensive study in Latin and French
language and literature, advanced mathematics, English literature, ancient history, rhetoric,
physiology, geology, mineralogy, chemistry, botany, zoology, and mental and moral
Philosophy. Electives included calculus, "Federal and State Constitutions," logic, philology,
and political economy. 85 Clearly, Vassar did open with an extensive, thoroughly-planned,
advanced curriculum, but the students themselves were not ready for it. Of the 353 young
women who made up the entering class, Vassar's president considered two-thirds of them
unprepared for college-level work. Wellesley had the same problem when it opened a decade
later. In a "major disappointment" to the president and faculty, "of the more than three
hundred students who enrolled at Wellesley, only thirty passed the entrance examination." 86
Nor was restricting admission to only those truly prepared a viable option. Both colleges had
favored the "seminary-style" building model Mary Lyon had put into place at Mount
Holyoke, where, to maximize contact with (and influence over) students, and create a true
sense of family on campus, students and faculty all lived together under one roof. But unlike
Mount Holyoke's simple structure, Vassar and Wellesley had constructed lavish, imposing,
and hugely expensive central buildings. To fill those buildings and maintain the colleges'

operating budgets, full classes had to be admitted—however ill-prepared.87

Thus, "[b]ecause female seminaries did not offer adequate preparation," Vassar "was forced to do the work of a preparatory school."88 A few of the other colleges had to do the same. These departments were never meant to be permanent, nor were they intended to offer any sort of discrete secondary education (meaning it was expected that preparatory department candidates proceed as soon as they were ready to the collegiate course, as opposed to terminating their educations at the secondary level), but all found them humiliating and debasing to the college's actual collegiate standards.89 At Vassar, President John H. Raymond was especially concerned that the preparatory department was growing too popular, and that, in terms of resources and in the eyes of the public, it threatened to overwhelm the college itself. In 1876, he emphasized to the trustees that:

It should be settled clearly that Vassar College is not to be allowed to lose its position in the forefront of the movement for Woman's Higher Education...and that the preparatory department is no integral part of the institution, but an accidental appendage, to be continued only so long as it subserves the College...All this should be made clear to the public.90

Wellesley was able to do away with its preparatory department by 1880.91 Goucher, though two decades younger than Vassar, found itself in a similar position, with an early history of the college noting ruefully that "it was one of the defects of the new college that it was partly a preparatory school."92 But within two years, Goucher managed to physically separate the collegiate and pre-collegiate programs, assign them separate faculty, and have the preparatory program renamed the "Girls' Latin School." Preparatory students were not allowed to use the college library, and rules were eventually put in place mandating that any

90 John H. Raymond, "Report to the Board of Trustees, 1876," quoted in Taylor, Haight, Vassar, p. 67.
92 Knipp, History of Goucher College, p. 27.
Goucher College students who needed to make up certain requirements had to do so “under a tutor at their own expense,” rather than in the pre-collegiate department. By 1893, the two were separate institutions in all but name, and in 1902 the trustees were at last able to dissolve the last legal tie. However, a less formal, but more advantageous, association survived: the preparatory department grew into a highly respected Baltimore girls’ school, serving as a frequent “feeder” for Goucher in the years to come.

This need for preparatory departments underlined more than anything the bald fact that very few American women were prepared to embark upon as ambitious a course as the ones of which the elite women’s colleges dreamed. It is no coincidence that Goucher’s preparatory department became known as the Girls’ Latin School; it acquired that name because Latin was the subject in which so many of its students required remedial work. The colleges’ only other option was to hold fast to their preferred high standards and accept a tiny enrollment as a result. This was the path taken by Smith, but it was only able to do so because, unlike Vassar and Wellesley, it had invested less money in campus construction and housed its students in smaller, family-style “cottages,” instead of grandiose single buildings. With the need to fill all its beds less pressing, Smith had greater flexibility in its first years, and, more importantly, could forego a preparatory department. The fact that neither Radcliffe nor Barnard had dormitories in their early years, and that Bryn Mawr adopted Smith’s “cottage” system, enabled them to accept only students who were properly prepared, but the colleges’ leaders knew, no less than their counterparts at Vassar and Wellesley, that unless overall standards and access were raised for women’s secondary education, the problem of ill-

93 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
94 Ibid., pp. 60-61. To give just one example, of Goucher’s 1902 entering class, 32 out of 133 students came from the Girls’ Latin School, Knipp, p. 61.
95 Ibid., p. 58.
prepared applicants would not go away, hindering all of the colleges' potential for growth.\textsuperscript{96}

Also facing the colleges was the challenge of offering a program that would appeal to a large enough number of students to keep enrollments healthy, but that would also remain true to their high standards and commitment to a classically based liberal arts education. The general American college curriculum was very much in flux during the nineteenth century, with institutions grappling to reconcile new and expanding fields of knowledge with the traditional classical course, as well as a growing number of students who desired the prestige of a college education but wanted one with more practical application to "real" life. The elite women's colleges, many of whose founders, early leaders, and faculty came out of these very same prestigious men's institutions, understood that this was going to be their problem as well, but they also knew that they would have to move much more carefully than the men's colleges. If they were to convince the public of their truly collegiate status, they could not afford to deviate too much from the traditional curriculum, and instead agonized to create, with varying degrees of flexibility, courses of study that, they hoped, would offer the best of both worlds.

A common early strategy was that, instead of offering one rigorous and inflexible degree course, admittance to which was conditional on passing one equally rigorous and inflexible admissions examination, many of the elite women's colleges opted for a system of multiple degree courses—all equally difficult, but each with a distinct focus. Vassar adopted this technique very early on when it was trying to bring order to its masses of students, many of whom were not only ill-prepared but who also disliked the idea of studying subjects in

\textsuperscript{96} To some extent, this problem took care of itself. As the elite colleges grew in size, popularity, and number, more secondary schools took seriously the need to properly prepare applicants. Nor were the colleges and their alumnae idle. They developed partnerships with especially promising girls' schools and in some cases, as with The Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, helped found new ones. One of the first priorities of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, founded in 1882 and the forerunner of the American Association of University Women, was to work with secondary schools to facilitate the proper preparation and admission of talented students to the elite women's colleges. See Marion Talbot, Lois Kimball Matthews Rosenberry, \textit{The History of the American Association of University Women, 1881-1931} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931); Mary Dockray-Miller "Seven Sisters," in \textit{Historical Dictionary of Women's Education in the United States} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 364-66.
which they had little interest. Under this plan Vassar offered two courses of study leading to the bachelor's degree, the Classical and the Scientific, the former being quite similar to the traditional college course, and the latter being much the same, but with less emphasis on the classics, especially Greek, and more on the natural sciences and modern languages, especially German. This plan sounded good in theory, but from the start Vassar found that it did not work well in reality. Among other concerns, the same young women who were so often insufficiently prepared for college-level work seemed likewise incapable of making a mature and informed decision between the two programs. By the 1874-75 school year, Vassar had abandoned this plan, and settled instead on a single program that would be strictly prescribed through the first half of the sophomore year, and then allow increasing flexibility for electives.

Vassar's unsatisfactory experience did not deter all of the succeeding colleges from trying similar plans. Smith opened with three degree courses, Classical, Scientific, and Literary, and seems to have maintained this approach until just after 1900. But Smith also required all students, regardless of their chosen track, to pursue the same program in their freshman year—Latin, Greek, mathematics, botany, ancient history, French, English grammar, biblical studies, and physiology and hygiene—and had hefty common requirements for the remaining three years as well. In fact, by graduation, Smith students had pursued courses of study that had more commonalities than differences, and the multiple degree courses resembled a series of electives more than discrete plans of study. When Goucher opened in 1889, it offered no less than four degree programs—Classical, Modern Languages, Natural Sciences, and Mathematics. Barnard offered a single degree course (though with

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100 The Smith catalogues discuss the three courses through 1879, when either the separate courses or merely the descriptions of them, disappear for a few years, reappearing in the mid-1880s and disappearing for good after 1904, when Smith decided to offer a single bachelor's of arts. Smith College Catalogues. Five College Archives Digital Access Project.
101 Smith College catalogue, April 1876, pp. 3-4.
increasing flexibility) for its first seventeen years, switching to separate degree courses in Science and Arts in 1906.103 Bryn Mawr, on Thomas' urging, bypassed the multiple courses in favor of a more sophisticated "group system" adopted from Johns Hopkins University, "a compromise between the elective system...and the traditional classical curriculum."104 The group system allowed Bryn Mawr students a small amount of leeway in their studies—primarily the ability to study more of what they wanted rather than less of what they did not want—but there was no respite from the traditional college studies.

Smith and especially Bryn Mawr were exceptionally strict in these years. Typically, the non-classical courses allowed students to reduce the required amount of Latin (either for admission or graduation or both), and often to bypass Greek all together. Thus a candidate for Goucher's Natural Science degree could omit the otherwise prescribed six credits of Latin (though the subject was still required for admission), in favor of a minimum of fourteen credits in the sciences. Likewise a student on the Modern Languages track, who would otherwise be required to have one year of Greek for admission and another in the freshman year, could instead be admitted with two years of either French or German, and then double the freshman year's regular modern language requirement.105 It is important to note that when Goucher excused certain students from some or all of the classical requirements, those students were typically required to compensate not with an equal number of credits in other subjects, but with a greater number of credits. This seems to have been the case at many of the other colleges as well. When Mount Holyoke transitioned to a college course in 1888, its admissions requirements to the regular, classically based, program included Latin, Greek, and either elementary French or elementary German. Applicants to the scientific course were excused from Greek, but had to make up for it with extra work in modern languages.106

These repeated curriculum revisions and complicated admissions and degree

103 Robinson, The Curriculum of the Woman's College, p. 50.
105 The Woman's College of Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland, 1889, pp. 13-14.
requirements were the results partly of growing pains and partly of a broader trend in the academic world toward both greater regulation and greater flexibility. For the colleges, the revisions were an endless source of frustration and often conflict. When Wellesley drastically reworked its curriculum in 1890—reducing requirements in Latin, dropping prescribed Greek entirely, and making room for the growing social sciences—faculty hostility and infighting was such that the embattled president rejoiced that she was term-limited. As the curriculum was always something of a work in progress, none of these issues would ever really fade away, but these growing pains were exactly that, growing pains, and the colleges' presidents, administrators, and faculty understood them as such. They did not lead them to question their mission or lower their standards, but rather to persevere until they had both the curriculum and the caliber of students they desired.

A further indication of the colleges' rapid success is that, even as they spent the first generation—the 1860s, 70s, and 80s—trying to work the kinks out of their system, other schools were watching closely, and many followed decisively in their footsteps. Mount Holyoke expanded into a college in 1888, operating as the "Mount Holyoke Seminary and College," for four years and then closing the seminary entirely. This transition was fueled by a number of factors, but pressure from alumnae—who looked at the growth and success of Vassar, Wellesley, and Smith, and desired to recast their seminary in that mold, was especially fierce. Mary Lyon had always wanted Mount Holyoke to be a college, but in 1837, constraints of practicality and custom had mitigated against this; fifty years later, the example of the elite women's colleges had shown that, finally, the time was right. Mills Seminary in Oakland, California, traveled a similar path. Founded in 1852 and run for decades by a Mount Holyoke alumna, Susan Tolman Mills, who shaped it closely in the image of her alma mater, Mills added a college course to the existing seminary in 1885, and then, when finances and student preparation allowed, phased out the seminary department between 1906 and

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Agnes Scott, in Decatur, Georgia, was much younger, founded as a seminary and grammar school in 1889, but its leaders had collegiate ambitions from the start and carefully planned the school's program with one eye on the future and the other on its academically prestigious neighbors to the northeast. Agnes Scott's administrators' systematic plan was to eliminate each elementary and secondary class as soon they had produced enough students qualified for more advanced work. The plan worked with astonishing speed: Agnes Scott received its college charter in 1906, and discontinued its preparatory program in 1913—less than twenty-five years after the school's founding.\textsuperscript{109}

Not all of the colleges' curriculum growing pains had to do with the classical curriculum and how much or little of it was appropriate to a modern, women's liberal arts college. The position, or lack thereof, of the fine arts gave them headaches too. In the second half of the nineteenth century, coursework in the fine arts slowly but steadily became more common in many leading American colleges—Amherst offered a course on the "Philosophy of Art: Architecture, Poetry, Painting, Sculpture, Music, Oratory" as early as 1865.\textsuperscript{111} In a climate of growing curricular flexibility and focus on electives, these additions were not particularly earth-shattering or noteworthy. To be sure there were traditionalists who bemoaned the dilution of the classical curriculum, because these courses were fairly few in number, and because they were academic, rather than practical, in their makeup, they did not detract from the colleges' reputations.

The matter was not so simple for the women's colleges. For them, the fine arts had long associations with traditional, more "decorative," forms of female education, associations that they did not especially want to encourage. Not only had the "decorative" accomplishments dominated elite women's education for centuries, those days, even in the

\textsuperscript{110} For Agnes Scott's founding and rapid development, see J.R. McCain, The Story of Agnes Scott College, 1889-1939 (Decatur: Agnes Scott College, 1939).
\textsuperscript{111} Amherst College Catalogue, 1865-1866, p. 18.
late nineteenth century, were not so very far in the past. There were fears that such coursework, understood to be non-academic and “feminine,” would “demean” the serious liberal arts study of the modern college, and, most dangerous of all, undermine the colleges’ mission to give women the best education possible. As Horowitz observes, “Those who wanted to distinguish institutions of collegiate grade from the seminary either had to eschew education in the arts, establish it on a different basis, or...add them to a full liberal arts curriculum.” Complicating matters further, many of colleges did not have the luxury of a clean slate with which to approach the issue—several of them already had in place practical courses, usually in art, music, or painting—and had to come up with ways either to incorporate them more satisfactorily into the liberal arts program or eliminate them entirely. Underpinning all of this was the thorny issue of “womanly” coursework itself, whether the elite colleges should leaven their prized liberal arts programs with more traditional, “womanly,” accomplishments, and whether doing so would further their mission or betray it.

As mentioned above, “decorative” or “ornamental” coursework had a long history in women’s education. Oftentimes it, rather than the inclusion of greater academic study, distinguished the elite girl’s education from that of her less privileged sister. Many of the early seminaries included it, either because they believed it helped constitute a rounded education, or because such work would render their schools more attractive to parents, or both. Many female educators considered such courses to be a necessary evil, that is, they took time way from “serious” work, but the extra fees they commanded were a vital source of income. Mary Lyon disliked ornamental studies, but from its earliest years, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary offered supplementary instruction in vocal music, and eventually in piano as well—one of the few ways in which it resembled other contemporary seminaries. After receiving its college charter, Mount Holyoke continued to offer extracurricular practical coursework in art and music, but seems to have distinguished between these and actual elective studies. Elective courses in painting and music were available only in the junior or

112 Horowitz, Alma Mater, p. 84.
senior year, and paired practical work with lectures and examinations on theory and history.\textsuperscript{113} Matthew Vassar’s 1861 plan mentioned the importance of “[a]esthetics, as treating of the beautiful in Nature and Art,” and early Vassar students were required to take one arts class per semester \textit{in addition to} their regular coursework.\textsuperscript{114} Matthew Vassar and his colleagues believed in the importance of a well-rounded education, but doubtless they also saw how fine arts work might increase the college’s appeal—such recognizably “feminine” work, tempering the rigorous liberal arts course, was likely a reassurance to many parents still vaguely discomfited at sending their daughters off to receive a “man’s education.”

At Wellesley, which was founded very much in Vassar’s image, “Instruction in music, drawing, and painting was offered,” but, these classes were optional, kept in a separate category from electives, and apparently not counted toward degree credit.\textsuperscript{115} Nor should they have been, as the music course, at least, was initially established as purely practical. According to Horowitz, “a music course consisted of mastering an instrument...musical theory and history did not form part of the music curriculum.”\textsuperscript{116}

Smith, which had, at the outset, the most purely classical course, initially made little provision for the fine arts.\textsuperscript{117} This changed in 1880, but only because the college needed a way to increase tuition revenue without lowering academic standards. President Seelye was implacably opposed to opening a preparatory department, and instead created two separate schools of music and art. The intent was to keep the college students and the art and music students as separate as possible, and “Smith did not integrate these studies into the collegiate curriculum...Rather, Smith created two largely autonomous schools, with their own program

\textsuperscript{113} MHFS catalogue, 1838-39, p. 9; 1845-46, p. 11; Mount Holyoke College catalogue, 1890-91, pp. 30-31; for Lyon’s dislike of ornamental subjects, see Arthur C. Cole, \textit{A Hundred Years of Mount Holyoke College: The Evolution of an Educational Ideal} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), p. 64.

\textsuperscript{114} Robinson, \textit{The Curriculum of the Woman’s College}, p. 9; \textit{Historical Sketch of Vassar College, founded at Poughkeepsie, N.Y., January 18, 1861} (New York: S.W. Green, 1876), p. 5.

\textsuperscript{115} Robinson, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{116} Horowitz, \textit{Alma Mater}, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Smith College Circular}, June 1877, p. 11. According to the 1879-80 circular, “during the four years there will be given to all the students a series of lectures upon Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, and Household Decoration,” which were required but apparently not for degree credit, p. 11.
and their own diminished entrance requirements.\textsuperscript{118} As anticipated, enrollment and revenue rose, and as a result, the college was able to attract more and generous donors, but Seelye seems to have developed doubts about his own scheme almost immediately, worrying that the presence of any kind non-collegiate course on campus was enough to undermine Smith's identity as a liberal arts college. Nor was the task of keeping the college and the art and music schools entirely separate as easy as Seelye had hoped. By the 1890s, art or music students could enroll in regular college courses, provided they met a number of requirements; especially gifted applicants were permitted to substitute their credentials in music or art for one of the otherwise required academic fields. To a faculty and administration still touchy about Smith's academic standing among the long-established, prestigious men's colleges, such a side door into the college was a very real cause for concern.\textsuperscript{119}

The real problem with these special or supplementary classes was their unclear relationship to the rest of the college course. Were they there to offer women students a dose of artistic, and reassuringly "feminine," culture, or were they principally a source of extra income catering to students otherwise uninterested in or even unprepared for a genuine college course? Even at Smith, where the schools of music and art were not intended for the undergraduates at all, the college had been unable to keep them from mixing. As the years passed, concerns grew stronger that, like the preparatory departments that had so vexed institutions like Wellesley and Goucher, such programs were holding the colleges back from becoming—and becoming accepted as—"true" liberal arts colleges on the model of Amherst or Williams. Increasingly, the question became how to keep the fine arts—popular with students and parents regardless of the colleges' qualms—without allowing them to weaken the colleges' academic \textit{bona fides}.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the answer had become clear: if the colleges' intent was to offer to women the best liberal arts education available, then they must put all

\textsuperscript{118} Horowitz, \textit{Alma Mater}, pp. 213-14.

\textsuperscript{119} Smith College catalogue, 1890, pp. 24, 27. See also Smith catalogues, 1895, 1899.
of their energies to that end. Students who were unprepared for or uninterested in college work belonged elsewhere and should be phased out, and any “satellite” programs, such as Smith's music and art schools, brought to an end. At most of the colleges, the multiple degree courses would be collapsed into one course, culminating in the bachelor of arts. At the same time, the colleges would bow to the contemporary belief that least some knowledge of the fine arts belonged in a woman’s education, but they would provide that knowledge in their own way, thus arts courses were reorganized into academic departments, with practical work fully anchored in scholarly preparation. Smith’s “Art 3: The History of Decorative Art” included a practical component but also a broad survey of Western art from Classical Greece to the Victorian era. At Mount Holyoke, the art history offerings grew from one course in 1890 to seven in 1899, practical work in art was laden with heavier academic requirements, and a stricter division was made between the study of music—which comprised history and theory as well as technique—and lessons in music, which continued to cost extra.

In a 1903 address at Mount Holyoke, Smith’s President Seeleye congratulated the two colleges for their success in integrating the fine arts into their curricula, and hinted at the delicate balance required to offer a college education that was both collegiate and womanly:

It is to the credit of Mount Holyoke and Smith, that they have assigned an honorable place in the college curriculum to these important subjects, and aim to teach them in accordance with academic requirements, not in an elementary and superficial way, but as thoroughly as the other studies with which they are coordinated....It would seriously detract from collegiate training for women if it gave them no opportunity to cultivate musical or artistic talent, or, the opportunity being given, a stigma and restraint were placed upon the culture by allowing it no consideration in the work necessary for an academic degree.

The elite women’s colleges were able to blend the fine arts into their curricula because they accepted that such subjects could be taught in an appropriately academic

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120 Smith College catalogue, 1900-01, p. 57.
121 MHC catalogues, 1890-91, p. 30; 1899-1900, pp. 33-35, 50-51.
manner. It helped too that some of the most prestigious men's colleges were also slowly incorporating them into their programs, signaling that the fine arts had shed enough of their traditional associations with shallow, "decorative," female education, to be worthy of a place alongside the liberal arts. By asserting that subjects such as art and music required theoretical as well as practical knowledge, colleges and universities made them "safe" for liberal arts study. As subjects worthy of "serious" scholarship, the fine arts were, at least theoretically, no longer gendered, allowing the women's colleges to include them without compromising their curricula with remnants of the old "feminine" education. Subsequent efforts to incorporate further "womanly" studies into the curricula would not fare quite so well.

The liberal arts, and especially the classical subjects at their core, symbolized not only knowledge, but knowledge that had for centuries been the almost exclusive domain of men. By arguing that women could, and should, study the ancient languages, immerse themselves in classical history and philosophy, and discipline their minds with advanced mathematics, the elite women's colleges made their boldest foray into the male world of the college, laying claim to its symbols and cultural cachet, just as much as the learning itself. That the nineteenth century witnessed a protracted decline in the primacy of the classics at the leading men's colleges, just as women were finally making some gains with it, is ironic but also ultimately irrelevant. Some scholars have pointed to this decline as evidence that what the elite women's colleges did was not so very aggressive or transformative after all. But such analyses ignore the continued cultural status and power that classical learning conferred, and the early leaders of the women's colleges, as well as their students, well understood the symbolism. Men's colleges could afford to deemphasize the classics and to

123 Farnham argues that the decline of the classics in the male colleges renders the lack of them in most southern women's colleges unimportant. But she misses the continued cultural significance of the classical curriculum as well as the tremendous symbolism of offering it to women. See Farnham, chapter 1, "What's in a Name? Antebellum Female Colleges," in The Education of the Southern Belle.
experiment widely with new subjects, because their claim to collegiate standards, and their students’ right to pursue collegiate studies, was not in question. But as long as women were shut out of the very subjects that had defined higher education for centuries, their education and their intellects would continue to be deemed inferior. In explaining the tremendous symbolic importance of Greek in the women’s college curriculum, an early history of Barnard College put it very well, “Greek was the intense intellectual excitement of Barnard students—the secret garden of the mind—the knowledge that separated the college woman from the school girl.”

This statement could easily be applied to the classical curriculum as a whole. By not only offering but requiring the traditional, “masculine,” course of study, the new women’s colleges signaled unmistakably that they were breaking new ground.

Thus the liberal arts curriculum was more to the elite women’s colleges than just the content of their course catalogues and their reluctance to alter it more than a stubborn attachment to the past. A rigorous classical course may not have been the only thing the new colleges had to offer if they were to make good on their claim to be academically superior path breakers, but it was the essential component. This they had to have. A liberal arts education was a badge, proof that women had successfully pushed themselves into the academic world and, more broadly, into the intellectual world of men.

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Chapter Three

“Totally Ignorant of the Things They Should Know”: Domestic Science, Professional Training, and “Womanly” Education

“As long as the colleges don't break women of being women, the damage they do will not be unsupportable.”
—Life, June 15, 1899.1

“There is no doubt that the average girls’ college would be more useful to girls themselves and to American domestic life in general if the practical components of a woman's life entered a little more into its curriculum.”
—The Ladies’ Home Journal, May 1900.2

“The most backward educational institutions in this country today are women’s colleges. They are worse than primary schools. They are dealing with stuff that never counts in life. In fact, they content at Vassar, which is typical of other women’s colleges, that the further you get from real life and usable knowledge the more cultured you become.”
—F.M. McMurray, Columbia University, 1913.3

The curriculum of the elite women's colleges was controversial as early as the first generation, and criticism grew more rather than less strident in the third generation, but it was the second generation, the years between 1890 and 1920, in which the issue was truly decided. Though discussions of the pros and cons of “womanly” coursework continued to

1 Life, 33, 84, June 15, 1899 (APS online), p. 502.
3 “Churchmen, Scientists,” Los Angeles Times, September 21, 1913 (APS online).
flare up from time to time, most notably in the 1920s and the years following World War II, by 1917, not only had the colleges had largely made up their minds about “feminizing” their programs, but the general public had also become quite set in its opinion of the colleges as purveyors of impractical and unfeminine education. The curriculum debate in this generation was thoroughly dominated by the nascent discipline of domestic science and whether or not the elite women’s colleges would accept it into their curriculum, and also influenced the colleges’ sense of the futures for which they were, and perhaps more importantly, were not, preparing their students. The ways in which they negotiated these issues reflected a growing sense of social as well as academic elitism, a deep suspicion of anything that could be labeled “women’s work,” and the distinctions they drew, perhaps unconsciously, between vocational (skill-based) and professional (academically-grounded) training. The decisions the colleges made in these years would have long consequences for the their subsequent development and for several popular and influential stereotypes about them. By digging in their heels, refusing to forsake the liberal arts, spurning the notion of a “womanly” education, and appearing to countenance and even encourage women’s incursion into the professions, the colleges increased their appeal to the American upper classes, allied themselves, however inadvertently, with the burgeoning feminist movement, and appeared to reject deeply held cultural beliefs about women’s “natural” role and responsibilities.4

Curriculum issues, and the endless, often contentious debates they engendered, were more than enough for the colleges to have on their plates in these years, but they were also confronted with the reality that the general tolerance with which they had been treated in the past was beginning to slip away. By the end of the nineteenth century, social factors were

4 The terms “domestic science” and “home economics” are not interchangeable, though they have often been used that way. By 1909, a refined version of domestic science had been renamed “home economics,” but the discipline’s founder, Ellen Swallow Richards, came to prefer the old name, apparently feeling that it more accurately reflected her original vision. By the 1910s, “home economics” had become more common, and was used by colleges such as Agnes Scott, Goucher, and Mills, but many contemporaries retained the term “domestic science,” even when discussing departments or programs specifically called “home economics,” and vice versa. For simplicity’s sake, I treat the terms as synonymous, and alternate between them as the sources dictate. For more on the discipline and its terminology, see Sarah Stage, “Home Economics: What’s in a Name?” in Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of Profession, Sarah Stage, Virginia B. Vincenti, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 1-13.
making some people increasingly skeptical of the idea of liberal arts education, or at least exclusively liberal arts education, for women. The concurrent emergence of domestic science, coupled with the colleges', first perceived and then actual, rejection of it, made it all the easier for critics to accuse them of hostility toward normative womanhood, and to point to other colleges that did accept domestic science as preferable alternatives.

From the very beginning, of course, the women's colleges had had to confront the charge that the classically based liberal arts education they offered, so strongly associated with male college education, would somehow "unsex" the young women in their care. Historically, academically minded women had been ridiculed as "bluestockings" or "strong-minded," undesirable to be sure but essentially harmless in small numbers. Though the women's colleges, as institutions that could serve as virtual factories for such women, had raised plenty of eyebrows in their early years, they had managed to assure the general public—or at least enough of it to balance out the skeptics—that they were no danger to normative womanhood, that, in fact, advanced education would produce ideal wives and mothers. However, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the notion that the women's colleges were dangerous after all began to pick up steam.

The expectation that the educated woman would use her education to the benefit of the nation had always been at the heart of the mainstream American (i.e., white, native-born, broadly middle-class, and Protestant) support for women's higher education. In the years following the American Revolution, this belief had been at the heart of "Republican Motherhood," and the need for educated mothers to nurture virtuous, citizen-sons had fueled a tremendous surge in educational opportunities for white women. In the antebellum era, Mary Lyon had linked women's education with the diffusion of both Anglo-American

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5 The term "bluestocking" originally referred to a group of prominent, intellectually-minded women in eighteenth-century London, and evolved into a commonly-used, more general and unflattering appellation for scholarly women. According to Mary Kelley, in the nineteenth-century United States, "any woman who commanded the same learning as a college-educated male risked the label 'bluestocking.' It was said that bluestockings were ostentatious. They were conceited pedants. They were heartless blues," Mary Kelley, Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, Williamsburg, VA, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 99-100.
Protestant mores and political power across the American continent. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the founders of the new women's colleges relied principally on a democratic defense of women's higher education, maintaining that it was un-American to deny the higher learning to interested and capable women, but they were also always quick to invoke the beneficent influence of the educated wife and mother. In effect, a deal had been struck with American women, or rather those women privileged enough to access advanced schooling: education in exchange for maintaining the (white, middle-class) American way of life.

At the turn-of-the-century, this responsibility took the particular form of increasing the white, Protestant, birthrate. Just as they had in the antebellum era, the culturally dominant white, native-born, Protestant, middle class—the same class from which the vast majority of women's college students was drawn—believed its political and cultural hegemony to be under attack. Census takers reported that not only had the birthrate of the white upper and middle classes fallen consistently over the course of the 1800s, but also that immigrants and other non-white ethnic groups were having substantially larger families. The unprecedented number of immigrants entering the United States in these years, mainly from eastern and southern Europe, combined with their markedly higher birthrate, was changing the political demographics of American cities, especially in the industrialized Northeast and parts of the Midwest.

White elites could, and did, speak out against immigration and deplore the growing political and economic influence of non-white Americans, but they also looked within their own communities for both a scapegoat and a solution, and, increasingly, they turned their attention to the educated women of the middle class. Theodore Roosevelt popularized the term "race suicide" to describe the ways in which native-born whites were neglecting their duties to their "race," and white women's apparent desire to postpone or forego childbearing in order to pursue their own selfish, individualistic ambitions seemed the worst manifestation of all. When, starting in the 1890s, a series of studies appeared, confirming that not only did
college-educated women have fewer children than their non-collegiate sisters, but that alumnae of the elite women's colleges had fewest of all, the “race suicide” theory found its star villain.

To many proponents of the “race suicide” idea, the women's colleges were guilty of more than encouraging students to pursue paths seemingly incompatible with marriage and motherhood—sufficiently terrible though that was. As historian Louise Michele Newman explains, by the late nineteenth century, many native-born white Americans had embraced a social and pseudo-scientific doctrine that argued that the Anglo-Saxon “race”—from which the American ruling class descended—occupied the top rung of the evolutionary ladder. This perceived racial superiority was used to justify and explain the United States’ embrace of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as account for Anglo-Saxon dominance (however threatened) at home. The sharply differentiated physical characteristics and gendered behaviors of men and women that, in theory, defined the white middle class, were the key to their racial superiority, and because they believed that “‘primitive’ men and women exhibited far fewer sexual differences between them than did 'civilized' men and women,” the differences between them had to be monitored and protected in every area of life. As Newman explains, “to eradicate sexual differences between civilized men and women would mean the de-evolution of civilization back into a less advanced society.”6 As long as white women did their racial duty (in the form of childbearing to be sure, but also by not interfering with the necessary differences between the sexes), the continued progress of the Anglo-Saxon “race” was assured.7 Any deviation from this model, anything that might propel white women from the safety of the domestic realm and into the rough, male, world of politics and industry, anything that might encourage white women to take on customarily masculine roles and behaviors, was a threat both to the “race” in general and to its hegemony

7 Ibid., p. 17.
The actions of native-born white women were vital to the maintenance of their class' privileged position, but at this critical moment, or so it seemed to many observers, the elite women's colleges were leading these same women down a very different life path. In fact, far from educating future mothers of the "race," the colleges seemed implicated in most of the unnerving changes in the lives of middle-class white women. And for no change were they deemed as responsible as the phenomenon of the "New Woman."

It is hard to exaggerate the impact the "New Woman" had on turn-of-the-century American society. Historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's description of her is worth quoting at length:

The New Woman constituted a revolutionary demographic and political phenomenon. Eschewing marriage, she fought for professional visibility, espoused innovative, often radical, economic and social reforms, and wielded real political power. At the same time, as a member of the affluent new bourgeoisie, most frequently a child of small-town America, she felt herself part of the grass roots of her country. Her quintessentially American identity, her economic resources, and her social standing permitted her to defy proprieties, pioneer new roles, and still insist upon a rightful place within the genteel world. Repudiating the Cult of True Womanhood in ways her mother ...never could, she threatened men in ways her mother never did.

The New Woman was most associated with the same white, Protestant, native-born, middle-class that had articulated a code of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and identified its basically patriarchal social system as the hallmark of advanced civilization, yet judging from most of her behavior, she seemed, at least on the surface, very much at odds with that mentality. The New Woman would not be confined to the domestic sphere. With her enhanced education, she invaded the professional world. Physically active and sporty, she rode a bicycle—often wearing shorter skirts, bloomers, or even breeches—and claimed for her own a share of the public world of men. Along with shaking off many aspects of

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traditional patriarchy, the New Woman had dangerously liberated herself from many of the
dictates of Anglo-Saxon civilization. At the very least, she was a troubling iconoclast. At
worst she endangered Anglo-Saxon hegemony at home and American power and prestige
abroad. And for all of this, disconcerted "Anglo-Saxons" knew exactly where to place the
blame: "[w]e identify the New Woman most directly," Smith-Rosenberg argues, "with the
new women's college."10

This is no exaggeration. A variety of cultural factors combined to produce the
phenomenon of the New Woman, and while not all New Women attended a woman's college,
or even attended college at all, these cultural factors overlapped with the elite women's
colleges at virtually every turn. Much of what so troubled conservatives about the New
Woman, and that seemed at odds with and at times directly undermining the tenets of Anglo-
Saxon civilization, could be traced, directly and indirectly, to the women's colleges and
communities and ideologies they fostered.

The declining birthrates of white, middle-class, college-educated women may have
laid the groundwork for the race suicide debate, but more was at issue than just
demographics. Compounding the problem, and in a way, adding insult to injury, were the
avenues many of these highly educated women pursued in lieu of conventional domesticity.
By the end of the nineteenth century, white women had made slow but steady inroads into a
variety of professions, such as medicine and the law, and were integrally involved in
developing new ones, such as social work. The movement of women into the professional
world—and thus their further encroachment upon what had been virtually exclusive male
territory—signaled another national sea change and another area over which white, native-
born men seemed to be losing control. As with the New Woman in general, not all of these
professional women were college-educated and among those who were, many had attended
co-educational institutions, but, as with so many other changes, the woman's colleges were
disproportionately identified with this development because of their well-publicized stance

10 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis," p. 245.
on women's right to an equal education and because they tended to receive more attention as a general rule. Accurately or not, by 1900, the growing numbers of professional women and the women's colleges which produced so many of them were very much linked in the public imagination. With so much riding on the actions of white women, the education of this female elite could not be too closely monitored. Seen in this light, the reasons behind the increased turn-of-the-century scrutiny of the women's colleges, and especially of their curriculum, become more clear.

One of the earliest public responses to the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, published before the school even opened, was the prediction that its curriculum would undermine "all which is most attractive in female manners."\textsuperscript{11} More than six decades later, in 1904, Mount Holyoke's president, Mary Emma Woolley, observed, "Two questions are very familiar to those who are interested in college training for women; the first is, —'Does college unfit a woman for home life?' and the second, 'Do college women marry?'"\textsuperscript{12} Founders and administrators had taken great pains to construct campus environments that would "protect" students' femininity and reassure the public, and in the early years, the outside world—whether worried parents or just interested members of the public—did at least recognize and appreciate the efforts undertaken to balance the "masculine" curriculum with an appropriately feminine environment, even if some critics felt that such precautions did not go far enough.\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps more importantly, very few American women had access to higher education in these years and fewer still attended one of the new women's colleges. Those who did were principally depicted in the press as either exceptionally gifted scholars (and thus already outside the female norm) or, more commonly, as future teachers who


\textsuperscript{12} Mary E. Woolley, "Values of College Training for Women," \textit{Harper's Bazaar}, vol. 38, no. 9, September 1904, (APS online), pp. 0-4.

\textsuperscript{13} See Horowitz, \textit{Alma Mater}, especially chapters two, "More Lasting than the Pyramids," five "To Preserve Her Womanliness," and six "The Advantages of the So-Called 'Cottage System.'"
wished to bolster their credentials. As teaching, up to a certain level, had gained wide acceptance as a woman's profession during the nineteenth century, such ambition was not seen as untoward or unwomanly. Skeptics may or may not have been convinced by the colleges' assurances that a well-regulated and properly feminine environment would prevent the "masculine" curriculum from "masculinizing" women students or prejudicing them against a woman's customary life, but if most of these women were already understood to be inclined to a different life path, to be what might be called "outliers," then perhaps the college curriculum did not really matter. Either way, the tiny number of college-educated women was itself insurance against the fear that higher education would cause widespread disruption to women's expected life path.

But the scope and influence of the elite women's colleges did not remain at this stable, comfortable, level. The colleges grew significantly between 1865 and 1890, and a noticeable number of their alumnae were not sticking to "acceptable" life paths. Many graduates opted for a profession rather than matrimony, and more and more of them were pushing beyond elementary and high-school teaching into male-dominated fields. Not only, as discussed in chapter two, did the "masculine" curriculum grow in popularity, as existing women's seminaries like Mount Holyoke and Mills upgraded their programs to bring their standards into line with the colleges, but at the same time, the first formal organization of college women, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (ACA), was positioning itself as the ultimate arbiter of what constituted higher education for women, and its leaders came down heavily on the side of the liberal arts. Founded in 1881 to provide a community for women graduates, who, due to their small numbers, often found themselves very isolated in the "real world," and dedicated to the twin goals of improving women's education and expanding their postgraduate opportunities, the ACA grew rapidly in size and influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and eventually absorbed similar organizations like The Western

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15 See Solomon, chapter 8, "After College, What?"
Association of Collegiate Alumnae and The Southern Association of College Women. The forerunner of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), it fully embraced the curricular model at the elite women's colleges, and from the beginning withheld its endorsement of new institutions until they brought their programs in line with them.

The catalyst of the general public's change in attitude toward the elite women's colleges, from skepticism and tolerance to concern and hostility, was the rapid and very visible increase in the overall numbers of women entering college. Between 1870 and 1900, "the number of females enrolled in institutions of higher learning multiplied almost eightfold, from eleven to five thousand...and the number of women as a percentage of all students rose from 21 percent to at least 35 percent." By 1900, women enrolled in coeducational institutions outnumbered those in single-sex colleges by more than 2 to 1, but, as was typical, most public discussion of the matter focused on the women's colleges. This growing popularity forced the realization that higher education for women was no longer a phenomenon limited to a very small number of eccentrics, whose academic ambitions might be odd but were not likely to make a significant change to American life. Advances in women's education had been tied very obviously to women's expanding professional opportunities, and by the time it became clear that neither trend was receding, both were very much identified with the elite women's colleges.

If, as suggested previously, the general public had been prepared to tolerate unconventional education for some women because they understood many of those women to be already unconventional, the skyrocketing number of college women would have been somewhat troubling. To those who believed that the liberal arts curriculum did indeed have the potential to "unsex" women, it followed that steps had to be taken to prevent it from "masculinizing" more and more young women. Others, who did not see the liberal arts

17 Ibid., pp. 67-68.
18 Solomon, p. 58.
curriculum as dangerous in itself but did consider it essentially irrelevant to women's domestic futures, began to worry that large numbers of young women were now wasting important years memorizing "the rudiments of a dozen uncomprehended sciences" and gaining "familiarity with protoplasms or the Semitic tongues," as one worried mother put it, when what they really needed to know was how to run a household, raise children, and look after their families in times of illness and distress.\textsuperscript{19} In other words, now that the typical college woman had changed, her education had to change as well.

Aggressive and mean-spirited public statements were fairly rare in the pre-war years, but discontent was still very much on display. In 1899, a prominent Boston clergyman, condemning the women's colleges, remarked that "the average college course causes a woman to become a blue stocking," and so isolated her from the rest of society that "she does not accomplish the good which she ought to do."\textsuperscript{20} The following year, a blistering piece in the \textit{Ladies' Home Journal}—a frequent critics of the colleges on this score—argued that, "in their anxiety to develop her brain as fully as that of man, [they] forget the woman's life which is inexorably placed before her, and do not fit her for its inevitable work." The colleges, the author contemptuously continued, "cover every branch of knowledge from the language spoken by the Ninevites to the measurement of the gnat's foot," but, she concluded, "I know of no college for women in which nursing, cookery or any of the practical arts which she will need hereafter as wife or mother can be learned."\textsuperscript{21} Another article that same year opined, "Deplorable, then, is the fact that at not one of our five most prominent women's colleges in the East has the domestic science course been as yet introduced."\textsuperscript{22}

Criticism was not limited to the opponents of the women's colleges, their friends, too, voiced many grievances. One 1894 article charged firmly that "Domestic Science belongs to the so-called higher education, and perhaps no education of any college or university open to

\textsuperscript{19} "Is a College Education the Best for our Girls?" \textit{LHJ}, vol. XVII, no. 8, July 1900 (APS online), p. 15.
\textsuperscript{21} "Is a College Education the Best for our Girls?" \textit{LHJ}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{22} "Three Thousand Sensible Girls," \textit{LHJ}, May 1900, vol. XVII, no. 6 (APS online), p. 16.
women can be regarded as complete unless it has met or is preparing to meet this importunate need."\(^2\) \(^3\) Five years later, another article, "The 'Home-Life Ideal' and College Manners," praised the elite colleges and their graduates but hinted that the education they provided was not all it should be, noting, "because our college-bred women are our hope and pride...we of the older generation are so anxious to see them trained in the best possible way. When they return to their homes, and find the life there narrow and uninteresting, we feel that there is something wrong in the college training which we would fain have set right."\(^2\) \(^4\) Students themselves were very much aware of the stereotype and could be sensitive about the implication that college women were by default poor housekeepers.\(^2\) \(^5\)

The press, and especially the women's magazines, weighed in frequently on the issue. These voices tended to praise the colleges and their graduates for their academic achievements, but then quickly followed such compliments with the concern that female students were not learning what they really "needed" to know. This was the attitude of clergyman Samuel A. Dike. In an 1892 article titled "Sociology in the Higher Education of Women," Dike wrote that rapid changes in American life—he singled out upheavals in "[m]arriage, divorce, chastity, children, the domestic economy...the family and its various functions in the complex social order, the place of woman in reference to the family, and in the industrial, political, and educational activities of society"—meant that, more than ever before, women needed to exert a positive influence on society. He understood that after so many generations of exclusion from higher education and even the informal study of certain subjects, many women would clamor to master the "male" curriculum, but he also had faith that "[o]nce having escaped from the traditional limitations which have deprived her of comradeship with educated men, the womanly nature will plead anew for its own rights."

Lamenting how few courses could be found at the elite women's colleges that related in even

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\(^2\) \(^5\) Mabel Francis Tilton, "Culture Courses in the Curriculum," Smith College Monthly, December 1907, p. 163.
the most tenuous way to domestic economy or family life, he called for “a new class of studies touching sociology, and those specific subjects that are more intimately related to the life of women and their work in society.” Until they did so, the elite women’s colleges must give up their pretensions of offering women the most advanced education available.26

The publisher of Good Housekeeping magazine was of a similar opinion, writing to the students and alumnae of Mount Holyoke that while impressed that the “women’s colleges have given to their students a thorough training in almost everything that goes to make a thoroughly equipped woman,” he was disappointed to note that, “they have failed to give them what to my mind is more important training that shall fit a woman for wifehood and motherhood.”27 In 1902, the Chicago Tribune praised the newly founded Simmons College for its stated determination to balance the liberal arts course equally with studies of a more practical nature, emphasizing its unique status among women’s colleges, and suggesting that Simmons would come to be favorably compared with institutions such as Smith and Vassar.28

Seven years later, an article in The North American Review observed rather sharply, “The large colleges for women would naturally be expected to take the lead in introducing the study of domestic science, instead of being forced into line by public opinion...But so far Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr, Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, and Mount Holyoke have stood conspicuously aloof from the battle waged in behalf of household science.”29

As a general rule, the elite women’s colleges and their supporters rejected the notion that they should use the actual college course to prepare students for domestic futures. After reading the abovementioned article in The Atlantic, Smith president L. Clark Seelye politely declined to enact most of its suggestions, explaining to the Reverend Dike, “I agree with you that we cannot afford to lose the differentiation between the sexes...but it seems equally

27 George D. Chamberlain, “To the Alumnae and Students of Mount Holyoke College,” 27 May 1899, Mount Holyoke College Archives, (MHC).
important that in our efforts to differentiate we do not begin to restrict and specialize so widely that...the intellectual life is hindered in its normal development.” In any event, he assured Dike, such a move was unnecessary as “[t]he feminine characteristics...can be secured by the proper organization of social life rather than by a differentiation in the studies which may be pursued.”

Seelye, as historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz explains, had always “based his advocacy of women’s higher education on a ringing defense of the liberal arts.” To him, college was meant “only to develop the mind and spirit. Just as a man might enter law, a woman might marry, but the college prepared for neither.” His colleagues at the other elite colleges largely shared this view that sex distinctions belonged to social, rather than academic, life. In 1900, John Franklin Goucher, president of the Woman’s College of Baltimore (later Goucher College) agreed that “[a]ny method of education which has a tendency to transform either women or men into weak imitations of brilliant substitutes for the other is narrowing and inadequate,” but he denied that liberal education could be so damaging. In fact, a broad, cultural education and “such intensive work as will add to her discipline” should be the college woman’s ideal. Most of the colleges had strict rules meant to instill and safeguard conventional femininity; female faculty, especially in the early years, “felt the pressure on them to be accommodating and conventionally feminine.” Some colleges had even designed their campuses with an eye to keeping students involved in town life, so their “masculine” studies might be balanced by continued exposure to a world in which sex differences and gender-specific roles were unchallenged.

But for the colleges to concede that sex differences were so important as to mandate a specific “womanly” curriculum was another matter entirely. In an 1898 address to the ACA, Vassar professor Abby Leach opened by saying, “I am no believer in sex in education, having

30 L. Clark Seelye to Dr. Samuel A. Dike, 4 November 1892. L. Clark Seelye Papers, Series II (SC).
31 Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, p. 73.
biology as to be largely invulnerable to societal forces. But by the end of the nineteenth century, new ideas were emerging that warned that sex differences could be undermined by daily behavior and that social institutions had a responsibility to shore those distinctions. In this environment, the more that the elite women’s colleges clung to the “masculine” liberal arts, the more fuel they provided to their critics. They could have saved themselves a lot of trouble by adopting more “womanly” subjects, or at least more openly and graciously experimenting with them. But by and large the colleges held firm, even as they were accused of irreparably harming their students and American society as a whole, and ceding their cherished reputations as cutting-edge educators of women to institutions more mindful of preserving distinctions between “male” and “female” education.

The key to this curricular intransigence was the rarefied place held by the liberal arts curriculum within the world of the university and the years of struggle the women’s colleges had undergone to meet traditional collegiate standards. As discussed in chapter two, the liberal arts, and especially the classical studies of Latin, ancient Greek, and higher mathematics, had historically epitomized “true” higher education, education from which, traditionally, even the most privileged women were typically excluded. The same fierceness and determination with which the elite women’s colleges had constructed their curriculum in the first generation, including their painstaking efforts to bring it, and their students, truly up to collegiate level, was at work in the second, with the colleges constantly scrutinizing every detail of any new course of study and refusing to surrender the primacy of the liberal arts.

But if the colleges’ thorough understanding of the symbolic meaning of the liberal arts was the most important element of their reluctance to alter their curricula, they had other very weighty reasons as well. The colleges, many people argued, would not have had to forsake the liberal arts in order to establish a program more in line with women’s supposed needs. There was, after all, no reason why they could not simply add a few “womanly” courses to the curriculum and keep the focus on the liberal arts. But this too the elite colleges largely refused to do and their unwillingness to compromise on the issue was a critical
moment in their evolution. By the early twentieth century, they had come to view any kind of self-conscious “woman’s” curriculum as inherently dangerous to all they had already achieved as well as at odds with the public image they wished to present. The diffuse new discipline of domestic science fell victim to both these concerns.

The elite women’s colleges had been skeptical of domestic science from the start. Matthew Vassar had included its forerunner, domestic economy, in his original plan for the college, but such a course failed to materialize. According to historian Mabel Newcomer, “The prospectus of 1865 explained that practical work was not feasible for so large a group,” but that some sort of supplementary study, combining readings and lectures, would be offered. This too failed to appear and the college made no other substantive concessions to the idea of a “woman’s” curriculum until the twentieth century. Newcomer does not give a reason for this omission, but her discussion suggests that the faculty and advisers involved, including Vassar’s early presidents, were simply not interested. Vassar’s first president, Milo P. Jewett, resigned before the college actually opened, but his influence remained considerable, and while he was an enthusiastic reformer of women’s education, his plans did not include domestic education. Furthermore, there was criticism in the press as early as 1865 about this lack, but it did not move the administration or the trustees to any action. Their aim was to offer at Vassar an education equal to that at the best men’s colleges, and the subsequent elite women’s colleges followed suit. The evidence that survives implies strongly that they saw “womanly” coursework as, at best, an awkward fit, at worst, a rejection of their self-appointed mission.

Though the idea had been floating around since the early nineteenth century under the label of “domestic economy,” domestic science as a college discipline did not emerge in

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earnest until after the Civil War. Responding to a national clamor for a better educational system and one fit to train Americans for the industrial age, the Morrill Land-Grant acts of 1862 and 1890 led to the establishment of state-funded agricultural colleges and industrial education programs within larger, existing, universities. At the same time, according to historian Sarah Stage:

training in domestic skills, considered the equivalent practical education for girls, began to gain adherents by the 1870s. The decade witnessed a proliferation of courses in cooking and sewing. The land grant colleges of the Midwest led the movement by creating departments of domestic arts and science; in the East, cooking schools became popular.

Domestic science was from the start a diffuse field, endlessly flexible as well as vulnerable to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. A 1907 article in Harper's Bazaar complained, "In the world at large, the more or less fixed idea seems to be that the terms domestic science, domestic economy, household science, home economics, and the like are but elaborate titles for cooking and sewing." By the turn of the twentieth century, a group of women sought to refashion the movement in such a way as to expand its reach from the private to the public sphere, make it more relevant to the lives of educated women and, ideally, to increase college women's access to the professions. Spearheaded by Ellen Swallow Richards, a Vassar alumna and instructor of Sanitary Chemistry at M.I.T., this new movement—eventually termed "Home Economics"—was meant to "train educated women for household and institutional management" and, ideally, to "professionalize home economics and mold it into a career track for college-educated women."

42 For the subject's numerous incarnations, see, Stage, "Home Economics: What's in a Name?" in Rethinking Home Economics, p. 5.
44 Stage, "Ellen Richards..." pp. 24-25.
At its core, domestic science was about creating professional opportunities for women and, like Catharine Beecher's domestic economy before it, gaining for women's traditional work the same respect accorded to male professions. To Richards and her colleagues, domestic science, properly executed, would be rooted in considerable academic training and take its rightful place as one of the social sciences—itself an area of study gaining new prominence and influence at the turn of the twentieth century. But establishing domestic science as a field worthy of academic study and a fit companion for the liberal arts proved a difficult task.

At many institutions in the Midwest, West, and South, where the subject, in its earlier, less rigorous and more practical incarnation, had been popular, at least some aspects of Richards' vision were embraced and quickly assimilated into the existing curriculum. The subject was especially popular at the state-funded industrial colleges or normal schools, where it was often depicted as the female equivalent of agricultural training for men.45 Moreover, as Karen Graves explains in her examination of girls' schooling in the Progressive Era, by the 1910s domestic science had become a strong presence in the secondary school system as well, particularly for African-American girls.46 For those already doubtful of domestic science's intellectual rigor or application, these developments probably only increased their skepticism.

By the 1890s, it had become common for public, western and midwestern universities to criticize the eastern colleges' aversion to domestic science. College newspapers frequently disparaged the "frivolous education" that flourished in the east, and "heralded the opportunities for more practical and substantial education offered at land-grants."47 In 1903, President R.H. Jesse of the University of Missouri encouraged all institutions of higher

45 For the expectations and greater popularity of domestic science in the West, see Andrea G. Radke-Moss, Bright Epoch: Women and Coeducation in the American West (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008) pp. 141-45.
47 Radke-Moss, p. 145.
learning that admitted women to offer some general coursework in "household economics, embracing something of cooking and sewing...and much of marketing, home economics, sanitation, household decoration...[s]omething of sociology, of industrial history, and of the economics of consumption is essential." Jesse's vision nicely encapsulated the discipline's eclectic mix of practical and academic subject matter as well as the confusion over whether it was meant to prepare students for private or public life. Anticipating the objections of many colleagues who believed their programs would be degraded by such an addition, he emphasized, "this instruction would be general, becoming exhaustive at no point...Six hours' credit for such courses would not impair the quality of the Bachelor of Arts degree," and if certain colleges simply could not stomach the practical aspects, they could, "omit the cooking and sewing, but give the rest of the work."48

Jesse's comments were typical of those coming from the land-grant colleges and universities, but private institutions, particularly the elite women's colleges and the schools consciously imitating them, remained skeptical. In their 1912 explanation and defense of home economics, Isabel Bevier and Susannah Usher conceded, "A certain stigma has always attached to work in Home Economics" and that "The stickler for the classics has found it exceedingly difficult to believe that...training in Home Economics, reduced to its lowest terms, was not duly represented by baking and millinery."49

These reproaches and defenses of domestic science were often aimed directly at the elite women's colleges, which remained unconvinced of the subject's academic merit and were for the most part reluctant to even experiment with it. Individual professors could, and did, incorporate elements of the new discipline into their courses, stressing the practical applications of various subjects, especially as they related to the home or to women's more traditional public endeavors, like charitable work. This approach seems to have been

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especially common in certain chemistry, sociology, and economics courses, and was acceptable to faculty, students, and parents. But enshrining domestic science as its own department alongside more established disciplines like Latin, history, and philosophy was a very different matter.

It was not just that domestic science was new and untried that rendered it unappealing. Other new disciplines were emerging in the late nineteenth century and were much better-received by the women’s colleges. In spite of criticism that depicted them as academic dinosaurs uninterested in new pursuits of knowledge, by the early 1900s, the colleges had not only embraced subjects like economics, psychology, and sociology, but had prominent members of these fields among their faculty as well. In years to come the social sciences—among which domestic science was supposedly numbered—would prove very popular majors at the colleges. Free of other associations, domestic science might have eventually found its niche in the curricula of the elite women’s colleges, especially by the early twentieth century when most serious academics had conceded women’s intellectual equality and it seemed to some people less critical that women continue to prove themselves by mastering the classical curriculum. What damned domestic science’s chances just as surely as its quasi-academic status was its connection with the movement for a distinctly “womanly” college course and its association with traditional “woman’s work.” For the elite colleges, it was not enough to simply “omit the cooking and sewing,” as President Jesse had suggested; the problem was that domestic science evoked images of cooking and sewing to begin with.

Given that a true and publicized embrace of domestic science by the elite women’s colleges—as opposed to the occasional course of a similar nature discreetly tucked away within existing departments—would have done much to placate critics, the colleges’ ultimate rejection of the discipline merits analysis. Coursework in domestic science, even of an abstract nature and aimed at professional as well as personal life, would have been a
considerable counterweight to accusations that the women's college course imposed a masculine education, devalued women's traditional work, and turned out bluestockings unfit to keep house. The colleges' attitude was based on four overlapping factors: a refusal to accept domestic science as a discipline on par with the liberal arts, fear that domestic science's close identification with traditional "woman's work" would jeopardize the advances in women's education for which the colleges had fought so hard, concern that the subject, even in its most "academic" applications, too closely resembled vocational training, and finally, a largely unspoken but definite sense that domestic science simply did not accord with the refined image that the colleges increasingly wished to project.

Domestic science supporters worked hard to establish the academic credentials of their movement, but had mixed success and, when it came to the elite women's colleges, little success at all. Not only did the elite colleges largely reject it, in 1905 the ACA ruled that home economics qualified as practical training and did not belong at the undergraduate level, and thus "neatly sidestepped controversy over the intellectual rigor of the subject and instead reinforced the conclusion that home economics had become too specialized for a liberal arts program." The influential ACA had not exactly negated the intellectual merit of the subject, but it had not endorsed it either, providing the elite colleges with more ammunition against it.

The struggle over where to include home economics in Melvil Dewey's influential Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) illustrates both the reluctance of many social scientists to accept it into their field and the extent to which home economics' association with "women's work" and its status as a "woman's field" hindered its acceptance as a "serious" discipline. Between the publications of the sixth edition of the DDC in 1899 and the seventh in 1911, advocates of home economics as an academic discipline to be taught at the college level, sought unsuccessfully to move the classification of their field from "useful arts" to the more academically prestigious "sociology." Dewey was a supporter of the home economics movement and deeply interested in the field, but he ultimately declined to alter its

50 Stage, "Home Economics...", p. 8.
Dewey’s reluctance to tinker with his system was well known, but, in their discussion of the classification dispute, Anne M. Fields and Tschera Harkness Connell suggest that he was also affected by “tensions within the discipline itself about the placement of home economics within the curriculum, especially at the postsecondary level” and by the fact that women-dominated home economics departments “faced nearly insurmountable obstacles in avoiding second-class status.” As long, it seemed, as the subject's own proponents could not agree on what precisely their field was and, just as importantly, as long as it was taken less seriously than the male-dominated sciences, Dewey was going to err on the side of caution.

Dewey’s decision had lasting consequences for home economics’ status as an academic discipline, but it likely did little to influence the elite women’s colleges, most of which, by the first decade of the twentieth century, had already made up their minds. If M. Carey Thomas’s statement that “There are...not enough elements in cooking and housekeeping to furnish a very serious or profound course of training for really intelligent women” was particularly blunt, it was nonetheless an accurate reflection of her colleagues’ feelings. When, in 1916, Smith's second president, Marion L. Burton, toyed with the idea of creating “Sophia Smith University,” and suggested to a select group of faculty and alumnae that adding a separate “School of Practical Arts”—along the lines of the schools of Art and Music that his predecessor had instituted and then rejected the previous generation—might be a useful way to both increase revenue and placate critics, alumna Caroline Bourland responded that she would need reassurance that any separate schools required “work of a true college grade and character,” and wondered, a trifle snidely, “Can this be the case with a School of Practical Arts? Are practical baking and laundry work ever academic?” But

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52 Ibid. pp. 252, 254.


"natural" responsibilities for which they needed special collegiate training. From there it seemed a short, slippery slope to arguing that women should not study the liberal arts at all, and then to renewed claims that they were not capable of doing so. For a generation of educators who had fought hard for women's equal education, as well as some in particular who were committed to expanding women's professional access, that simply would not do. The leaders of elite colleges were not yet agreed on just what their ideal was for the college-educated woman, but they did know her intellectual and educational equality was part of it. To institute a "woman's" curriculum, even if its academic bona fides could somehow be firmly established, would be to endanger their own raison d'être, jeopardize everything they had already accomplished, and render themselves much like other, less prestigious women's colleges. M. Carey Thomas spoke for them all when she said, in 1901, that there was "but one best education," and that it was up to their colleges to ensure that women had access to it. If domestic science had a future—and the movement did have friends, even within the elite colleges—it was best to keep it as a specialized, post-collegiate, professional course—far away from the women's colleges, and somebody else's problem.

The case for domestic science was further hindered by the subject's association with practical household work and its growing popularity with state-funded colleges and universities. Although the popular image of the elite women's colleges as bastions of wealth and privilege has been overstated, their students, especially by the 1890s, were typically somewhat more affluent than their counterparts at public institutions, and, according to Sarah Stage, "Domestic science suffered both from its confusion in the public mind with household skills, deemed nonacademic, and from its association with the agricultural colleges of the Midwest (presumed inferior to eastern schools)." Moreover, an "overwhelming majority of women attending coeducational land-grant colleges before 1915 were enrolled in home

These associations tended to reinforce each other, at once impugning the academic fitness of the subject and hinting that an embrace of domestic science might undermine the social standing, as well as the academic standards, of the highest-ranking women's colleges. This would have been an unwelcome enough prospect in the 1860s and 70s, when the colleges catered to a genteel but solidly middle-class population. By the turn of the twentieth century, the demographics at the colleges were changing. Though still broadly middle-class, more students hailed from wealthy backgrounds and sharper class distinctions on campus were on the rise. The decidedly unfashionable, even "homespun" reputation of domestic science, however unfair or limited, clashed sharply with this new elitism.

The fate of Mary Lyon's famous domestic work requirement at Mount Holyoke—first instituted in 1837—can be used to further illustrate this point. Assigning a small amount of weekly housework to each student, the policy was meant to save the money and, by keeping tuition low, enable students of lesser means to enroll. The purpose was never to teach domestic skills, though the requirement was sometimes represented that way in the press and inaccurately repeated by historians. By the late 1880s, as Mount Holyoke transitioned from a high-grade seminary to an accredited college, it began to relax that requirement and allocate most housework to professional housekeepers, and in 1914 the requirement was abandoned completely. The reasons behind this decision were complex, but that the custom was essentially at odds with the college's evolving ideal for women's higher education seems

59 Rima D. Apple, "Liberal Arts or Vocational Training?" in Stage, Vincenti, Rethinking Home Economics, p. 80.
62 On page 204 in the Historical Dictionary of Women's Education in the United States there is a reference to the "first organized program in domestic education" at Mount Holyoke in 1837. For an early refutation of the "misapprehension that young ladies go to Mount Holyoke to learn methods of house-work," see Emily Florence Paine, "The Woman's Colleges of the United States—No. 6, A Girl's Life and Work at Mount Holyoke," The Delineator, vol. XLIV, no. 4, October 1894, p. 498.
hygiene, describing it as "lectures, recitations, and practical investigations of the principles of house sanitation." It also mentioned an elective for juniors and seniors that included "the microscopic study of tissues, experiments in physiological chemistry, and frequent dissections," and noted that Vassar suggested certain biology courses as good preparation. A course in food analysis was open to those who had completed quantitative analysis and organic chemistry. Finally, the report pointed to coursework in economics and sociology that domestic scientists felt were representative of their field.67

This same report congratulated Wellesley on its required "Elements of Hygiene" course, which focused primarily on "the proper care of the body" and "a practical knowledge of its structure," but also included "a useful outline...of the general principles of public hygiene." Smith and Bryn Mawr, too, were credited for their attention to "physical culture." But none of these colleges, the report made clear, could hold a candle to Boston's Simmons College, which had been founded for the domestic and professional education of women.68 Mount Holyoke was not included in the report, but in 1902 it had added a course to its Department of Physiology and Hygiene that featured a lecture from Ellen Richards herself on "The Efficient Woman, the Woman of the Twentieth Century."69 If not full-scale domestic science, physiology at the very least was considered by people like Ellen Richards to be an important part of the movement. In fact, the women's colleges played a large role in the development of physiology in both its first stage focused on personal and public hygiene and its later development as an academic science.70

Given this vague definition of domestic science and the fact that the colleges did not pursue identical paths it is hard to make hard and fast assertions, but some general

68 Ibid., p. 217. The elite women's colleges were actually pioneers in physical education at the college level, largely because of the nineteenth century fears about the effect of intense study on the female bodies. See Margaret A. Lowe, Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
observations may safely be offered. First and foremost, with only a few, short-lived exceptions, the elite women’s colleges refused to create separate departments, whether called domestic science or home economics, and this decision, in turn, affected the development of the subject, or lack thereof, at ambitious institutions aiming to cast themselves in the elite colleges’ mold. However, if the colleges were institutionally hostile to the discipline of domestic science or to any kind of “womanly” curriculum, individual faculty members were often more willing to experiment, and a significant number of students and alumnae thought the subject would be an excellent and long overdue addition to the curriculum. But this experimentation was largely confined to late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries. With only a few, usually short-lived exceptions, the colleges kept domestic science at arms’ length and by the 1910s, they had made up their minds: domestic science was not for them. Any lingering coursework or other classes that might be associated with it were either discontinued, safely secluded in existing departments and weighted down with significant academic prerequisites, or otherwise moved into the new, and infinitely more genteel, departments of Fine Arts. One consequence of this decision was a significant strengthening of the colleges’ reputations for social elitism and a “masculine” course of study that failed to outfit women for their “proper” role in life.

Among the so-called “Seven Sisters,” Wellesley seems to have gone furthest down the path of publicly embracing domestic science, at least early on. Marion Talbot—an Ellen Richards protégée and eventually the key proponent of home economics at the University of Chicago—was hired in 1890 specifically to teach a course in domestic science. According to historian Patricia Ann Palmieri, Talbot’s course, “Although it was rigorous—knowledge of chemistry and physics was a prerequisite—the course met with little faculty enthusiasm.”71 Following Talbot’s departure in 1892, the course remained listed in the college catalogue for

another four years, but it was asterisked to indicate that it was not actually offered, and after 1898, the entire department disappeared permanently.\textsuperscript{72} By the turn of the century, the idea of domestic science as its own department seems to have faded, but at least some people at Wellesley had not entirely given up on the subject. In 1902, Katherine Coman, a professor of history and political economy, called for the addition of domestic science as an elective at all of the women’s colleges, assuring skeptics that “Domestic science is only the application of sciences, of sociology, psychology, physics, chemistry, biology, to the problems of the home. It is by no means a matter of cooking and sewing alone.”\textsuperscript{73} Between 1906 and 1918, periodic courses were offered in the chemistry department—especially “Food Analysis”—that might have been considered “domestic science.” But, true to the colleges’ mutual determination to maintain their academic standards and prioritize the liberal arts, all of these classes, however “practical” some of their applications might have been, were open only to students with a significant grounding in chemistry.\textsuperscript{74}

Goucher also briefly had a department of Home Economics, created in 1917-18 by its autocratic president W.W. Guth. A college history claims that it was a popular major for two years, but shortly after its sole instructor, college physician Ruth Wheeler, took a position elsewhere, “the department was disbanded, and the only direct survival is a course in nutrition given in the department of physiology and hygiene.”\textsuperscript{75} Goucher’s department encompassed a variety of courses ranging from “Textiles” and “Design” to “The Present World Food Situation” to “Home Economics Education,” but, as at Wellesley, it seems to have been under the control of just one professor and did not long survive her departure—leading one to wonder how deep Goucher’s commitment really was. Enrollment numbers in home economics courses between 1917 and 1921 suggest a growing popularity—at its peak,  

\textsuperscript{72} From emails from Jane Callahan, Assistant Archivist, Wellesley College Archives, 18 May 2010, 20 May 2010.
\textsuperscript{73} Katherine Coman, to the \textit{Boston Transcript}, quoted in \textit{College News}, vol. 1 no. 17, Wellesley, MA, 27 February 1902, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{75} Knipp, \textit{The History of Goucher College}, pp. 415-16.
in the 1919-20 academic year, approximately twenty-eight percent of Goucher students took at least one home economics course, but the program was clearly interdisciplinary and a large number of courses were applicable to it. It is also unclear how many students were enrolled in multiple courses or merely sampling in the new department. Either way, home economics as its own discipline did not last long at Goucher and if its decline was lamented, evidence to that effect has not survived.

Agnes Scott College’s experience with home economics is both interesting and telling, given the extent to which it closely modeled itself on the elite women's colleges. Founded as the Decatur Female Seminary in 1889, Agnes Scott's administrators and faculty had collegiate ambitions from the start. Its early leaders were not necessarily interested in duplicating the northeastern women’s colleges (though their frequent likening of their curriculum and facilities with those of their northern neighbors suggests that neither were they averse to the association), but they were determined that their school should eventually be seen as their academic equal. Agnes Scott based its own curriculum very much of those of the elite colleges and acquired early on a reputation for strict, and strictly adhered to, admissions standards, requiring Latin, as well as English, mathematics, history, French, and German, while still a seminary.

In 1907, Agnes Scott received its college accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in the Southern States—an organization founded by southern white women, many of them graduates of the North's elite women’s colleges, to improve and regularize women’s education in the South. It was the first woman’s college in Georgia so accredited, and only the fourth in the South after Goucher, Randolph Macon Woman’s College, and Sophie Newcomb. Its curriculum for the 1906-07 academic year

76 From emails with Kate Daniels, Library Associate, Goucher College, 21 February 2011, 24 February 2011.
77 For Agnes Scott’s early aspirations, see “Aims and Ideals,” in J.R. McCain, The Story of Agnes Scott College: 1889-1939 (Decatur: Agnes Scott College, 1939).
79 Corley, pp. 165, 172n.
provides an interesting look at what college officials may have considered necessary to pass muster and transition from a seminary to a college. The ancient and modern language requirements remained tough, course offerings in mathematics and science became more advanced and were bolstered by newly-procured laboratory equipment, economics and sociology continued to grow, and physiology and hygiene was taught by a graduate of the Medical College of Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{80}

When Agnes Scott was accredited, it offered no work in domestic science, but only four years later, it established a department of home economics. Explaining in the July 1911 \textit{Agnes Scott Bulletin} that the course “must not be confused with the Domestic Science of the High School,” the college sought to assure parents that the subject could be offered without the college “sacrificing its high standard of culture.” The administration made it clear that “This does not mean any backward step in the higher education of women,” and that “a number of educators of the highest standing have expressed approval and endorsement of the action of Agnes Scott in offering the course of Home Economics.”\textsuperscript{81} This defensive tone would indicate that the college’s new direction was controversial, and the wording of the announcement hints that Agnes Scott may have been under some pressure, possibly from its trustees, to make this decision. The college explained that the new department “will tend to justify and commend the college to thousands of parents and to connect the college in the most practical and closest way with many future homes.” And, most tellingly, the announcement emphasized, “The movement to offer college courses in Home Economics to our young women is very strong.” The same bulletin contained the text of a speech made by the College’s chancellor two months earlier in which he expressed his pleasure that home economics was to be offered by Agnes Scott and stated bluntly, “I see no reason why any college for women should exist which neglects it.”\textsuperscript{82}

Agnes Scott’s home economics majors were classified as students in the “science-
mathematics” subject group. The program seems to have had components aimed at homemaking, public health, and teacher training. According to historian Frances Fleming Corley:

The courses included Foods (production and preparation, and their nutritive and economic value), Household Chemistry (‘for practical use in a woman’s home’), Household Sanitation (considering furnishings, refrigeration, household wastes, and the ‘relation of the house to the health of the city’), and Nutrition and Dietetics... In the Advanced Foods course, recipes and comparatives costs of foods were considered. A course for secondary school teachers, discussing Home Economics curricula and equipment, was also offered. In 1914 courses in bacteriology and Methods of Teaching Home Economics were also offered.83

Agnes Scott dedicated an entire campus building to home economics and seems to have gone to some cost and trouble to suitably equip its laboratories and secure well-qualified instructors. Given this outlay, as well as the vehemence with which the college defended the new course, it is rather remarkable that Agnes Scott dissolved its home economics department after only five years. In 1916, evidently with little fanfare (at least there was no comment in the campus newspaper), “Home Economics was phased out because of Agnes Scott’s continual emphasis on strengthening more purely academic and intellectual subjects.”84 As at other colleges, certain courses survived in other departments. Bacteriology was moved to biology while “Household Sanitation” was split in two, its public health component moving to chemistry and its emphasis on household furnishing reborn in the art department. The euphemistically titled “Food Production and Manufacture,” along with dietetics, disappeared completely.85

Brief though it was, Agnes Scott’s 1910s flirtation with home economics is instructive. The department’s short life span, along with the college’s defensive tone when introducing it and the apparent lack of student reaction to its demise, indicates at the very least a lack of strong commitment. If this was indeed the case, Agnes Scott—which was, like

83 Corley, p. 192.
84 Ibid., p. 193.
85 Ibid.
most women's colleges, perennially short of funds—would have found it untenable to
continue to support an unpopular program. Furthermore, Agnes Scott's administrators never
made a secret of their determination to match the academic standards and offerings of its
prestigious northern neighbors, and by the mid-1910s, officials at colleges like Vassar and
Wellesley had made their feelings on the matter clear. Moreover, the same racial and class
biases that weakened domestic science's chances in the elite northern women's colleges were
surely also at work in the South, and were perhaps even stronger. Public women's colleges
and normal schools in the South, for both African-American and white women, had long
offered practical instruction in areas such as dressmaking, cooking, stenography, book-
keeping, and by the 1910s were adding courses to their programs explicitly designated as
"home economics" and were graduating increasing numbers of students trained as home
economics teachers.86

Many of the South's other private, white, women's colleges seem to have shared
Agnes Scott's lack of enthusiasm for domestic science. Randolph-Macon Woman's College,
founded in 1891, also deliberately modeled itself on the northern women's colleges and spent
the 1890s and early 1900s working hard to bring its curriculum and the quality of its students
up to par. One example of the strength of the northern colleges' influence came in 1893 when
Randolph-Macon introduced its first courses in psychology. Many southerners evidently
found this to be an unnecessary or inappropriate topic for women, but the college defended
its decision in part by emphasizing that Wellesley and Bryn Mawr had already done the same.
Randolph-Macon does not appear to have even experimented with domestic science, though
it is possible that similar coursework was tucked away in one of the usual departments—
chemistry, physiology, economics, or sociology.87 In 1914, South Carolina's Converse

86 The South's two private African-American women's colleges, Bennett and Spelman, offered similar
programs in addition to the liberal arts curriculum, and by the 1920s both offered bachelor's degrees in
Home Economics. See Amy Thompson McCandless, The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education
87 Roberta D. Cornelius, The History of Randolph-Macon Woman's College: From the Founding in 1891
Through the Year of 1949-1950 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1951), pp. 28; 52;
63-75.
College introduced a few courses in home economics through its chemistry department, but the subject was not popular and was gone by 1927. But this trend was not universal: Sophie Newcomb College, recognized in the South for both its high standards and its social prestige, offered some kind of domestic science coursework as late as 1915.

Of the colleges included in this study, only Mills had a long-term home economics department. The subject's longevity might have been due, at least in part, to the very wide net it cast, as well as by the field's greater acceptance west of the Mississippi. Organized in 1906 as “domestic science,” when Mills was still a seminary, the subject survived Mills’ transition to a college and remained in the curriculum for the next fifty years. This description from the 1911 course catalogue reflects the program’s breadth:

The Department of Home Economics has been planned to meet the needs of...(1) Students who wish to specialize in subjects pertaining to home-making. (2) Students who specialize in other departments, but with some knowledge of the arts and sciences applied to housekeeping...(3) Students who wish to prepare for teaching Home Economics. (4) Students wishing to prepare for the work of dietitian or for the management of institutions.

Mills' 1910s home economics department nicely illustrates the diffuse nature of the subject and the extent to which defenders of its intellectual rigor and critics of its practical or "homemaking" aspects could both claim to be right. The requirements for the major were rigorous and varied, and included biology, chemistry, physics, social and political science, history, history of art, and philosophy. But the department also offered coursework in household management, sewing, household accounts, and home nursing, all subjects that made most other elite women’s colleges uncomfortable. Another class, "Home Sanitation

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88 McCandless, p. 58.
89 For Sophie Newcomb’s early domestic science work, see Gordon, Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era, p. 174. In 1915, the college published a handbook, “Notes and Recipes, Freshman domestic science,” for entering students, but it is unclear for how long it was in use. See Harriet Amelia Boyer, “Notes and Recipes, Freshmen domestic science, H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College, 1915.” (The Library of Congress Internet Archive, http://archive.org/details/notesrecipesfres00boye)
91 Ibid., pp. 58; 93.
and House Construction," featured public health and practical architectural aspects, while a class in "Textiles" emphasized costume design and construction. Upper division courses such as "Food Preparation" and "Food Analysis" had significant prerequisites in chemistry or biology, much like the ones found for similar courses at other women’s colleges, while "Institutional Menus" and "History and Theory of Teaching Home Economics" pointed toward the professional aims of at least some of its students. The department was quite popular, at least in the 1910s, and its breadth was surely responsible for much of that popularity. Enrollments in home economics courses rose from 42 in 1912, to 70 in 1914, peaking in 1917 with 186.

Unlike at the other elite colleges, home economics endured at Mills, but the department seems to have shrunk significantly after 1917. In the 1920s and 30s, Mills built strong programs in early childhood education and fine arts, and it is possible that many home economics courses, such as "Advanced Dressmaking" and "History of Costume," were reorganized into those fields, while courses like "Dietetics" and "The Economics of the Household," were moved into the usual economics, sociology, and chemistry departments.

Like the other elite colleges, Mills spent the 1920s trying to increase its endowment by, in part, reaching out to wealthier prospective students. The subject might have fallen victim to the same elitism that undermined its prospects elsewhere. A very small number of students were still writing theses in home economics as late as 1946, but the program was surely a ghost of its former self if the actions of President Lynn White Jr. are any indication. White spent much of the 1940s and 50s deploping the tendency of women’s colleges to devalue

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92 Ibid., pp. 93-95.
95 The Mills College library catalogue lists a small number of home economics theses written in the 1940s.
women's "traditional" work and working to create, and make Mills a national leader of, a resurgent "womanly" education.

Mills was exceptional among the elite colleges. The path more commonly taken was the inclusion of a few courses in already existing departments, most often physiology and hygiene, economics, sociology, and chemistry. In the early 1870s, Vassar offered a course in practical chemistry that dealt specifically with, among other things, the "chemistry of breadmaking." According to Mabel Newcomer, in the 1880s, Smith offered a one-credit course called "Household Chemistry," but she offered no details about the content, and the catalogues from those years only list courses with such unrevealing names as "Experimental Lectures in Chemistry," "Lectures in Organic Chemistry," and "Lectures on Chemical Theory." Mount Holyoke's president in these years, the influential Mary Emma Woolley, disapproved of domestic science and prevented the formation of such a program, but "Industrial" and "Food Chemistry," fields championed by Ellen Richards, did make strong inroads at Mount Holyoke, though they remained firmly within the chemistry department. Between 1897 and 1905, the director of Mount Holyoke's chemistry department was Nellie Goldthwaite. Though the exact makeup of Goldthwaite's classes is unclear, she received her doctorate in chemistry from the University of Chicago—a pioneer in domestic science—and, after leaving Mount Holyoke, taught household science and home economics at three different universities. It seems a safe assumption that Goldthwaite's Mount Holyoke classes contained at least some material recognizable to domestic scientists, and if she was especially committed to that field, it may have been part of the reason she eventually left. A later chemistry professor, Emma Perry Carr, another University of Chicago graduate, may also have been sympathetic to domestic science. Starting in 1907 she taught courses in industrial

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96 Robinson The Curriculum of the Woman's College, p. 102.
98 Wells, p. 108; Email from Patricia Albright, Mount Holyoke Archivist, 8 March 2011.
chemistry, and under her leadership, “Food Chemistry” remained in the curriculum at least through the 1930s. The survival of “Food Analysis” in Wellesley’s chemistry department, at least through the 1910s, has already been noted.

Barnard flirted briefly with domestic science in the early 1900s, though it is unclear how serious the college’s interest really was and how much may have been a response to outside pressure. Barnard, an independent college under the umbrella of Columbia University, offered no coursework in domestic science, though some classes in the economics department discussed “women and wages, consumption patterns, marketing, production, personnel,” and a course in sociology focused on family groups. In 1904, rather suddenly, domestic science at Barnard made an explicit appearance in the annual reports of Columbia’s president and the college’s dean. In his report to the Board of Trustees, President Nicholas Murray Butler wrote, “Barnard College is a college for women, not for men. The list of electives offered should contain carefully chosen courses in domestic science, domestic art, sanitary chemistry, the fine arts, and related subjects that are especially adapted to the training of college women.” He pointed out that the University, through another of its schools, Teachers College, already offered many of these courses and that they could be extended easily and at little cost to Barnard students. Barnard’s dean, Laura Drake Gill, concurred, calling for courses, “which are needed by large numbers of women to whom practical philanthropy will be a profession,” and including “the phases of law and government which are necessary to the license and factory inspector, to the settlement worker, and to the wealthy woman of public spirit.” Gill’s vision was markedly elitist, but it is also clear that she thought more of the public rather than the private applications of any

100 Ibid., pp. 335-337; 324
102 Annual Report of the President to the Trustees, 1904, Columbia University, Columbia College (New York, NY), 1904, p. 41.
such “womanly” studies.103

In 1904, Gill suggested an endowment of $50,000 for a department of “Domestic and Sanitary Chemistry,” but it seems that neither she nor the college pursued it very aggressively. Gill had other priorities; during her tenure as dean she was especially focused on establishing coursework in history of art and in improving the College’s physical education program. As a wide range of domestic science courses were already available to Barnard students through Teachers College, it is likely she may have simply preferred to focus her energies and the Barnard’s resources elsewhere.104 Gill’s comments in her 1904 report notwithstanding, it is unlikely that there was ever much interest in domestic science at Barnard. There is no reference to it of any kind in Gill’s report for the following year, nor did Alice Duer Miller—who was a student at Barnard at this time—and Susan Myers, mention it once in their detailed history of the college.105 In her 1918 analysis of the curricula of the most prominent women’s colleges, Mabel Louise Robinson noted, “Barnard makes no special attempt to give practical work,” even in chemistry, where “practical” instruction seems most commonly to have crept in.106 The sudden appearance of the issue and its rapid disappearance give the impression that it was only a momentary concern, perhaps a response to a recent outside campaign or attack.

Furthermore, Gill’s elitist view of her students’ needs and futures, her assumption that Barnard students would find domestic science useful for philanthropic endeavors as much as the running of their own homes, comes through clearly in her reports and may have reflected student attitudes.107 James E. Russell, the dean of Teachers College, grumbled repeatedly in

104 Barnard students were allowed to take a certain number of credits at Teachers College though this policy was not without controversy. See Bette Weneck, “Social and Cultural Stratification in Women’s Higher Education: Barnard College and Teachers College, 1898-1912,” History of Education Quarterly, vol. 31, no. 1, (Spring 1991), pp. 1-25.
105 Laura Drake Gill, “Report of the Dean, for the Academic Year ending June 30, 1905,” in Annual Report of the President to the Trustees, Columbia University, Columbia College (New York, NY), 1905, pp. 140-143; Miller, Myers, Barnard College: The First Fifty Years.
106 Robinson, p. 108.
the early 1900s about "the reluctance of college-bred women" to enter the "Departments of Domestic Art and Domestic Science" and blamed their "ignorance of what these departments have to offer" and a misguided belief that jobs at secondary schools—the aim of many women's college graduates—were more prestigious and better-paid than other positions. Barnard had limited resources and it is not surprising that it declined to expend them on a subject whose academic, professional, and social utility was still in question. And if Barnard students did want domestic science training, they could very easily obtain it elsewhere.

Given the nature of domestic science, and especially the fact that even its own proponents could not really agree on what it was and for purposes it should be used, it is not surprising that it is difficult to track its course at the elite women's colleges. "Practical" work, especially fields like cooking, household decoration, and dress-making, may have been in short supply, but a great many courses dealing with social issues, and in particular focusing on women's various relations to society, certainly did exist and thrived at the various colleges. Bryn Mawr is a case in point: it was probably the most institutionally hostile to domestic science of all the women's colleges. M. Carey Thomas' devotion to the liberal arts and objection to the very notion of a "womanly" curriculum has already been noted, and she remained firm in this conviction. As one biographer put it, "She never ceased to uphold the established subjects...against newer, more 'practical' interlopers in the curriculum of the liberal arts college."

But that did not preclude Bryn Mawr from developing prestigious programs in economics and sociology—programs that the college felt were entirely appropriate but that domestic scientists might well have considered within their purview.

As long as domestic science was viewed as the serious application of a variety of rigorous academic subjects to the public sphere, as well as to the home, it seems that there were those within the women's colleges who were willing to give it a hearing. The colleges

were very willing to expand their courses of study, provided they initiated and approved the changes. By the early twentieth century, the course offerings at all of the colleges had grown exponentially, making Mabel Louise Robinson's 1918 observation that "Rarely has a course been dropped, and, with the exception of domestic science, never a department" all the more telling.\textsuperscript{110} It is not a coincidence that support within the elite colleges for domestic science, such as it was, declined markedly toward the end of the second generation, just as it had become firmly entrenched in public colleges and universities. Furthermore, the discipline had failed to win widespread acceptance as one of the social sciences and had failed to shake its association with traditional women's work. However incorrectly, by the early twentieth century, and certainly by the 1920s, the terms "domestic science" and especially "home economics" were increasingly identified with either preparation for housewifery or with explicitly vocational training for a number of professions associated with "woman's work," such as nursing, dietetics, and elementary education. The elite women's colleges, jealous of their reputations as academic path breakers and both professionally and socially suspicious of the domestic science movement, increasingly dissociated themselves from it and pushed anything that might be reminiscent of it firmly into academic departments or into the emerging field of Fine Arts.

\textsuperscript{110} Robinson, p. 107.

The only force that was likely to have resulted in the creation and long term maintenance of any kind of domestic science program at the elite colleges was significant student, alumnae, and parental enthusiasm, and this never materialized. Individuals could and did make pitches for some sort of program more mindful of students' likely domestic futures, but there was never a concerted effort to incorporate domestic science into the curriculum. Furthermore, as will be discussed in chapter six, when a few of the colleges \textit{did} move to institute some sort of explicitly "womanly" curriculum, such programs uniformly failed. This was not due to any lack of student interest in the curriculum—by the 1910s
students had grown anything but shy in making their opinions known. But for the most part
they were interested in relaxing the rigid course requirements or desired professional training
that would prepare them for jobs other than teaching. The lack of student or alumnae interest
in domestic science likely came from much the same place as did the faculty’s—skepticism
of its academic rigor and prestige combined with concern about its ungenteel reputation.
Given the increasingly elite social makeup of the student population in the early twentieth
century, social concerns may well have predominated, but this does not negate the pride the
students took in the rigor of their college programs and their lack of interest in anything that
might undermine that.

But the fact that domestic science made few inroads at the colleges does not mean
that it was without supporters. After all, both Ellen Richards, the founder of the modern
home economics movement, and Julia Lathrop, the prominent social reformer who fiercely
advocated for its many applications in the public sphere, were Vassar alumnae. Less well
known but more numerous were the many alumnae who pursued postgraduate degrees or
careers in home economics. In 1909, the *Journal of Home Economics* noted approvingly that
Goucher’s Alumnae Association had sponsored a series of seven lectures at the college on
topics ranging from “Digestion” to the “Chemistry of Nutrition” to “Possibilities of Danger
from Inadequate Preparation of Food.”111 As late as 1912, an editorial in *The Wellesley
College News* remarked on the growing number of students who “desired the institution of
more utilitarian courses” and that “[t]he majority of these...wanted domestic science
training.”112 A 1914 article in *The Radcliffe News* captured what might have been a common
feeling: Radcliffe, lacking its own faculty, did not offer domestic science or any of its
variants—a lack that does not appear to have been much lamented by its students—but the
college newspaper did report that “Domestic Science is a new profession for the highly
trained woman” and directed interested readers to “A list of the schools and colleges offering

112 *The Wellesley College News (WCN)*, vol. XXI, no. 3, 17 October 1912, p. 3.
to college graduates a one year course in Domestic Science." Interestingly, this article both presupposes a level of student interest and suggests that domestic science properly belonged to the post-college course. Overall, an interest in domestic science was clearly present on the campuses, but it was not strong enough to prevail against entrenched academic interests and professional and social skepticism.

Nor were voices focused on actual homemaking (as opposed to the more public applications of domestic science) absent from the college community. In 1900, Smith alumna Kate Morris Cone called upon her alma mater to acknowledge that "college-bred brains may be exercised in homemaking," and pointed to the efforts of college women in pioneering the field of domestic science. As with Laura Gill at Barnard, Cone's approach was undeniably elitist—she referenced the "servant problem" and explained that "[e]ven the housework—when one must do it, becomes to the educated woman a revelation of the labor-saving capabilities of brains plus machinery," but she did not see domestic science training as antithetical to the women's colleges.

But by the 1910s, the bulk of this support seems to have waned. The trend was clearly in the direction of deemphasizing anything that savored too much of homemaking or any other kind of "woman's work." In 1909, the New York branch of the ACA, invoking the changing role of women in American life, launched a multi-year campaign to investigate what college women truly wanted and needed from their educations. Instead of a narrow focus on homemaking, they framed their investigation to examine "how women could be trained for their environment, economics, social, civic, while in college." The report, published in 1911, concluded that "there has been no desire for a radical wide-sweeping reform, no fanatical insistence on any experimentation which might tend to lower the present scholastic requirements," but also acknowledged "a demand among college women...for

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114 Kate Morris Cone, "Response for Home and Family," Celebration of the Quarter-Century of Smith College, October Second and Third 1900 (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1900), pp. 32-34.
courses which shall adapt college students more closely to the conditions of society which
they must face on graduation, for courses which shall present these facts vitally within their
proper philosophic and economic background.” The report suggested eight courses, and it is
worth noting which classes were to be required and which elective: classes in the “social and
ethical relations” of personal hygiene, “hygiene of the environment,” “biology and
bacteriology,” and an abbreviated law course “covering contracts, real property, personal
property, banking, and social and domestic relations,” should be required. Electives should
be offered in the “hygiene of childhood,” the “family, dwelling on its historical, biological,
social, and ethical significance, and emphasizing the economics of consumption,” as well as
political science and “the history of industry and the status of women in industries.”

This was only one branch and not all of its members came from the elite women’s
colleges, but given its east coast orientation and the fact that the elite colleges definitely
dominated the membership of the ACA at the time, the report’s recommendations were likely
at least broadly reflective of the views of the elite colleges’ alumnae in these years. It
would seem that programs that acknowledged homemaking as one of the many roles a
woman might play and offered some intellectual training in this area were acceptable;
programs that presupposed a woman’s domestic destiny and sought to instill in her the
necessary practical skills for it belonged elsewhere.

Just as they had rejected domestic science, the elite women's colleges were averse to
diluting their curricula with anything that savored too much of “practical” or professional
training, and this too had long term consequences for their reputations. It was not due to any
hostility to the idea of professional women. From the very beginning, a number of their
graduates had entered the professions and, by the turn of the century, more students were

115 “Reports (Condensed) from the Branches—the New York branch,” Journal of the ACA, Series IV, no. 1,
January, 1911, pp. 35-36.
116 For example, in 1909-1910, the ACA had 893 new members from 26 colleges nationwide, of those,
almost exactly one third (297) came from Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, Smith, Wellesley, or Vassar.
JACA, Series IV, no. 1, January 1911, p. 11.
looking for ways to both marry and pursue careers, either in sequence, or, increasingly, at the same time.\textsuperscript{117} Some of the colleges took a more socially conservative line, emphasizing that the educated woman was still best suited to the home, but that she would fulfill with distinction any role she was called upon to play, others were more open in their enthusiasm for enlarging women’s opportunities. But the postgraduate lives of their students all told a similar story: a significant number of alumnae pursued paid employment after graduation, most of them as teachers.\textsuperscript{118}

Regardless, the elite colleges were always skeptical of vocational training. This was partly a matter of self-protection, after all, one reason that college training for women had always been so controversial was the fear that it would lead to women entering into the professions and competing with men. It would have been injudicious for the colleges, especially in the early years, to display too much interest in professional training. But more than anything else, the colleges were simply not that interested. In light of their original mission to provide to women the same education available in the best colleges for men, this feeling is hardly surprising. By the late nineteenth century, the leading men's institutions had largely rejected explicitly vocational training at the undergraduate level and were increasingly recommitted to a more general, “cultural” education, more reflective of the traditional classical curriculum than of modern, practical, studies.\textsuperscript{119} Most of the faculty and presidents of the elite women's colleges were themselves either classical or liberal arts scholars, or happy recipients of such an education. They were understandably most

\begin{thebibliography}{11}
\bibitem{117} Gordon, \textit{Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era}, p. 5.
\bibitem{118} Solomon, \textit{In the Company of Educated Women}, pp. 32-34, 45-47.
\bibitem{119} In his survey of the history of American colleges and universities, Frederick Rudolph claims that one of the reasons the liberal arts or “culture” courses retained their preeminence at the leading men's colleges was precisely because those colleges refused to admit women. I will leave it to the reader to assess Rudolph's statement that “it may also be true that the men's liberal arts colleges like Yale and Princeton and Amherst and the co-ordinate institutions like Harvard and Columbia preserved the liberal inheritance of Western civilization in the United States by protecting it from the debilitating, feminizing, corrupting influences which shaped its career where coeducation prevailed.” But it is accurate to say that at coeducational institutions, subjects that proved popular, either through their own choice or because of faculty and administration guidance, with women, like English and domestic science, did experience a loss of status in the early twentieth century. See Frederick Rudolph, \textit{The American College and University: A History} (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1962), pp. 324-325, and Solomon, chapter 6, “Women and the Modernizing of Liberal Education: 1860-1920.”
\end{thebibliography}
interested in preserving and promulgating their areas of study. When presidents and faculty argued, as did M. Carey Thomas in 1918, for “the supreme value of intellectual non-vocational training,” they were speaking from genuine conviction.\textsuperscript{120}

Paradoxically, a significant part of the reason why the colleges were able to maintain this pure liberal arts stance and turn up their collective nose at vocationalism was that a fair measure of professional training or assistance had been present in their programs virtually from the start. This real, but largely unacknowledged, accommodation of students’ professional needs, created a grey area in which the colleges could give students the support they needed without expending too many resources or impinging publicly on their commitment to the liberal arts. The vague status of pedagogical training in the elite colleges, from the 1860s to the 1920s and beyond, illustrates this compromise.

In the early years, several of the elite colleges admitted a number of “Specials,” students who enrolled in a few courses but were not degree candidates. Many of them had worked as teachers and were there to bolster their credentials with both purely academic and pedagogical coursework. These students provided badly needed extra income for the colleges, making it difficult for the colleges to put their anti-vocational stance into practice. As with the music and art classes the colleges’ grudgingly allowed into the curriculum, the pedagogical courses aimed at Specials were, in theory, kept separate from the regular course, and while it is impossible to gauge the amount of overlap, there was clearly enough to keep administrators and faculty concerned.

Though established as a liberal arts college, Wellesley’s founder and early leaders were particularly committed to educating teachers and designed programs to facilitate this goal. In 1878, only three years after the college opened, “the teachers’ department was organized for women who were teachers already, but desired ‘peculiar facilities for advanced studies.’ A special building...was provided...teachers were given the utmost consideration;

\textsuperscript{120}“Bryn Mawr Opens Fifth War Year with Stand for Liberal Studies; President Thomas Says War Experimentation in Vocational Courses is Over,” \textit{The College News}, vol. 5, no., 5, Bryn Mawr, PA, October 10, 1918, p. 1.
and they flocked to Wellesley in large numbers.” Wellesley walked a fine line between the liberal arts and vocational training. The teachers enrolled were allowed to take other classes in the collegiate course, but “regular” Wellesley students were kept out of all classes in the teachers’ department. Vassar seems to have made similar accommodations for teachers in its early years, though teachers were not given their own department and the project as a whole was discontinued by 1879. When Mount Holyoke, which of course had a long tradition of teacher training, transitioned from a seminary to a college in 1888, it “offered special advantages to teachers, allowing them to enter without examination if they were over 21 years old and had taught at least a year.” This policy endured for at least another twenty years, though at some point, in what was probably an attempt cut down on the numbers of teachers enrolled and ensure that the ones who were there were of especially high caliber, the previous teaching requirement was raised from one year to a minimum of three. As late as the 1910s, Goucher had a similar arrangement in place with nearby Johns Hopkins University in which the schools jointly administered courses for teachers.

The colleges seem to have all traveled a similar path. They disavowed “teacher training” as unconnected and possibly damaging to their liberal arts mission, but all offered pedagogical training—present in the curriculum either from the beginning or emerging shortly thereafter. The number of alumnae who became teachers, especially high in the first generation but still notable into the second and third, likely fueled the popularity of pedagogical classes, and that popularity, in turn, made them hard to get rid of. At the same time, disciplines like psychology and sociology—disciplines that formed the basis for much study of what became the field of education—were expanding and professionalizing, in short, becoming respected fields that the colleges could be comfortable with. By about 1900, pedagogical courses at the elite colleges were increasingly redesigned, and often renamed, to

121 Robinson, pp. 21-22.
122 Ibid., pp. 22–54.
123 Ibid., p. 54; “Special Students,” in “Mount Holyoke College Catalogue, 1900-1901,” p. 12. Mount Holyoke Collections Online.
125 Knipp, The History of Goucher College, p. 211.
emphasize things like child and adolescent psychology and the history and philosophy of education, and before long were organized into their own departments. But the colleges could still be very touchy on the subject. At Vassar, as late as 1919, when courses in education were well-established in a number of departments, the college’s genial president, Henry Noble MacCracken, responded with brevity verging on rudeness to a routine request from Columbia’s Teachers College for any information about Vassar’s teacher training, explaining tersely that Vassar did not provide vocational training.\textsuperscript{126}

However, colleges like Agnes Scott and Mills, younger or evolving institutions that had attempted in so many ways to cast themselves in the mold of the elite northeastern colleges, were openly expanding pedagogical training, indicating a belief that vocationalism, at least in this respect, neither degraded nor dangerously diluted the liberal arts. In 1920, Mills established an actual School of Education that offered “a five-year course leading to the master of arts degree or the State Teaching Certificate,” but it had been offering education courses for years and had had an education department in place at least as early as 1911.\textsuperscript{127}

At Agnes Scott, the education department was the product of the increased demand for teaching in the South’s growing number of public schools and, perhaps, of Agnes Scott’s own reputation for academic excellence.\textsuperscript{128} Their greater flexibility on this front was likely motivated by a variety of factors, not least by the dire need for extra funds (their finances being even shakier than those of their more established northeastern sisters), but region and institutional age surely played a role as well. In the South, where normal schools, but not teaching itself, were identified with the middle- and lower classes, but “liberal arts colleges were viewed as the preserve of the region’s elite,” Agnes Scott may have felt that meeting the need for teacher training among its more genteel student population trumped any concern that

\textsuperscript{126} For Vassar’s education courses, see Robinson, \textit{The Curriculum of the Woman’s College}, p. 16; Letter, W.C. Bagley to Henry Noble MacCracken, December 16, 1919; MacCracken to Bagley, 18 December 1919. Henry Noble MacCracken Papers, Vassar College, Box 80, Folder 80.99 “Teachers College,” Vassar College Archives (VC).


\textsuperscript{128} Corley, “Higher Education for Southern Women,” p. 245.
such a program undermined the rest of its curriculum.\textsuperscript{129} Likewise, the lack of squeamishness in the West about including liberal and practical arts in the same program that had allowed home economics to maintain at least a toehold at Mills, probably fueled greater acceptance of vocational programs as well.

Depending on the college, arrangements could also be made for students to take professional courses at nearby institutions, though this solution was not without problems. In the early 1900s, hostilities practically broke out between Barnard and Teachers College when Columbia University tried to increase cooperation between the two institutions. Barnard students were allowed to take a certain number of courses at Teachers College and, in some cases, to work toward a joint degree. However, Barnard’s dean, Laura Drake Gill, felt it was necessary for her to inspect any such Teachers College courses, to insure that they were sufficiently “liberal,” by Barnard standards. Gill also criticized Teachers College students, whom she felt were neither the academic nor social equals of her own students. Gill’s highhandedness was also resented by Barnard students and Columbia’s president, probably none of whom were sad to see her go when she resigned in 1907. Among the many accomplishments of her talented, and more tactful successor, Virginia Gildersleeve, was a friendlier relationship with Teachers College. Barnard students continue to take a few courses there and, starting the 1910s, were also admitted to a limited number of courses at Columbia’s School of Journalism.\textsuperscript{130} Certain graduate programs were also opening to women students and the high academic standards of the elite women’s colleges did not go unnoticed. In 1893, Johns Hopkins agreed to admit Goucher students who had completed the scientific program directly to their medical school. Wellesley appears to have had an informal premedical program as well.\textsuperscript{131}

Vocational training and opportunities also entered the elite colleges, sometimes

\textsuperscript{129} McCandless, \textit{The Past in the Present}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{130} Miller, Meyers, \textit{Barnard College}, pp. 70-73. For the tension between Barnard and Teachers College, see Weneck; Solomon, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{131} Knipp, p. 109; Solomon, p. 84.
implicitly, sometimes explicitly, through the faculty. One example of this, of course, was
domestic science, which, at least for a time, was promoted by some professors as a promising
career path for women. Mount Holyoke introduced a journalism course in 1896, but it seems
to have been discontinued by 1905, possibly subsumed into the “Press Club,” a one-credit
course required of all campus newspaper correspondents that came with prerequisites and
was directed by a member of the English department.132 Even at Bryn Mawr, M. Carey
Thomas countenanced a course in “Private Law.” While not explicitly vocational, the course
covered “real and personal property, including the various titles to property, trusts,
mortgages, wills and deed; Contracts; Torts; Crimes; Persons and Personal Relations, and the
chief forms of Procedure at Civil Law,” and was undeniably pre-professional in flavor.133
Less tangibly, but perhaps even more importantly, female faculty members, though they were in the minority at most of the colleges, provided their students with, if not professional training, at the very least, professional role models.

The elite women’s colleges also played a large role in developing a new professional field largely dominated by women, social work, heeding—though probably inadvertently—Mary Lyon’s vision of women’s education paired with social action. Courses, most often in history, economics, or sociology, that stressed modern social problems and experimental ways of dealing with them, were extremely popular at the colleges. Franklin Giddings taught “Charities and Corrections” at Bryn Mawr in 1888, a course that Vassar’s pioneering professor of history and economics, Herbert E. Mills, adapted five years later, and which seems to have inspired countless Vassar students to pursue social work.134 As early as 1883, Wellesley’s “Political Economy” course (the forerunner of its economics and sociology programs) combined stiff required readings with a practical “study of social problems by means of lectures and special investigations of industrial conditions.” Pioneered by

Katharine Coman and expanded by Emily Greene Balch, Wellesley, by the early twentieth century, “taught economics from a historical and sociological viewpoint” and combined its study with an emphasis on social action.\(^{135}\)

Eventually, both Bryn Mawr and Smith made programs in social work available to students at the graduate level, a solution that proved their commitment to expanding professional opportunities for women while simultaneously preserving the “pure” liberal arts in undergraduate training. It is worth noting, though, that the driving forces for both of these programs came from outside events, an unforeseen bequest in one case and a world war in the other. In 1915, an alumnae donation allowed Bryn Mawr to establish a graduate department in the field of “Social Economy and Social Research,” which, according to a Bryn Mawr historian, “[though] it was called a Graduate Department, it was more nearly a professional school... .with... its own certificate of completion of a settled two years’ course.”\(^{136}\) Intended to train “professional social science scholars,” the program granted the M.A. and the Ph.D., combined vocational with academic training, and offered strong proof that Bryn Mawr was not averse to professional training, so long as it could control the content.\(^{137}\) Following the United States’ entry into World War I, Smith, like many of the women’s colleges, operated summer programs to assist in training war workers and, under these circumstances, countenanced a number of courses it would have blanched at only a few years before—among them courses in psychiatric social work pioneered by distinguished social worker, and Goucher alumna, Mary Jarrett. Smith’s program was much praised, especially for its efforts on behalf of shell-shocked soldiers, and in 1919, the college agreed to continue it. Within just a few years, these courses were expanded into the Smith College School for Social Work (SSW), a graduate program that offered the master’s degree.\(^{138}\) As at

\(^{137}\) Dzuback, “Women and Social Research at Bryn Mawr College,” p. 582.
Bryn Mawr, it seems that Smith was prepared to tolerate and even embrace a professional school so long as it was developed to the college's specifications. College degrees were required of all students (an exception was made in the early years for applicants who were already experienced social workers), and an attempt to add other vocational courses to the SSW's summer session appears to have been quickly rejected.\footnote{It is unclear what kind of vocational subjects were under consideration, but the majority opinion seems to have been that such courses were likely to draw poorly-prepared students to the summer program. See report of the "committee of the Board of Trustees...to discuss recommendations...on the School for Social Work," November 1922. Mary Van Kleeck Papers, Series V: Organizations and Conference Files, Box 107, Folder 10, "Smith College-Board of Trustees, 1922," (SSC).}

Through such courses and programs, as well as through work in college-affiliated settlement houses and other progressive organizations, the colleges became key to preparing and funneling educated women into social work. In the late nineteenth century, much of this work was voluntary, as women’s charitable endeavors had largely been for decades. But as the twentieth century dawned and ideas of professionalization spread, many college-educated women commanded salaries in exchange for their expertise. The elite women’s colleges played a key role in transforming an accepted activity for wealthy women of leisure—charity work—into respectable, paid employment that offered women professional status, and in so doing, they allied themselves with feminist forces calling for an expansion of woman’s sphere.

But no sooner had the elite women's colleges made up their minds about both domestic science and any kind of vocational training that appeared “too” oriented toward practical skills or traditional woman's work, then they were compelled, however briefly, to reconsider. In 1917, the United States' entry into World War I forced the colleges to adopt more utilitarian coursework, as women were called on to work for the war effort or temporarily replace men in a host of home front occupations. Most of these concessions were temporary, though they were popular while they lasted. As previously noted, Goucher's short-lived home economics department was established during the 1917-1918 academic
year, and the popularity of home economics courses at Mills also peaked during the war years. At Vassar, “Preparedness Courses” planned for the 1918-19 academic year included accelerated language classes with special focus on “practical vocabulary” and “censorship and commercial work,” typewriting, mechanical drawing, and “war-cookery.” Vassar also required its students to devote a certain number of hours each week to war work, a measure that was noted approvingly by the Smith College Weekly—some of whose readers thought Smith could be doing more for the war effort, including giving academic credit for national service. Goucher offered special language classes, as well as coursework in agriculture, wireless telegraphy, bookkeeping, and typewriting. It is unclear how much Wellesley may have altered its curriculum to suit wartime needs, but its mathematics and physics departments did advertise the new opportunities opening up to women in those fields and served as conduits for war industries to recruit graduates. Responding to the entreaties of the Red Cross and the federal government for trained nurses, Mills added a pre-nursing program but, as it had with its home economics course, grounded it firmly in the liberal arts. Nursing students would complete “a three-year course at Mills, followed by two years in an accredited hospital” and were required to take “biology, chemistry, English, hygiene, language, physical education, mathematics, social and political science, philosophy, [and] physics.”

The wartime experiment in utilitarian coursework and its immediate aftermath proved another critical moment for the colleges. There had never been an easier moment to circumvent college politics, tradition, and inertia, and permanently “modernize” the curriculum. Given the virulent attacks on the colleges that started during the war years, there

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142 Knipp, p. 232.
144 “War Nurse Course is Added at Mills College,” undated article, Mills College Clipping File, 1916-1918 (MC).
Chapter Four

“Grinds,” “Queer Girls,” and “Intellectual Monstrosities”:

Andromaniacs, Inverts, and the “Unsexing” Power of Women’s Colleges

“If the ‘smash’ is mutual, they monopolize each other & ‘spoon’ continually, & sleep together & lie awake all night talking...My theory is that it comes from massing hundreds of nervous young girls together, & shutting them up from the outside world...The coeducational colleges don’t suffer much from ‘smashes.’”

—Alice Stone Blackwell, 1882

“Teachers and Physicians say that it is an often demonstrated physiological [sic] fact that the herding together of a large number of females of any species makes them hysterical and morbid.”

—Good Housekeeping, 1908

Perhaps the earliest charge leveled against the women’s colleges was that they would somehow “unsex” the young women entrusted to their care. “Unsexed” was defined in a number of ways, but it always revolved around the notion that higher education and normative womanhood were essentially incompatible, that too much schooling would rob women of their looks, charm, physical health, and most especially, their reproductive capacity. By the early twentieth century, as college-educated women entered increasingly into the traditionally masculine professional realm, as their marriage rates dropped noticeably, and as the mainstream public became increasingly familiar with the idea of

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female same-sex desire, the definition of "unsexed" expanded to include women who appeared to turn their backs on their "natural" roles in favor of a "masculine" profession, "masculine" independence, and, eventually, the "masculine" prerogative of controlling their own sexuality.

The specter of "unsexing" was not limited to the women's colleges; initially they were actually less offensive to dominant social mores than were coeducational institutions. In the 1860s and 70s, the first decades that saw significant numbers of American women entering college, some critics felt coeducation was significantly more dangerous. As historian Margaret A. Lowe explains, "Fears of illicit sexuality and romantic liaisons lurked just beneath the surface" of objections to coeducation. Sending a daughter away from home was troubling enough to many parents, even worse would be to send them to places where they might "follow their unwise hearts, be duped by unscrupulous men, or grievously end up with someone of a different ethnic, or class background."³ In this light, one of the new women's colleges seemed a safer choice.

If the contemporary popular culture, which commonly depicted the college woman as a frumpy, silly, or otherwise unattractive bluestocking, focused most of its attention on the elite women's colleges, it did not entirely spare the "coeds," and campus publications at coeducational schools and student recollections make it clear that male collegians often regarded their female classmates in much the same negative light.⁴ But by the end of the century, the weight of these fears, especially as they pertained to domesticity, reproduction, and overall femininity of appearance and manner, had shifted to women's colleges, and most of all to the elite, higher-profile institutions. Concerns about coeducation remained, but increasingly the bulk of anxieties revolved around, not how women would behave with men, but how they might behave without them.

Further fueling this shift was the mistrust of autonomous women's environments that was deeply rooted within the United States' dominant Anglo-American Protestant culture. Just as it had with convents in the early- and mid-nineteenth century, this suspicion would manifest in a growing unease about and determination to know what precisely went on behind college walls. These concerns were heightened around the turn-of-the-twentieth-century as mainstream definitions of desirable womanhood became increasingly linked to women's sexual desire for men—superseding even the importance of their reproductive capabilities or maternal instincts—and the general public became more familiar with female homosexuality. Concerns about coeducation did not disappear, but suddenly the women's colleges seemed much more problematic, placing as they did impressionable young women under the authority and influence of unmarried female administrators and faculty, depriving them of regular male company, and above all secluding them in an "artificial" social environment where anything might happen.

The widely held popular association between the elite women's colleges and the archetype of the "New Woman" has already been discussed. But what might be called a supplementary narrative was also emerging around the turn-of-the-century, one that identified the colleges with what to many conservatives seemed the most extreme and undesirable aspects of modern womanhood. And so, depending on the generation and context, the colleges might be thought to produce a monstrously androgynous creature, devoid of all feminine charms and intent on claiming and exercising masculine authority. Or it might create a neurotic, pitiable wreck, so warped by life in an "artificial" all-female environment and deprived of "normal" enjoyments and affection that she could never hope to sustain a healthy relationship with a man, even if she so wished. Finally, there was the female sexual invert, largely identifiable by her unfeminine appearance and, most likely, by aggressive feminist opinions as well. Compelled either by nature or circumstances to channel her emotions into psychologically unhealthy and potentially violent relationships with other women, the invert was a figure to pitied—or would be, but for the fearful reality that she
could, within the cloistered, “hot-house,” world of the women’s colleges, exercise a
dangerous and predatory influence over other women.5

The tendency of mainstream American culture to ascribe aspects of “undesirable”
womanhood to the influence of the elite women’s colleges had been present from the very
beginning, as had the debate as to whether the benefits of women’s higher education could
outweigh what, to many observers, were its self-evident faults. But by 1900, a new element
had entered the discussion, and one that has remained constant: merely by virtue of its all-
female makeup, the women’s college was a dangerous environment. At the very least, it
severely curtailed interactions with men at age when most young women were embarking on
marriage and motherhood, but the colleges evoked darker fears as well. By isolating large
numbers of women and depriving them of the constant companionship of men (or rather, one
might say, depriving them of the constant reminder of women’s normative position as
complement and subordinate to men), the women’s college could strip women of all that
made them “womanly” in the first place.

As early as 1837, one critic had ridiculed Mary Lyon’s plan for the Mount Holyoke
Female Seminary, saying that the students’ education would come at the expense of their
feminine charms. A Boston educator complained that female education was already likely to
weaken “all which is most attractive in female manners,” and that a school that isolated them
“for a considerable period from all but female society,” would only make the situation
worse.6 By the 1870s, anecdotes published and republished in the popular press depicted
college women as hoydens and tomboys, given to sliding down bannisters and obnoxiously
smacking chewing gum, made heedless of ladylike behavior as a result of their prolonged

5 For the various undesirable mutations of normative womanhood that women’s colleges might produce and
a general discussion of how these images were disseminated to the American public, see Carroll Smith-
Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936,” in Smith-
Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.,
1985), pp. 245-96.
6 E.A. Andrews, Religious Magazine, and Family Miscellany (April 1837), quoted in Helen Lefkowitz
Horowitz, Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women’s Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century
Beginnings to the 1930s (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), pp. 57-58.
separation from “normal” society in general and masculine society in particular. One joke that made the rounds of the Georgia press in 1880 had it that “Sitting Bull chews spruce gam, but it should not be supposed that he is a graduate of Vassar College.” The joke did not get old either, in 1889, a Pennsylvania journalist was still making reference to “The sweet gum chewers of Vassar College.”

Early twentieth-century fiction—such as Dorothy Foster Gilman’s *The Bloom of Youth* (1916), whose heroine is informed that “Radcliffe College was not a place for ladies,” and “there isn’t a girl at Radcliffe who doesn’t look like a freak”—frequently depicted students as badly or sloppily dressed, and unable to attract men. Many authors sympathetic to women’s higher education also invoked these images, underlining how widespread they were. Beulah Marie Dix even named her fictional woman’s college “Ambrazon College,” leaving no doubt of what many men and women felt about the colleges and the women they produced.

Much more seriously, many nineteenth-century critics charged that higher education threatened women’s emotional and physical health. Naysayers offered frightening tales of students who pushed themselves too hard and suffered nervous breakdowns or even fatal illnesses as a result, arguing that immature college women, in their zeal to prove themselves or to outdo their male counterparts, would fail to exercise prudence and moderation. Others warned that even if young women managed to avoid obvious damage to their own health, the intense study required by college life would divert blood away from their ovaries to their brains, leading to unhealthy babies or even sterility.

When, in 1875, Harvard-trained physician Dr. Edward Clarke famously argued that a woman who pursued a man’s education risked “neuralgia, uterine disease, hysteria, and other derangements of the nervous system,” he was merely tapping into an existing vein of social anxiety.

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9 Lowe, pp. 1-3.
Mindful that not even the most progressive parents would support higher education if it came at the expense of their daughters' health, the women's colleges went on the offensive. By instituting some of the earliest physical education programs, keeping a strict watch over students' nutrition, and collecting detailed reports of their overall health, the colleges waged a largely successful campaign against the idea that higher education was injurious to physical health. In the 1880s, the newly-formed Association of Collegiate Alumnae (ACA) released a series of reports that argued that college women were not only healthy, but that they were arguably even healthier than their non-collegiate sisters. The idea that higher education was essentially incompatible with women's physical health would never entirely fade, and was occasionally dusted off when critics wished to step up their attacks on the colleges. As late as 1900, a woman's magazine reprinted an 1896 address by physician S. Weir Mitchell (whose idea of normative womanhood, and the best physical and mental regimen to maintain it, was immortalized in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," in which he warned Radcliffe students that scholarship was not worth their health and that it was better to be "a healthy waiting-maid than Professor Minerva with a yellow skin and a lazy liver." But all the same, by the end of the nineteenth century, voices like Mitchell's were in the minority. Parents still fretted over their daughters' health, prevailed upon them not to work too hard, and frequently threatened to bring them home at the first sign of trouble. Daughters included reassurances in most of their letters home, and college authorities vigorously oversaw the nutrition and exercise of their charges, but, generally speaking, in this matter the colleges had triumphed.

If college women's general physical health had been the only concern, that might have been the end of it, but because women were still widely seen as, first and foremost, mothers or potential mothers, health concerns had always revolved around questions of fertility. Mainstream American culture (dominated by white, native-born, broadly middle-class, Protestants) had for decades been fretting over its falling birthrate, and these concerns were only amplified by the growing numbers of immigrants entering the United States following the Civil War. One of the oldest and strongest cultural defenses of women's education in general and of women's higher education in particular, was that it would bolster American (white, Protestant) culture and "civilization" by producing wiser, better-educated mothers. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, this role of culture-bearer or transmitter was complicated by a new discourse focusing on evolution and the perceived superiority of both the "Anglo-Saxon" race (native-born Protestants of British or otherwise northern European descent), and the culture, or "civilization," it had created. It was vital, proponents argued, that Anglo-Saxon women marry and breed in sufficient numbers to ensure their continued hegemony, and college women—who were drawn overwhelmingly from among this Anglo-Saxon elite—were not to be excused from this "duty" to their race.14 But by the end of the nineteenth century, despite assurances that higher education was not physically injurious to women, the very assault upon college women's fertility feared by so many Americans appeared to be happening anyway. Starting in the 1890s, a series of well-publicized studies indicated that not only were the marriage- and birth-rates of white, native-born, Protestant women continuing to fall, they were even lower than average when it came to college-educated women, and, among alumnae of the women's colleges, they were lowest of all (see chapter three).

In the early years of the twentieth century, numerous proponents of Anglo-Saxon superiority weighed in on this issue, invoking fears of "race suicide" if damaging

environments, entering the professions in growing numbers, and (at least thought to be) under the constant influence and authority of female professors, most of whom had eschewed marriage for a career, and some of whom lived in settled, romantic partnerships with other women. The supposedly malign influence of female faculty was a particular concern. In the 1900s and 1910s, as normative womanhood became increasingly identified with women's romantic and sexual attachments to men, the women's colleges seemed less old-fashioned than potentially sinister. Female professors had once been viewed as largely acceptable exceptions to the rule—permitted by individual circumstances or exceptional talent to take up a different kind of life, but otherwise essentially "normal" women—but now they were increasingly represented as undesirable aberrations who could potentially seduce impressionable young women away from their "natural" desires and life path.

As bearers, figuratively and literally, of Anglo-Saxon civilization, college women were both intellectually and biologically a precious cultural resource, and the primary purpose of their education was at least supposed to be the cultivation of this influence, but the women's colleges, in spite of, and perhaps because of their all-female makeup, were not holding up their end of the bargain. To many turn-of-the-century Americans, they seemed to champion the wrong kind of womanhood, and thus could no longer be trusted with so critical a task.

When it came to the notion that the women's colleges were dangerous environments, essentially at odds with what most people considered "normal" or "desirable" womanhood, many Americans did not require much convincing. Historically, American Protestants had been suspicious of the few female-dominated environments which they were familiar, fearful that such places might somehow endanger their own patriarchal vision of an orderly society. They also had a well-established tradition of associating such environments with what they perceived as masculinized and deviant social, gender, and sexual behaviors. For most of the nineteenth century, the figure of the convent bore the brunt of these social
anxieties, but by the dawn of the twentieth century, they had largely been transferred to the woman’s college.

As discussed in chapter one, many of the antebellum-era women’s seminaries bore a significant resemblance to the convents that so agitated many Protestants, and in several important ways, the women’s colleges that followed bore a similar resemblance. They provided advanced education, were staffed with and often led by unmarried women, removed impressionable young women from the immediate control of the patriarchal household, and, most unnerving of all, equipped those women with the means to shun conventional womanhood and demonstrated an alternate life path. In fact, much of the public criticism leveled at the elite women’s colleges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries echoed to a striking extent the attacks experienced by the convents two generations earlier, despite the fact that the colleges were, to some extent, the Protestant answer to and equivalent of Catholic educational institutions. This similarity suggests a lingering suspicion of and unease with the figure of the educated woman, and the extent to which many Americans worried that women’s educational institutions, regardless of their religious or ideological underpinnings, were fundamentally at odds with American life.

Anglo-American culture had centuries of tradition to draw upon for suspicions of and disdain for convents and women religious. Even before the Reformation, stories of innocent girls locked up in convents against their will were an established rhetorical and literary device. Later, in Protestant England, where convents and monasteries disappeared rapidly from living memory and the Catholic Church quickly emerged as a catch-all cultural and political villain, such stories grew more pronounced and colorful. By the eighteenth century, with the advent of the Enlightenment and the growing popularity of the Gothic literary genre,
the convent as a setting of terror and corruption, complete with lecherous priests and immoral abbesses, became more popular than ever.21

These stories and the prejudices they fed upon crossed the Atlantic with European settlers. In “The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America,” Mary Ewens traces the figure of the nun in American literature and notes how negative connotations remained strong throughout the eighteenth century, despite few American-based “convent tales” and a paucity of actual nuns. Moreover, Ewens notes that the few real nuns who did live in the colonial and early republican eras were usually regarded in a positive light by their Protestant neighbors, indicating that the stereotype was so ingrained in popular culture that it could survive encounters with a more positive reality.22

A key component of this stereotype was the “deviant” sexuality that supposedly flourished behind convent walls and the nuns who were either its victims or its embodiment. Despite their theoretical identification with chastity, “[t]he nun-as-prostitute image,” scholar Tracy Fessenden notes, “is ubiquitous in Western cultures.” In the antebellum United States, “the nun-as-whore figures most centrally in the best-selling genre of the convent exposé,” but the widespread use and recognition of terms like “nun,” “mother superior,” “abbess,” “convent,” and “nunnery” as euphemisms for prostitution make clear that the image was in no way limited to the more elite, literate classes.23 In a culture that regarded unregulated female sexuality with deep anxiety, the fact that both nuns and prostitutes had freed their bodies—at least in theory—from male control, made them immediately suspect. In the nineteenth century, this suspicion was compounded by the dominant middle-class culture, which reinterpreted respectable women—women who, as wives, mothers, or daughters, lived their lives within the ideological confines of the patriarchal home—as sexually benign, and

22 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
demonized the sexuality, and by extension the morality, of women who lived their lives any other way.

As anti-Catholic sentiment grew stronger in the first half of the nineteenth-century, negative depictions of Roman Catholic doctrine, clergy, and institutions became increasingly common in the American press and popular culture. Because, as discussed in chapter one, a paramount concern among American Protestants in this period was the perceived infiltration of girls' education by the Catholic Church, sensationalist (and often salacious) convent tales or “exposés”—featuring isolated women’s institutions, innocent (often Protestant) girls, and older women of dubious morality in positions of authority—enjoyed a particular renaissance. The anti-Catholic rhetoric that flourished in this period, and especially these best-selling exposés, emphasized three themes: first, that Catholic institutions were the agents of a foreign, decadent, undemocratic ethos that could potentially undermine the American republican experiment. Second, that seemingly “hidden” from public view and lacking proper (i.e., Protestant and patriarchal) oversight, convents were especially dangerous to young women’s virtue and character. And third, that a cloistered woman was, almost by default, a deviant woman, because she had either repudiated, or been made to repudiate, the (Protestant) American vision of virtuous, domestic womanhood in favor of an unnatural existence. These notions added up to the idea that the convent itself was a threat to American civilization, which, after all, had so much invested in the moral and maternal influence of its women, and that the women who populated it were either active agents of that threat or too compromised to defend themselves against it.

Literary scholar Nancy Lusignan Schultz locates all of these themes in her examination of the most popular American convent tales of the antebellum period, Rebecca Reed’s *Six Months in a Convent, or, the narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed* (1835), and Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (1836). Along with a full complement of religious practices that would have seemed alien and excessive to Protestants, Schultz notes that Reed’s narrative pays particular attention to “the convent’s cruelty toward
Sister Mary Magdalene, a nun dying of tuberculosis, and...the power wielded by the convent's Mother Superior," while Monk's emphasizes the sexual abuse suffered by novices at the hands of priests and how she escaped from the convent to prevent the murder of her child.24 Scholar Jenny Franchot adds, "Accusing her mother superior of an aggressive (hence depraved) female sexuality, Maria Monk claims that the superior played the role of brothel director, assigning sexual duties to her nuns and regulating the procedures for the murder of their infants."25 In these stories, it is not only the power of the Church that is an issue, but the fact that convents were evidently such warped environments that they either prevented women from exercising their "natural" womanly, maternal traits or drained them of these impulses all together.26

Reed's and Monk's stories were only the most well known of these threatening and salacious tales. The following decades saw a spate of other "escaped nun" narratives, many of which began as a series of public lectures that were later compiled for publication.27 Some of these women had actually been either nuns or at least educated in convents, others were simply frauds taking advantage of the national craze for sensationalist convent exposés. Ewens writes that:

[t]he country was flooded with...articles which purported to reveal what really occurred behind convent walls. The images portrayed in print were reinforced by the harangues of anti-Catholic ministers...and by lectures given by so-called escaped nuns and ex-priests. Those who accepted the image of the nun as one who was a prisoner forced to submit to the lascivious attentions of priests and to take part in immorality of all kinds...cannot really be blamed for reacting as they did. It is no wonder that they insulted nuns on the street, tried to undermine the sisters' schools, and proposed convent inspection laws to their legislatures, with the intention of freeing nuns from their prisons.28

26 Schultz, p. xxi.
Such propaganda doubtless fed on genuine anti-Catholicism, but Franchot argues that many Americans picked up on the "sense of theatricality and insincerity" that "pervades not only the frankly commercial dime-novel literature but more elite literary production as well," and understood that they were being manipulated. But to a large extent, it really did not matter. Anti-Catholicism was becoming a critical component of the emerging (Protestant) American cultural identity. It stood for all that "real" Americans reviled and would tolerate not in their own society—not the least of which were institutions that served as virtual factories for non-normative womanhood. Exaggerated tales could be excused, because their audience understood that they represented greater truths.29

Some groups acted to remove from their communities what they saw as the pernicious influence of the convents, often through violence, the most famous example being the 1834 burning of the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. Though leading citizens and much of the mainstream press condemned the attack, "many secretly rejoiced," Ewens argues, "that Catholics had been given what they deserved." "Rioting," adds historian Ray Allen Billington, "might be a poor way to achieve an end, but for the most part the public was so completely satisfied with the result that it quietly welcomed even such a violent attack upon Catholicism as that precipitated in Charlestown," and "while editors and ministers were willing to deplore violence, they were quick to add that the Ursuline convent and all convents should be destroyed to prevent the conversion of Protestant girls to Catholicism and the spread of immorality throughout the United States."30 There were other instances of mob violence and threats, such as the repeated window-shattering at the Providence, Rhode Island, convent of the Sisters of Mercy, or the St. Louis convent that was forced to close temporarily because its decision to educate free African-American children and minister to those still enslaved enraged the local population.31 There were more genteel

29 Franchot, p. 111.
31 Ewens, pp. 151-54.
attacks as well, such as that of Pennsylvania women who, in 1852, "petitioned their state legislature to suppress convents...because they were centers of vice," or the state-sanctioned Massachusetts "Nunnery Committee," that in the 1850s demanded full access to convents and convent-run schools in order to ascertain that nothing untoward was happening behind their walls.32

Critics appear to have been offended more than anything else by the perceived secrecy and foreignness of convent life, by its customs and female-dominated structure, just as much as by its actual religious practices. As Franchot writes, "Imagining every conceivable iniquity behind the impassive exterior of the convent, American Protestant authors formulated a conspiratorial rhetoric...The cloistered celibate woman...attracted hostile scrutiny from passersby; what sort of family life was practiced behind convent walls? Even more disturbing, what sort of power was given to women in the relative absence of men?"33 This environment, so antithetical to the Protestant ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family, might have been uneasily tolerated had the Church confined its influence to its own flock, but its seeming determination to infiltrate (Protestant) American life through the education and conversion of Protestant women, made it everyone's business. As the male editor of Rebecca Reed's sensationalist memoir made clear, a convent "was either a religious establishment, for the worship of Roman Catholics, or it was a seminary of learning for the education of Protestant young ladies. If it were the former, it was no place for Protestant children. If it were the latter, then it is entitled to no sanctity."34 His point was clear: if a convent would have any intercourse with the wider world, it must be fully open to public (i.e., normative, Protestant, patriarchal) scrutiny; it could not seclude Protestant girls behind its walls with impunity.

32 Ibid., p. 160.
33 Franchot, p. 143.
34 "Preliminary Suggestions for Candid Readers," p. 43, quoted in Franchot, p. 149.
Along with suggesting that convents posed a danger to women’s sexual virtue and morality, anti-convent prejudices, and especially the convent tales that represented their more extreme forms, anticipated yet another potent argument against the women’s colleges—the notion that they would prevent young (Anglo-American Protestant) women from fulfilling their duty to their “race,” and thus posed a direct threat to its survival. The tremendous influence with which early republican and antebellum American culture imbued motherhood was the critical reason improved female education had gained so much support in the first place. If some of these young women failed either to become the right kind of mothers or even mothers at all, not only would that beneficent influence be weakened, it might even add strength to what the white, native-born, Protestant middle-class considered less desirable elements of American society. Convents and the influence of women religious, it was feared, could either trap Protestant girls outright, damage their health beyond repair, or manipulate them into embracing Catholicism. In each case they posed a direct threat to these women fulfilling their social and religious obligations to the nation. Nineteenth-century critics may not have used the famous cry of “race suicide,” but the bogey they were invoking was almost exactly the same.

Most obviously, convent tales depicted a threat to the physical well-being of young women, and, by extension, to the (Protestant) children they were destined to bear. Physical punishments or extreme and creative acts of penance were a common staple of these stories, highlighting the threat to young women and emphasizing by contrast the benevolent, protective embrace of the patriarchal household. Along with the threat of physical or sexual violence meted out to any woman who dared to resist the convent’s corrupt regime, Franchot notes that the “figure of the consumptive nun,” was a frequent device in Protestant denunciations, and linked the rejection/deprivation of women’s natural destiny with disease as well as with moral degeneracy.35

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35 Franchot, p. xxv.
If the renunciation of marriage and motherhood made women religious suspect in the eyes of mainstream nineteenth-century culture, the possibility that they might influence young, Protestant women to similar acts was truly disturbing. For Protestant daughters to embrace the religious life was itself troubling, but “mere” conversion to Catholicism was almost as bad. Convert daughters would tear apart the Protestant family just as surely as if they had taken vows and secluded themselves behind convent walls. Worst of all, they would likely marry Catholic men and raise Catholic children, further weakening Anglo-American Protestant hegemony. As one worried mother put it in 1835, “[w]hen these young ladies become mothers, they will educate their children for the special service of the Pope of Rome, and their Catholic sons will become our rulers, and our nation a nation of Roman Catholics.”

Thus convents threatened not only women’s natural destinies as wives, mothers, and moral guardians of the nation. They carried a particular kind of blight or sickness, one that could sterilize native-born, white, Protestant girls just as surely as the convents physically secluded or even killed them. One did not need to be vehemently anti-Catholic to embrace these concerns. More moderate Protestant parents might worry that their daughters simply were not safe in such environments. Removed from the daily care and protection of their fathers and the moral and womanly example of their mothers, and placed under the supervision of women who, however well-meaning, had rejected “normal” womanhood, any dreadful fate might befall them—their health might be ruined, their faith and morals endangered, and who knew what peculiar ideas they might pick up from the authority figures around them. Two generations later, the elite women’s colleges provoked many of the same anxieties, and not merely among critics reflexively hostile to women’s higher education.

On a superficial level, convent tales represented mainstream Protestant fears of the Catholic Church and what would happen to their vision of American civilization if

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Catholicism were allowed to spread across the new nation, but, genuine as anti-Catholic sentiment was, this discourse was ultimately as much as about gender as religion, if not more so. Anti-convent invective was not aimed solely at Catholics nor did it serve only one end; it contained warnings to all American women—including those white, native-born Protestant women whose purity and maternal beneficence was understood to be the moral bedrock of the republic—of what was and was not appropriate behavior, and where the boundaries of legitimate female power and autonomy were drawn. The Protestant affiliation of later institutions like women’s seminaries and colleges would not be enough to shield them from these same concerns.

For all that nineteenth-century mainstream culture embraced the image of the “True Woman” and basked in her protective influence, many individual Americans thought even the most respectable and admirable women were coming to exercise too much public power. Drawing attention to the increasingly prominent role of women in many antebellum Protestant religious groups, Susan M. Griffin argues that the popularity of convent tales signaled anxieties that Protestant women’s influence had gone too far, adding that “[a]t the historical moment when American women were shaping Protestantism in their own image, these publications called the testimony of the religious woman into question,” and, “[t]he escaped nun echoes the emphasis mainstream writers of this period placed on women’s spirituality. Yet her confirmation of this cultural dogma is narratologically structured to reveal an undercurrent of dissent. The multiple voices and forms...work to destabilize the feminine spiritual, religious, and moral authority,” insisted upon by the mainstream culture and the Cult of True Womanhood.37 By demonizing the convent, these stories and the wider prejudices they fed on cast aspersions on any sort of autonomous women’s environment and avenue of female power, and thus communicated an important message about what mainstream American society would and would not tolerate in its own women. Women’s

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institutions operating under the wider influence of patriarchal authority and serving mainstream interests were acceptable, women's institutions that sought to promote women's autonomy or an alternate form of womanhood most definitely were not.

For most of the nineteenth century, "unsexed" was an appellation affixed to women who, in one way or another, rejected normative female behavior. An "unsexed" woman might deliberately affect an unfeminine appearance, might cultivate and enjoy exercising what was more appropriately "masculine" authority, or she might adopt (aggressively, it went without saying), unfeminine opinions, hobbies, social causes, or professions. In 1897, a Presbyterian clergyman used the term "Andromaniacs" to denote those misguided women devoted to the "passionate aping of everything that is mannish."38 As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, all these categories remained, but the definition of "unsexed" expanded to include a lack of romantic and sexual interest in men. This, along with various other "unsexed" behaviors, was increasingly attributed to a lack of male company—as if, without the daily presence of men and the constant framework of patriarchal culture, women might forget or somehow be depleted of what made them women in the first place. Before long, this attitude produced another popular stereotype about the elite women's colleges: that they were breeding grounds for non-normative sexuality and sexual behavior.

This is possibly the most deeply rooted and pervasive of all the stereotypes that have dogged the women's colleges. It is almost certainly the one most familiar to modern observers. Referring especially to female same-gender sexuality, but also to unbridled, promiscuous, or otherwise culturally defined "inappropriate" sexual behavior, it has been aggressively promoted in popular culture and the press, both through innuendo and euphemism and, as public discussions of sex grew franker in the 1920s and 30s, through outright assertion. Surprisingly, though, the topic has received little scholarly attention, and what has been done focuses more on the experiences of lesbian professors and students than

how and why the popular image became so entrenched and widely accepted. Patricia Ann Palmieri's *In Adamless Eden* devotes much attention to the romantic friendships and so-called "Boston Marriages" that flourished among the Wellesley faculty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Alma Mater* examines the same situation among faculty at the other women's colleges and also discusses some of the steps the colleges took to discourage intense friendships among the students. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, historian Lillian Faderman examines the ways in which the existence of the women's colleges facilitated the emergence of a lesbian identity in the United States, and later, in *To Believe in Women*, discusses the contributions to the women's colleges of many lesbian scholars and administrators. Literary studies have been able to shed more light on the subject, especially Sherrie Inness' *Intimate Communities* and *The Lesbian Menace*, but still missing is a systematic look at just how the colleges came to be so labeled and why the mainstream American public was so quick to accept it.39 Did the stereotype emerge in response to the historical actions and experiences of the colleges, their faculty, students, and alumnae? Was it that the popular definition of lesbianism in the first half of the twentieth century dovetailed so perfectly with already-established stereotypes of the women's colleges that the association between the two was inevitable? Or does the answer lie somewhere in between?

This pervasive stereotype that not only linked the elite women's colleges with non-normative sexuality but also argued that the colleges were somehow responsible for it,

emerged within the context of a larger, changing conversation about women, sexuality, and sexual behavior. Put simply, starting around the turn of the twentieth century, and picking up steam after 1910, mainstream American ideas about respectable women and sexual behavior underwent a dramatic change. Female sexual desire was increasingly acknowledged and represented as a positive thing, fully compatible with normative womanhood provided it was channeled in an appropriate direction. By the 1910s and 20s, numerous physicians, psychologists, and other “experts” expressed the belief that mutual sexual satisfaction was a key component of a happy marriage, and some went so far as to say that a woman uninterested in (hetero)sexual activity or unsatisfied by it was to be not only pitied but considered in some way “damaged.”

This was an enormous change from the ideal that had dominated only a few decades earlier. Historically, within western, Christian culture, women’s sexuality has been regarded in a suspicious light, in need of careful policing and, if unleashed, capable of causing social disruption and even chaos. Chastity before marriage and fidelity within it was required of all respectable women, across all social classes. But in the early nineteenth century United States, with the ascendancy of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” a woman’s sexual purity was redefined by a lack of sexual desire period. “True Women” were “passionless,” pure and virtuous creatures who submitted to their husbands’ baser needs out of wifely obedience and the desire for children. In a nation undergoing enormous social, political, economic, and technological changes, the figure of the “True Woman” served a critical, comforting, purpose, assuring Americans that their nation had not lost its moorings and locating its virtue and morality within the family home. This ideal largely excluded any woman who was not white, native-born, Protestant, and either middle-class or otherwise “genteel”—and surely a

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great many "respectable" women failed to recognize themselves in this formulation—but it
evertheless exercised tremendous influence. As historian Christina Simmons writes, "[T]o
claim respectability and middle-class status, women had to present themselves as passionless
and were judged more harshly than men in their sexual conduct" and even though plenty of
couples clearly shared passionate, if discreet, sexual attachments, "values of sexual self-
control and purity were officially very powerful."42

This sexual purity was protected and denoted by the "True Woman's" supposed
seclusion within the private, domestic sphere; women whose lives took them into the public
realm, such as wage-earning, working-class women, were automatically morally and sexually
suspect. But this formulation, already imperfect, began to crack visibly in the late nineteenth
century when more and more "respectable" women started moving from the domestic to
public sphere. These women, though the targets of much criticism, had grown up protected
by racial privilege and class status, and as such were less vulnerable to aspersions cast on
their character and virtue.43 Furthermore, as historian Nancy Cott explains, "As girls and
women swarmed on to terrain culturally understood as male...the domestic definition of
women became obsolescent. Some women practiced law, voted, held political, judicial, and
civic office; some women managed capital...held the highest academic degrees possible;
some women smoked in public and others flaunted their sexuality on the silent screen,
belonging to no man."44 Not everybody approved of these changes, of course, but with
otherwise respectable, middle-class women pouring into the public sphere and claiming male
roles, it was becoming harder and harder to uphold the notion of absolute difference between
the sexes.

As a result, as the Victorian era gave way to the modern age, women's sexuality was
dramatically redefined as not so very different from men's, fully compatible with social

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42 Simmons, pp. 8-9.
43 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne," in Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender
respectability and morality, and even beneficial to women's physical and mental health. Feminists had of course long claimed sexual autonomy as a right, but more moderate men and women were also beginning to look at female sexual desire as a positive good. Mutually satisfying sexual relations were linked to closer and happier marriages, and a stream of “marriage manuals” came on the market, aimed at newlyweds and older couples alike. This new attitude also contributed to a rise in support for contraception—at least within marriage—as experts argued that very large families strained marriages and often led women to dread sex with their husbands.45

To some extent, this shift represented a positive change for women, but mainstream sexual mores only changed so much. Acknowledging the existence of a “good” female sexuality created a space to argue that there was also a “bad” female sexuality, one that was not only disreputable and immoral—as female promiscuity had traditionally been defined—but also destructive and diseased, and into this space leapt physicians, psychologists, and the myriad men and women who took it upon themselves to interpret their findings for public consumption. By the first decades of the twentieth century, the new consensus held that female sexual desire was a good thing, but only when channeled into heterosexual acts within marriage. If no longer “passionless,” women were still expected to be submissive when it came to sex, and those same “marriage manuals” that championed mutual sexual pleasure typically also depicted women as sexually passive, in need of their husbands’ expertise to awaken them to connubial bliss. Sexual independence and aggression in women was not a good thing. In fact, it might betoken a disordered mind or body, a woman determined to claim male sexual privileges and perhaps even to compete with men for the affections of other women.46

45 D’Emilio, Freedman, pp. 223-26, 229-34; Smith-Rosenberg, pp. 282-83.
More or less concurrently with these new ideas about female sexuality in general, mainstream Americans were also beginning to learn something about female same-gender sexuality. The new pseudo-medical field of Sexology emerged in Europe starting in the mid-nineteenth century, and by the 1890s, more and more of its core findings were beginning to travel across the Atlantic. Sexologists sought to identify, analyze, and classify all aspects and behaviors of human sexuality, but were especially interested in sorting them into “normal” and “abnormal” categories. Human society had long done this to one degree or another, with sodomy (often broadly defined to include any non-reproductive sexual act) and “fornication,” traditionally the most objectionable, but those offenses, and other forms of sexual “deviance” identified by any given community, had for centuries been viewed as moral or legal transgressions—discrete acts rather than elements of an individual’s biology or personality—and were subject to clerical or state punishment as opposed to medical intervention. What the sexologists, chief among them the Austrian Richard von Krafft-Ebing, did was to shift the conversation about “abnormal” sexuality from sexual acts to elements of sexuality identity, transforming homosexuality, as Michel Foucault explains, “from the practice of sodomy” into “a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” It might result, Smith-Rosenberg adds, from “a specific disease-related trauma, but more commonly it constituted a vicious form of congenital degeneracy, a hereditary taint.”

In their investigations of homosexuality, early sexologists focused most of their energies on men, but by the 1880s Krafft-Ebing had turned his attention to women, and to ways by which female homosexuals could be identified. Singling out as likely lesbians, or “sexual inverts” in the common, contemporary phrase, women who in physical appearance and social behavior did not conform to normative standards of womanhood, Krafft-Ebing

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48 Foucault, p. 43.
49 Smith-Rosenberg, pp. 268-69.
defined lesbianism in a way that, as Smith-Rosenberg writes, “fused sexual, physiological, and social characteristics.” Not that all lesbians were the same—Krafft-Ebing worked out four increasingly escalating “degrees” of inversion—but the sexologists generally pointed to a preference for men’s clothing, the desire to claim at least some masculine social prerogatives, and, in more extreme cases, a distinctly masculine external appearance, as reliable signs. Likely, Krafft-Ebing opined, female sexual inverts had displayed these signs in early childhood, scorning dolls and coveting their brothers’ toy soldiers. As adults, they continued their preoccupation with masculine activities and sought to compete with men.

Krafft-Ebing’s hugely influential creation was the “Mannish Lesbian,” a figure who, in one, easily identifiable package, combined “women’s rejection of traditional gender roles and their demands for social and economic equality” with “cross-dressing, sexual perversions, and borderline hermaphroditism.” According to historian Lillian Faderman, “sexologists conflated sex role behavior...gender identity...and sexual object choice...They believed in an inevitable coherence among the three.” In short, women who failed to conform to normative standards of womanhood were now considered more than merely “unsexed,” they were physically and psychologically “deviant.”

Most early case studies of lesbianism focused on poor women, partly because they were most likely to come to the attention of the state, and partly because middle class sexologists may have resisted recognizing in their own mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters the same behaviors they were busily describing as perverted. Furthermore, because cross-dressing, adopting a masculine persona, and “passing” as a man were behaviors popularly associated with the working class, the relationships of more conventionally feminine and

50 Ibid., p. 270.
51 Ibid., pp. 270-71.
52 Ibid., p. 272.
53 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 45.
54 Faderman posits that the sexologists “were more easily able to acknowledge that intimate relations between women in the classes 'beneath' them could go beyond platonic than they could with reference to women of their own class.” Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 39.
genteel women may have avoided scrutiny, at least for a while. But the highly publicized, 1892 Alice Mitchell murder case, in which the daughter of a wealthy Tennessee family slit the throat of her lover, Freda Ward, rather than lose her to family interference and a male suitor, made it increasingly difficult to maintain such distinctions. Alice and Freda had planned to elope to another city, where Alice would adopt a masculine appearance and persona, and live with and support Freda, just as a husband was expected to do for his wife. As historian Lisa Duggan explains, what seemed to have struck white middle-class journalists and newspaper readers was the violent and, to their minds, nonsensical end to Alice and Freda’s relationship, not the relationship itself. They were not unfamiliar with the concept of a working-class woman cross-dressing in order to claim masculine privileges, and what Duggan refers to as “female husband” narratives were periodically mentioned in the press, though it is unclear just how middle-class readers interpreted these relationships, other than to classify them as something that did not happen in their world. Evidently what most shocked middle-class readers about Alice Mitchell was her inappropriate ambition—Duggan describes it as “a strategy so rare among bourgeois white women that their plan was perceived as so radically inappropriate as to be insane”—coupled with her physically violent reaction when thwarted. This was so thorough a repudiation of white, middle-class, female gender norms—the embrace of the male roles of breadwinner and sexual aggressor, and rejection of the dependency and passivity of respectable women—that it could only be understood as morbid, delusional, or perverse.

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55 Broadly speaking, the historical evidence does bear this out, but this theory can also oversimplify the matter. As Smith-Rosenberg observes, “Krafft-Ebing’s lesbians seemed to desire male privileges and power as ardently as, perhaps more ardently than, they sexually desired women,” a broad definition that could very easily extended to any women—including the New Women who populated the elite women’s colleges—who challenged traditional sex roles. See Smith-Rosenberg, pp. 272, 271; also Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 24.


At this time, even among the educated elite, few Americans outside the medical profession were familiar with the theories of European sexologists, but in the national frenzy brought about by the Mitchell case, journalists ransacked the sexology literature and served up choice (and often sensationalist) elements for public consumption. American physicians and sexologists, albeit more soberly, did the same. Much was made of Mitchell's "hard" and unfeminine features, her childhood preference for boys' games, and, as an adolescent, a general lack of interest in "ladylike" activities. Significantly, Mitchell was deemed criminally insane and committed to an institution. As a result of this coverage, mainstream American audiences not only "discovered" lesbianism, they were "informed" of its "inevitable" link with unconventionally feminine appearance and cross-dressing behavior, and its alarming connection with violence and mental illness.

But the sexologists' opinions were hardly uniform or static. By the early 1900s, more of them were coming to regard "the very concept of homosexual desire as a discrete sexual phenomenon," separating sexual object choice out from "a broad range of cross-gender behavior (in which men behaved like women, and vice-versa), of which homosexual desire was only a logical but indistinct aspect." In other words, lesbians could not be reliably identified by masculine appearance or manner. Under this new rubric, the figure of the "mannish lesbian" should have, if not disappeared entirely, at least lost much of its cultural power, but in reality it stayed as strong as ever. The notion of "womanhood" was so thoroughly identified not only with feminine appearance, but with women's roles vis-à-vis men (as wife, mother, helpmeet, dependent), that women who sought an alternate life path, "masculine" authority, or a "masculine" role in public life continued to be strongly associated with homosexuality by sexologists and members of the general public alike.

Given that the elite women’s colleges were high-profile institutions known for their “masculine” curricula, significant numbers of unmarried female faculty, and lower-than-average alumnae marriage rates, it was probably inevitable that they would become prime targets of suspicions of lesbian behavior. The writings of the turn-of-the-century English sexologist Havelock Ellis, however, did much to speed up the process. Ellis, already more immediately accessible to the American public because he wrote in English, produced a definition of lesbianism so flexible and nuanced that it could potentially be applied not only to any woman who too aggressively questioned the prevailing gender order, but also, for the first time, to intense or especially demonstrative friendships conducted by women who otherwise seemed to conform to accepted gender behavior—both situations common to and commonly associated with the colleges.

First Ellis reiterated the Victorian article of faith that men and women had “natural” characteristics, emphasizing that a woman’s paramount role was motherhood and implying that there was something not only unfortunate but also unnatural about childless women. Then he placed close female friendship under suspicion, insisting, according to Smith-Rosenberg, “that a woman’s love for other women was in itself sexual and ‘inverted’” and that “[w]omen could experience their love for other women as the most innocent and tender of platonic involvements,” but this nevertheless comprised lesbian behavior, regardless of how the women in question might have seen it.60 Finally, apparently unable to decide whether inversion was a hereditary or acquired characteristic, Ellis split the difference, dividing lesbians into two categories, the “congenital” or “true” invert whose desires were an unalterable part of her nature and who could potentially “corrupt” other women, and a second, larger group who “possessed a genetic disposition—a weakness—for the advances of other women” but for whom “homosexuality was an acquired characteristic—preventable and curable.”61

60 Smith-Rosenberg, p. 275.
61 Ibid., p. 276.
According to Ellis, any female-dominated environment was a fertile place for lesbianism to take root and spread, but schools and colleges were his particular concern, making clear that "girlish devotions, on the borderland between friendship and sexual passion, are found in all countries where girls are segregated for educational purposes." He believed that, as Smith-Rosenberg explains, "the numbers of lesbians had steadily increased since the expansion of women's roles and institutions" and that "[e]ducation, feminist ideology, the new women's colleges and settlement houses, all freed the 'female invert' from the restraints of family, permitting her to reach out to young girls, drawing them into lesbianism." He attached an essay, "The School-Friendships of Girls," as an appendix to his 1897 Sexual Inversion, in which he summarized studies and memoirs of the pervasiveness of "crushes" and "raves" at a number of European institutions and concluded that "the phenomena as found in the girls' colleges of America are exactly similar."

Ironically, Ellis considered himself a sexual progressive. He rejected the Victorian notion of "passionlessness," believed that women were quite properly sexual beings, and, in his early years, had supported many aspects of the women's movement. But like so many of his fellow sexologists, he was unable to let go of the idea that a woman's sexual desires were somehow bound up with her social behavior, and all of his ideas about women grew from his core belief that they were inherently maternal and that motherhood was their principal vocation. If, as Ellis believed, sexual inversion was increasing, then changes in women's lives must be at least partially responsible. The independence brought by education and wage-earning allowed women to delay marriage or opt out of it entirely, but, still needing an outlet for their sexual passion and human need for companionship, they would turn instead to other women. To Ellis, this was simply too high a price to pay for women's emancipation, and he grew ever more hostile to the figure of the New Woman and to the institutions and

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63 Smith-Rosenberg, p. 279.
65 Chauncey, p. 104.
changing social mores that made her who she was. Nor was he alone in these fears. According to Chauncey, a number of "doctors attributed the supposed increase in inversion to the repudiation of motherhood by women influenced by feminism." Others went further, asserting that even if feminist women did reproduce, their children would suffer for their mothers' beliefs, that "[b]y forsaking their proper social role...women produced effeminate sons and masculine daughters." As Faderman observes of Ellis and his American disciples, "Frequently their goal...seemed to be to discredit both the women's movement and love between women by equating them with masculine drives and thus freakishness."

Social attitudes did not change overnight, but the medical establishment's increasing preoccupation with female homosexuality and its supposed social origins did have consequences, as did the mainstream American public's increased familiarity with oversimplified freudian theories that emphasized that "the sexual instinct permeated human life and might change the course of civilization," in general, and the negative consequences of repressing female sexual desire in particular. Throughout the 1900s and 1910s, middle-class women continued to engage in romantic friendships, schoolgirls (and college women) continued to "smash," "crush on," or "chum" with each other, and "Boston Marriages" continued to flourish. Nevertheless, the ways in which Americans looked at unmarried women, women who did not appear fully "feminine," and close female friendships, began to change. As the popular understanding of female homosexuality was so tied to an apparent distaste for conventional womanhood and a feminist determination to alter the status quo, environments that fostered, or seemed to foster, such women, were also highly vulnerable to suspicion.

Other all-female or female-dominated institutions—girls' boarding schools, women's prisons, or settlement houses—have also excited suspicions of non-normative sexuality

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66 Ibid.
67 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 46.
68 D'Emilio, Freedman, pp. 223-225.
69 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, pp. 49-56.
behavior in general and homosexuality in particular, but feelings about women's colleges, and especially the elite colleges, seem to have always been especially strong. The colleges were largely isolated little worlds and exercised considerable authority and social influence. Settlement houses, though often controversial, were less cloistered and generally staffed by more mature, less impressionable, women. They also did not enjoy either the same longevity or the breadth of influence as the colleges. Women's prisons, though the subject of their own salacious stereotypes, were perhaps similarly less troubling to the general population. They were, after all, designed to seclude women and were firmly under the control of the state. By contrast, the women's college had the power to chart its own course, removed young women from the oversight of their families, had the potential to first transform its students and then unleash them on the outside world, and did all of this more or less protected from the public gaze. Perhaps most of all, women's college students were, as turn-of-the-century physicians, writers, and eugenicists frequently pointed out, was proportionately influential due to their education and their privileged racial and class status, and as such, their well-being could not be gambled with.

It is possible to trace when and how mainstream American culture began to embrace the idea that women's colleges and non-normative female sexuality somehow went hand-in-hand, though it is difficult to do so with tremendous precision. Certainly the findings of the European sexologists, echoed and elaborated on by American physicians, played a large part in the process, as did the increasingly common, and explicit, dissemination of these ideas through popular culture. Moreover, since the women's colleges were already "on the hook," as it were, for their "low" marriage rates, stubborn attachment to the "masculine" liberal arts curriculum, encouragement of professional women, supposed espousal of feminist politics, and even their famously sloppily dressed students, the sexologists' depiction of lesbians as aggressive, ambitious, hostile to men, and masculine in appearance, would have resonated with anybody who wished to make the connection.
For the most part, the stereotype crystalized and spread in two, somewhat overlapping phases, roughly contemporaneous with the second (1890-1920) and third (1920-1940) generations of women's higher education. The first phase was the “expert” discussion of lesbianism and women’s sexuality in general and of the climate of women’s colleges in particular. This discussion built on the extant narrative of the women’s colleges as proponents of unfeminine behavior and agents of race suicide, and while it was usually discreet in its language, its meaning was nevertheless quite clear to an increasingly sophisticated public. The second phase continued in a similar vein but was strengthened by much a franker discussion in mainstream publications and popular culture, and spread even further via word of mouth by growing numbers of Americans comfortable speaking openly, and, they believed, knowledgeably, about human sexuality.

Historians frequently point to Havelock Ellis’ 1897 work, Sexual Inversion, with its blunt and provocative essay, “The School-Friendships of Girls,” as a turning point in the popular understanding of lesbianism and where, for want of a better term, it came from.70 Ellis’ American colleagues were quick to echo his findings. In 1901, one sexologist explicitly linked the women’s colleges with lesbianism, pointedly referring to them as “the great breeding ground.”71 But Ellis and the others were hardly working from a blank canvas. As discussed previously, the highly publicized 1892 Alice Mitchell trial increased many Americans’ awareness of female sexual inversion and drove home to middle-class Americans that what had been previously represented as a working-class phenomenon could be found in their genteel world too. The case was a sensation and clearly whet the public’s appetite, according to Lillian Faderman, “[i]t was probably no coincidence that in 1895...three fictional works were published that contained images of lesbians.”72 These stories all made good use of the image of the lesbian as an amalgam of masculine physical appearance,

70 Smith-Rosenberg, pp. 275-80; Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 49; Inness, Intimate Communities, pp. 50-51.
72 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 56.
characteristically masculine aggression, and not only a sexual desire for women, but also the assumption of the masculine prerogative of pursuing women. All of these characteristics, however oversimplified the novelists' representations may have been, reinforced the picture of female inversion proffered by the sexologists and made famous by the Mitchell case. Significantly, two of the novels explicitly linked inversion to upbringing and education. In one, Faderman writes, "[i]t is explained that her natural perversion was encouraged by her environment: her father had wanted a son and hence raised her as a boy." In the other, "Norma's inversion...is aggravated because her father insists she be given a 'good education,' since she is fond, as only males presumably were, of 'books and learning.'"73 None of these stories involve women's colleges, but they kept the issue before the public and, in their insistence that upbringing and education could be linked to inversion, implicitly cast suspicion on any environment that might nurture "masculine" tendencies in young women.

An important result of the white middle class's burgeoning awareness of lesbianism in their midst was the increased attention paid to the close and often intensely-emotional friendships formed by girls and young women. It was not that people suddenly saw an Alice Mitchell lurking within every schoolgirl friendship, but concerns over the emotional turbulence of adolescence and the long-established belief that women were by nature prone to excessive feeling and bouts of hysteria, combined with a new appreciation of women's sexual natures and the "evils" to which they might lead, moved many "experts" to urge moderation on young women. In 1895, the same year that saw the above-mentioned spate of novels featuring female homosexuality, Side Talks with Girls—a sort of advice manual to help "nice" girls navigate the strange, modern world—was published. Its author, Isabel Mallon, devoted an entire chapter to the subject of "Your Own Familiar Friend," and though she never mentioned inversion, she bluntly attacked girls' and young women's exclusive friendships as "very silly," and warns of the "great dangers of such intimacies." Mallon did not repudiate devoted female friendships entirely—indeed she opens her chapter by

73 Ibid.
proclaiming “[t]here is nothing so beautiful as a faithful friendship between two women”—but girls, she makes clear, are simply too immature to forge such a relationship and ought not to even try.\textsuperscript{74} Instead, Mallon writes, “I like a girl to have many girl-friends; I do not like her to have a girl-sweetheart.” Such a relationship, she warned, could weaken a girl’s bonds with her own family and, ominously, make her somewhat unworthy of “Prince Charming when he comes to claim his bride.”\textsuperscript{75}

By the early 1900s, warnings about girls’ friendships had become very strong and increasingly clear in their implications. In a series of widely circulated lectures, one doctor, leaving little to the imagination, warned girls and young women to “Avoid girls who are too affectionate and demonstrative in their manner of talking and acting with you; who are inclined to admire your figure and breast development; who are inclined to be just a little too familiar in their actions toward you...who press upon you too earnestly invitations to remain at their homes all night, and to occupy the same bed they do.”\textsuperscript{76} A 1905 pamphlet titled “Is College Bad for Girls?” warned of the “Evils of Dormitory Life—Midnight Hours of Who Knows What?” In a 1913 article in \textit{Harper’s Bazaar}, “Your Daughter: What Are Her Friendships?” a writer identifying herself only as a “College Graduate,” claimed that a tenth of college women’s friendships were, as Faderman puts it, “morally degenerate and caused guilt and unhappiness.”\textsuperscript{77}

Truly blunt statements linking the women’s colleges with non-normative sexuality and sexual acts, such as those in the \textit{Harper’s Bazaar} piece, were fairly rare in the 1900s and 1910s. Social convention constrained many people outside of the medical profession from making explicit statements about matters of sexuality in general. Nonetheless—because

\textsuperscript{74} Isabel Allerdice Sloan Mallon (Lucy Ashmore), \textit{Side Talks with Girls} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), pp. 121, 122, 119.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p. 123.
\textsuperscript{76} Irving David Steinhardt, M.D., \textit{Ten Sex Talks to Girls (14 years and older)} (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1914), p. 60.
popular awareness of female homosexuality was both on the rise and characterized by appearances and behaviors seemingly embodied by many women's college faculty and alumnae—the idea steadily gained ground. Certainly by the 1910s, as all of these ideas coalesced into a broader stereotype, the issue can be detected in many of the continuing laments over birthrates and "race suicide," the unattractive and disheveled appearance of women's college students, and especially the psychological damage experienced by college women who sought to "ape" masculine standards of education. In their 1916 attack on feminism—*Feminism: Its Fallacies and Follies*—John and Prestonia Mann Martin did not refer overtly to sexuality, but in their attack on women's colleges, and especially the campus rules that governed students (presumed minimal) interaction with men, their meaning is clear. Claiming that families were more likely to send a less "fully feminine" daughter to college in the first place, they argued that it was imperative that the women's colleges not foster conditions to "starve" women students' already "slight female instincts." The only way around this "evil outcome" was to cultivate a fully, traditionally, feminine ethos on campus, one in which marriage and motherhood were praised, and where "a sour domestic ménage...be as prejudicial to a teacher's career as slovenly work and ways; voluntary childlessness as grievous as drunkenness; a bevy of children as high a recommendation as a German doctorate."78

The emergence of this stereotype linking women's colleges and non-normative sexuality had little to do with the "real life" of either the colleges or the women who studied and taught there. Mainstream cultural unease with female-dominated environments and autonomous women, and the lingering suspicion that education was the mainstay of these unfortunate phenomena, ensured that any newly defined "unwomanly" behavior could be easily associated with and even attributed to the women's colleges. Nevertheless, for anybody looking for confirmation, the very particular and well-documented culture of the

women's colleges could provide plenty of "evidence" of the stereotype's truth. Marriage rates were lower for women's college alumnae, even compared to other college-educated women, students and faculty did appear increasingly caught up in feminist and other left-leaning political activities, and the colleges were strongly identified not only with the "masculine" liberal arts curriculum, but also with the repeated refusal to temper it with more feminine domestic science coursework. Moreover, crushes and romantic partnerships, or "Boston Marriages," did flourish among the students and faculty, and neither of these situations had ever been concealed. Taken as a whole, the problem with the women's colleges was not that unconventional female behavior of one kind or another flourished there—that was hardly news—the problem was how much of it there was and the increasing extent to which these behaviors were being vilified, as opposed to merely scorned.

Neither schoolgirl crushes nor more mature, longterm romantic friendships were any mystery to Americans in the late Victorian era, nor were these relationships seen as necessarily problematic or at odds with a woman's "natural" domestic destiny. It was only in the early twentieth century, as romantic attachments between women were cast under suspicion and women who opted for independence and a profession were increasingly stigmatized as "unnatural" and eventually lesbian, that these relationships came under attack. Historians have argued that the mainstream American public's reluctance to identify lesbianism or otherwise "deviant" sexual behavior with the respectable middle-class, to some extent shielded these women from suspicion, permitting romantic friendships to exist more or less openly through the 1910s. This is true up to a point, but it did not prevent the women's colleges—which were, of course, dominated by this same "respectable," white middle-class—from falling under some suspicion as early as the turn-of-the-century. This probably can be attributed to the same innate cultural suspicions of autonomous and "cloistered" women's

80 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p. 39.
environments, and especially to the kind of woman who would choose to seclude herself in such a place, that had aroused such animosity toward convents, and now stripped the women’s colleges of some of the protection and privacy otherwise accorded to the white middle-class. Given the dominant, patriarchal, culture’s sense of entitlement to inspect and police women’s environments, its growing hostility to women who openly loved other women and made their lives with them, and the fact that many such women presided over educational institutions where they had the charge of impressionable girls, it is hard to imagine a scenario in which the colleges could have escaped suspicion and hostility.

Student crushes, or “raves,” “smashes,” or “mashes,” were especially well known to the mainstream public, featured prominently in both American and British school- and college-girl fiction of the period, and were widely understood as a common part of girlhood. If they seemed more prevalent in all-female institutions, that does not seem to have struck anybody as unusual or disturbing. After all, in such environments, “females could meet each other...in large numbers.” While a few early observers did worry specifically about sexual contact among school friends—such as the author of an 1873 *Scribner’s Monthly* piece who warned darkly of “Diseases of body, diseases of imagination, vices of body and imagination”—they were in the minority. Far more common was the attitude of an oft-quoted Yale man who, that same year, explained, “When a Vassar girl takes a shine to another, she straightaway enters upon a regular course of bouquet sendings, interspersed with tinted notes, locks of hair, and many other tender tokens, until at last the object of her attentions is captured, the two women become inseparable.”

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Ironically, many officials at the women's colleges worried about crushes well before
the sexologists began to issue their dire warnings, but not, it seems, because they associated
them with any sort of sexual or "immoral" behavior. As early as the 1830s, it was standard
practice at Mount Holyoke to regularly shuffle roommate assignments in order to discourage
too intimate or exclusive friendships. According to Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Vassar
authorities in the 1860s, 70s, and 80s were continually exasperated by student crushes and
sought to relieve dormitory overcrowding in part because they recognized that it enhanced
the already "artificial" atmosphere of campus life. But this aversion to crushes was clearly
about campus discipline, morale, and, to a lesser extent, concern for students' health, not
because of any sense that crushes were somehow "wrong." As Horowitz explains,
"'Smashing' dramatized the threat...of student autonomy. Emerging college life, with its
independent standards, was the problem, not student sexuality." Crushes could distract
students from their studies and in more extreme cases, such as when two friends quarreled
passionately or a girl felt her devotion was unrequited, cause such emotional distress that
their physical health was endangered. Given the burden under which the colleges labored
in the second half of the nineteenth century to prove that higher education was not physically
damaging to women, it is understandable that they would wish to monitor any situation
which might threaten their students.

In her examination of "smashing" among the first generation of college women,
historian Nancy Sahli does raise the possibility that worries about sexual behavior may have
been at issue as well. Alice Stone Blackwell, an important contributor to the 1885 ACA
report on college women's health and a woman who drew clear distinctions between the
emotionally charged friendships that flourished at the women's colleges and the more sedate
cases of "particular friends" that prevailed at coeducational institutions, may have also
consciously connected crushes with homosexual behavior. Sahli cites as evidence Blackwell's
documented knowledge of female homosexuality and the ACA’s curious decision to omit all discussion of crushes from their final report. According to Estelle Freedman, the second half of the nineteenth century did feature the occasional, negative, commentary on intimacies between women at boarding schools or colleges. It is possible that some of Blackwell’s contemporaries at the women’s colleges may have seen matters in a similar light, but if so, they were likely a very small minority. If the colleges had felt that crushes posed any kind of moral danger, they would surely have acted much more aggressively to put a stop to them—as they would starting in the 1920s.

But that is not to say that campus attitudes toward crushes or any other kind of “exclusive” friendship were static. Reflecting changing social mores, by the 1900s and especially the 1910s, college authorities do seem to have been paying closer and more critical attention. The college community began to police itself, and some alumnae who penned fictional representations of women’s college life subtly but noticeably altered their depictions of crushes as well. Attitudes did not change overnight or all at once; crushes and other close friendships continued to flourish even as suspicion and condemnation was spreading. As Faderman points out, “many socially sheltered middle-class American college women” seem to have maintained a degree of “naïveté regarding lesbianism” well into the 1920s. (Indeed, the shock felt by the young heroine upon her “discovery” of lesbianism would be a common plot point in women’s college novels from the 1920s onward.) But all the same, it seems clear that college women were becoming aware as early as the first decade of the twentieth century that there was something about crushes and romantic friendships that was no longer considered suitable, even if they may not have been exactly sure why.

College authorities went on the defensive as well, employing increasingly forceful language to assure the public that women’s colleges were wholesome places. In 1900, Vassar

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87 Sahli, pp. 23-23.
89 Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, p. 52.
broader activities," and "the over-demonstration of affection."93 Nor was she was not alone in her discomfort over particularly intense attachments between students. In her 1911 essay, "A Girl's Student Days and After," Mount Holyoke professor Jeannette Augustus Marks devoted an entire section to such friendships, commenting that, "[t]here is no denying that there is great temptation to violent admirations and attractions in school." Marks was especially concerned by friendships too quickly or too passionately embarked upon, warning readers that "[s]uch a friendship is not a sane or a wise relation...Impulsive, quickly forced friendships are not wise investments; the fact that they come so quickly implies an unbalanced state of idealizing, or lack of self-control." Exclusive friendships, "a friend [who] is too absorbing [and] who takes all of one's interest to the exclusion of everything else," ought to be avoided because "Such a friendship can only make a girl forget for what she has come to school." Marks also mocked most such friendships as signs of immaturity, explaining, "[s]ome of these associations—and this is a hard saying, I know—which seem everything at the time are nothing, as the years will prove. A girl idealizes, and idealizes those who are not worthy. Inevitably the day comes when she laughs at herself,—if she does not do worse and pity herself for having been such a goose." Marks went on to detail other, more appropriate, kinds of devoted friendship, but emphasized that these came with time and maturity, closing with "friendship is like scholarship and must by its nature come slowly."94

Marks’ essay has raised some eyebrows among historians because of her own forty-year romantic partnership with Mount Holyoke president Mary Emma Woolley—a relationship of which the entire Mount Holyoke community was aware and which Marks and Woolley made no effort to conceal. Faderman posits that Marks’ seeming two-facedness might have been part of a “ploy to conceal what was coming to be considered...transgressions,” or that it might have been part of a more nuanced understanding and

assimilation of the sexologists' definition of female homosexuality. Willing to accept that there were some female inverts whose natures drove them to violence and insanity, but unwilling to characterize their own relationships in that light, women like Marks may have "formulated...rationalizations to make a distinction between their love and what they read about in medical books."95 Freedman cites a woman who acknowledged sexual intimacy with a particular woman friend but who nonetheless made clear that sex was only one of many factors in their relationship. Comparing this attitude with Marks' apparent discomfort with the unchecked emotionalism that characterized schoolgirl friendships, control over one's passions may have been a key way some women distinguished their own relationships from the relentlessly negative ones depicted by the sexologists. As Faderman puts it, "True [sic] lesbianism...had nothing to do with whether or not one has sexual relations with a person of the same sex. Rather it is a matter of balance: Those who do it a lot are the real ones."96

However much turn-of-the-century sexologists might have painted love between women with the same broad strokes, women themselves clearly understood that these relationships were not monolithic. Marks' essay does more than draw a distinction between "good" and "bad" lesbian relationships, it raises the question of how closely the college community associated student crushes with the more settled, mature, often life-long romantic partnerships that were numerous among the faculty. Did they, or for that matter did their students, necessarily place them on the same continuum, or were they seen as entirely separate phenomena? And if faculty and administrators did see them as at least somewhat connected, did this underpin their desire to "tone down" close student friendships, concerned that they might lead to relationships unhealthily driven by excessive sexual passion?

What is clear is that between 1890 and 1920, women's college students themselves redefined and ultimately rejected what might be termed "crush culture." Their reasons were complex but, I would argue, were dominated by a growing sense that crushes were at odds

95 Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, pp. 53-54.
96 Ibid. p. 54; see also Freedman, Feminism, Sexuality, & Politics, p. 114.
with their own definition of desirable, mature womanhood—a definition that was indeed strongly influenced by the dominant American culture, but also by their own conception of what a college-educated woman should be. This metamorphosis was only partially due to the sexologists’ dire warnings, but it nevertheless assisted the college community in a more intense policing of crushes, increasingly dividing them into “good” and “bad,” and eventually isolating them to such an extent that it was all too easy to pin on them an “unhealthy” and “unnatural” label. This rejection did come to include and, at some point, be dominated by the sexologists’ explicit association between crushes and homosexual behavior, but it was part of a larger transformative process.

While intense and erotically charged attachments between students had been part of the women’s college culture from the very beginning, the dominant student culture began to draw a distinction between “good” and “bad” crushes as early as the 1890s. But whereas faculty and administrators’ early concerns revolved around student health and discipline, early student objections seem to have been based on concerns that the crush was more properly part of schoolgirl culture, or was otherwise a relic of the pre-college age. In her examination of crushes and early women’s college culture, Sahli argues that college women in the late nineteenth-century demanded recognition as beings “capable of rational, intellectual thought,” and identified college education with the cultivation of self-control and logic. In an era in which most leading medical professionals explicitly linked intellectual ability and achievement with hysteria, neurasthenia, and other forms of mental decline, an ideology that linked the educated, accomplished woman with positive contributions not only to the domestic sphere but to all areas of life, might have seemed very appealing. Perhaps this led some college women to view with unease the unbridled affection and melodramatic behavior that often characterized crushes, and prompted their reinvention of such attachments

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97 Sahli, “Smashing,” p. 26. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was developing a theory along these lines around this time, though it was wholly confined to white women. Gilman’s influential Women and Economics was published in 1898 and may well have found a readership among white college women of the day. See Bederman, “Not to Sex—but to Race!” Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Civilized Anglo-Saxon Womanhood, and the Return of the Primitive Rapist,” especially pp. 121-50, in Manliness & Civilization.
as a specific phase of college life—part of the journey from “college girl” to “college-educated woman.” Radcliffe alumna Sarah Norcliffe Cleghorn’s 1916 novel, *The Spinster*, provides some evidence for this point of view. Home for Christmas and chatting with her childhood best friend, freshman Ellen, exclaims in exasperation:

“Julia! you’ve got that same old sentimental sag in your voice! Do cut it out!”

“You can call me sentimental all you like,” said Julia. “If it’s sentimental to feel that the greatest thing in life is to be an inspiration to somebody else—to somebody who—who... .What’s the matter with you, anyway, Ellen? You’ve got such a dry, cold way of talking! If college does *that* to you, I believe I’m glad I didn’t go.”

Ellen tried to be sympathetic; but Julia kept going back to those sentimental tones and poses, which Ellen recognized as having been in vogue with both of them in Seminary days.⁹⁸

Interestingly, Ellen is not repudiating loving female friendships, or even all crushes. Part of her discomfort comes from the suspicion that she has outgrown Julia, with her “sentimental, moonshining habit” and transferred her affections to an older Radcliffe student, on whom she thinks she has a crush, but only admires quietly and from a distance.⁹⁹ College, she seems to feel, should bring maturity and poise, as well as book learning. There is nothing wrong with a deep attachment to a female friend, but it must be demonstrated with the dignity and restraint befitting a grown and cultivated woman.

It is also possible that this emphasis on self-control that Sahli points to and Cleghorn’s novel advocates was a response to those new cultural attitudes that conceded women’s active sexual natures. For all that women’s college students were often seen as at the vanguard of the *decline* of native-born, white middle-class hegemony, there is no reason to suppose that most of these women were immune to either the cultural attitudes that exalted their own “Anglo-Saxon” culture as the pinnacle of American civilization or the prevalent

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⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 101, 121.
fear that their own social and evolutionary “superiority” could crumble with too much exposure to other, less “civilized” cultures and mores. One article of faith of this discourse on Anglo-Saxon superiority was the notion that “inferior” or “less evolved” women, typically represented as either working-class white women or women of color, were characterized by unbridled, almost animalistic, sexuality. Under these circumstances, many such “Anglo-Saxon” women might have embraced the opportunity to demonstrate self-control as a way of asserting their continued “superiority” and rightful place in that “superior” culture.

Turn-of-the-century women’s college students may have begun the process of identifying and labeling “bad” crushes, but college life still had ample room for the “good” sort as well. The highly independent student culture that emerged at the colleges at this time was based on deference to and idolization of older students by younger ones, and it appropriated the highly emotional and demonstrative crush as a means of reinforcing and perpetuating itself and its hierarchical system. As Horowitz writes, “the experience of dominance and subordination remained at the heart of the college experience for women. Each campus had its specific rules governing respect paid by freshmen and sophomores to juniors and seniors.” Moreover, because “College mores insisted that only immature college students formed erotic attachments with other women,” crushes became assimilated into that system.\(^\text{100}\) Horowitz quotes an 1890 letter from a Vassar junior recounting a loving moment with a younger student, and then reflecting, “It seemed quite like old times when we were ‘crushes,’ when I was a Freshman and she was a prep.” Though not especially troubled by her lapse into “immaturity,” this student did acknowledge that her behavior was more properly suited to a younger girl.\(^\text{101}\) Doubtless the reality was more complicated than this and crushes did not always follow prescribed lines, but, as scholar Sherrie A. Inness argues, because crushes were increasingly understood as first and foremost the bedrock of the

\(^{100}\) Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, pp. 167, 166.

elaborate social system and ritualized etiquette of college life, they were able to resist, at least for a time, the growing mainstream "equation between smashes and perversion." This attitude reassured a public made increasingly nervous by women's rapidly changing social role that crushes were part of youth, a game to be discarded with adulthood, and in no way threatening to normative femininity.\(^{102}\)

This grey area of "acceptable" crushes is amply demonstrated in the popular "college girl" fiction of the area, much of which was penned by women's college alumnae. In these stories, which were typically aimed at early-to-mid adolescent girls and had their heyday between 1890 and 1920, the crush, "smash," or "rave" is "regulated and controlled by the peer community...An acceptable crush socializes outsiders into the community and spreads the hegemonic codes of the institution...a smash is neither a simple nor a single entity; some are desirable, others are not."\(^{103}\) Fictional representations of crushes demonstrate the extent to which they were seen as particular to the student culture; college women frequently developed crushes on female faculty, but as the novels show, these were increasingly discouraged by the 1890s. As Inness explains, "student crushes on a teacher or on a 'bad girl' are firmly discouraged as destructive to the group's moral views and development. The student smashed on a teacher denies the authority of her peers."\(^{104}\) In Elinor's College Career (1906), one unpopular student has a crush on a faculty member, and while "Ruth's idolization of Miss Ewers is tolerated...as long as she herself is only on the fringe of community life; when she begins to be accepted by her peers...her relationship with Miss Ewers must be sacrificed."\(^{105}\)

Crushes are commonly depicted as part of the process through which younger students observe and acquire the social attitudes most important to college life—friendship, loyalty, a devotion to community, and a sense of fair play—all attitudes parents presumably

\(^{102}\) Inness, *Intimate Communities*, p. 51.
\(^{103}\) Ibid., p. 53.
\(^{104}\) Ibid, p. 57.
\(^{105}\) Ibid.
desired in their daughters as well, and not at all associated with masculine tendencies, unbecoming independence, and intense personal ambitions.106 Moreover, in many of these stories, "good" crushes are depicted not only as strengthening the student community, but also as relationships in which the older student encourages the younger to adopt better, and often more conventionally feminine, habits, another aspect of a girl's journey from childhood to (normative) womanhood.107

Finally, these stories reinforce the idea that crushes, like college life itself, are a temporary experience, a brief interlude between childhood and settled, domestic, womanhood. Inness argues that some authors seem to be directly countering aspersions cast on college friendships and seeking to reassure the public. Some of the early twentieth century authors even take on directly the sexologists' theories of "abnormal" womanhood and "morbid" friendships, defending crushes as entirely normal and chiding college faculty and administrators (many of whom, Inness points out, themselves attended women's colleges) for not knowing better.108 In fact, not only did crushes not diminish femininity, they could even "prepare a woman for her role as a wife and mother since it taught her stereotypical feminine behavior," and cast her, at least as an underclassman, in a subordinate, female position.109 And lest parents or other outsiders fear that upperclassmen would be undesirably "masculinized" by the authority they exercised with adoring younger girls or otherwise inclined to remain permanently committed to same-sex relationships, the stories reminded them that college life did not last forever and students would, in one way or another, embrace conventional womanhood. In "The Education of Elizabeth," part of Josephine Dodge Daskam's *Smith College Stories* (1900), a freshman, within a mere two months of her arrival, writes to a hometown suitor, "I doubt if I could ever love you as you think...I am not a man's woman. I much prefer women. Really, Arnold, it is very strange how men bore me now that

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106 See Inness, chapter 4, "The All-Around Girl, the Gibson Girl, and the New Woman," in *Intimate Communities*.
108 Ibid., pp. 61-63.
109 Inness, p. 67.
I have known certain women. Women are so much more interesting, so much more fascinating, so much more exciting!” She then adds, rather more provocatively, “the modern woman I am sure is rapidly getting not to need men at all! I have never seen so many beautiful red-haired girls before. One sits in front of me in chapel, and the light makes an aureole of glory around her head.” But within a month, Elizabeth has dropped out to marry Arnold, and writes to a classmate, “[i]t seems a long time since I was in Northampton: the girls seem very young and terribly serious over queer little lessons—or else trying to play they’re interested in each other. Arnold says he thinks the attitude of so many women is bound to be unhealthy, and even in some case a little morbid. I think he is quite right, don’t you? After all, girls need some one beside themselves.”

In this one story, Daskam manages to convey just how immature and changeable college girls can be, and presents crushes as short-term phenomena—a little silly perhaps, but really little more than a game or passing phase. By using the term “morbid,” she acknowledges the sexologists’ concerns, but then swiftly assures readers that if they are looking for evidence of such morbid relationships, they are looking in the wrong place.

But, if fictional representations depicted crushes as uniformly fairly harmless, actual student attitudes toward them were changing in these years. Campus publications are full of student references to them, often in the form of tongue-in-cheek instructions to incoming students. In 1906, Smith College sophomores provided freshmen with a guide to crushes, making clear that “[a]dvances must be made from the crushed to the Object of Adoration. To demand or expect reciprocity is to commit a solecism...In the small fraction of time spent out of her presence one must talk continuously to everybody who will or will not listen, of the Object’s virtues and charms.”

The following year, the Barnard College yearbook attempted a similar definition:

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Crush: an epidemic peculiar to college girls. It usually appears at sometime during the freshman year and lasts anywhere from 20 days to 3 months. It is caused by a Junior or Senior microbe and is characterized by a lump in the throat, a feeling of heat in the face and an inability to speak. No remedy has been found for this disease. It must be allowed to run its course. Common sense, snubs, and sage-tea have proved ineffectual.\textsuperscript{112}

Both of these descriptions made light of crushes and emphasized that they were merely a phase of college life, a youthful folly that was part of a girl's transition to womanhood. Parents and college authorities did not need to worry about them, because the students themselves would gently chide excessively affectionate younger girls and get them back on the "right" course, before they injured their health or, more likely, made too great a fool of themselves. Along with introducing and enforcing the campus social structure, student efforts to police crushes in this way may have reflected an awareness of the growing "outside" criticism. In a short story in the January 1904 Smith College Monthly, a junior reflected on her experiences with crushes, and how a relative had informed her that they were part of the "unnatural" life of a woman's college:

The Freshman Next Door told you what a "crush" was. A "crush" was a person whom you could give flowers to, and whom you could tell your best friend how much you adored. Every Freshman must have one...There was a very nice girl, a junior, who called you 'my dear', so you told the Freshman next door you had a "crush". Soon you noticed that most everyone called you "my dear", even when they were angry with you. Then you went home for Christmas...when you told your aunt about your "crush"...she said that the life was unnatural...When you got back after Christmas...The Freshman Next Door...told you your "crush" had said you were a silly, typical Freshman. So that was why you despised "crushes" from that day forward.\textsuperscript{113}

Crushes, this author implies, come into being in large part because impressionable incoming students are told that they are an integral part of college culture, and so "crush on" the first upperclassman who takes any positive notice of them. They are born that easily, and are swept away with just as little reason. Can anything this flimsy and inconsequential, so

\textsuperscript{112} Wilk, "What is a Crush?" p. 20.
clearly juvenile, the author seems to be challenging her reader, truly be seen as dangerously "unnatural?"

But by the 1910s, this indulgent attitudes toward crushes was souring. While there was still a place for close friendship and even the intense adoration of a younger girl for a junior or senior, students were becoming harsher in their condemnation of any crushes that transgressed the acceptable boundaries of upholding community mores, and the distance between "good" and "bad" crushes was likewise lengthening and hardening. A 1913 editorial in the Goucher College Kalends carefully divided college friendships into three distinct categories: "‘sane, affectionate, loyal friendship[s],’ natural one-sided ‘adorations’ of younger students for their older classmates, and ‘abnormal and perhaps injurious...cases.’" Two years later, a Barnard newspaper editorial cast crushes in a similarly negative light; "The girl...who has a ‘crush’ is either a person trying to make herself conspicuous, or else she is an unhealthily emotional, or possibly hysterical, girl who has not learned that every ordinary disappointment is not a cause for passionate despair...nor yet every charming and admirable person for lover-like rapture." 

Ironically, and however inadvertently, the women’s colleges assisted in first belittling and then demonizing close female friendships, and thus helped to provide their critics with ammunition against them. Administrators, faculty, students, and alumnae may or may not have been reading Havelock Ellis and his ilk, but by the 1910s they were certainly aware of and participating in the increasingly derogatory depiction of crushes, or indeed of any college friendship that seemed somehow too intense or exclusive. Between their own various reasons for disliking crushes, the desire to protect the good name of women’s higher education, and an understandable sensitivity to accusations of being “unnatural” women or fostering an “unnatural” atmosphere, they helped to create an environment where women’s relationships with other women were subject to intense scrutiny and suspicion. By the 1920s

115 Quoted in Wilk, “‘What is a Crush?’” p. 20.
and 30s, when the public had become very much aware of lesbianism (or rather, the sexologists’ definition of it) and Sigmund Freud’s association of homosexuality with immaturity and arrested development gained widespread acceptance, the women’s colleges had already created an environment in which close female friendships could be labeled as either undesirably childish but safely rooted in college life, or as the manifestation of unbalanced, unhealthy womanhood. As many women internalized these ideas and policed their behavior accordingly, it became easier to isolate, identify, label, and condemn women who preferred or seem to prefer same-sex attachments and declined to move on to “mature” heterosexuality. One legacy of this transition was the increased chasm on campus between women who embraced new ideas of female sexuality and those who, to one extent or another, resisted them. By the end of the 1910s, a growing number of college women—mainly students or young faculty—not only enthusiastically embraced the new heterosocial culture and understanding of women’s positive (hetero)sexuality, but actively denigrated the older, all-female culture and friendships that had flourished within and historically nurtured the women’s college culture. Along with further isolating and making vulnerable those women on campus who appeared in any way to be non-normative, this split weakened the colleges just as they entered a generation in which they would have to confront the most virulent criticism yet.
Chapter Five

"Those wild, perverted, female Bolsheviks:"

Equal Education, Equal Rights, and the Myth of the Radical Woman's College

"Who if not Vassar College should be concerned that New York State
enfranchise its women?"
—Edith Greer, to President James Monroe Taylor of Vassar College, 1913.¹

"Wellesley has been kept in the public eye for years by the activities of Socialists
among its faculty...Of...Bryn Mawr I will say nothing except that it is recommended by
the Rand School of Socialism as the best place to educate a girl.”
—B.L. Robinson, Massachusetts Public Interest League, 1923.²

"Those were the days when Calvin Coolidge wrote of our blasting at the Rock
of Ages, and called our colleges dangerous, when Vassar women led parades on Fifth
Avenue, and chained themselves to the White House fence.”
—Henry Noble MacCracken, The Hickory Limb, 1950.³

In June 1921, in the first of a three-part series published in the influential women's
periodical, The Delineator, the Vice-President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge, publicly
accused the nation's leading women's colleges of being hotbeds of radical social and political
ideologies. They were, he was sorry to report:

ministering to a new element which, sometimes, exhibits morbid
tendencies...there is evidence...of considerable strength, that they are the

² B.L. Robinson, quoted in “Socialism in Women’s Colleges,” The Woman Patriot, 1 June 1923, p. 6.
object of adroit attacks by radical propagandists to an extent creative in some colleges of an element of radicalism decidedly hostile to our American form of government, to the established personal right to hold property and to the long-recognized sanctions of civilized society... An examination of recent student publications shows a friendly familiarity with that antagonistic attitude... and not without support by some faculty members who permit its exercise under a cloak or claim of academic freedom.  

The situation was worse at some colleges than others—Coolidge was relieved to note that Mount Holyoke had neither a socialist club nor a curriculum that in any way stressed radical discourse, and he congratulated Smith for its “sane,” primarily academic approach to the study of socialism. He conceded that there was nothing, in itself, dangerous about the purely intellectual examination of radical doctrines. But “such activities by students ought...to be pursued under competent direction and instruction,” and he expressed considerable skepticism that such wise guidance was abundantly available at the women's colleges. Most of them, he made clear, employed openly socialist professors, tolerated socialist clubs, and welcomed to campus numerous radical speakers. The unfortunate and inevitable result was the growth of socialist sympathies among the highly impressionable students.

In the United States of 1921, a nation in the grip of the jittery, reactionary, postwar period known as the “Red Scare,” and dominated by fears that there were elements within the country plotting to bring about a Bolshevik-style revolution, the idea that any college might be either promoting or tolerating radical propaganda would have been, and was, disturbing. But while the mainstream press did also lament the presence of socialist professors and students at men's colleges and coeducational institutions, somehow, the threat from the women's colleges always seemed greater. The root of the problem, as Coolidge explained, was that “adherence to radical doctrines means the ultimate breaking down of the old sturdy virtues of manhood and womanhood...the destruction of the foundations of civilization.”

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5 Ibid., p. 67.
other words, the institutions that posed the greatest danger were the ones that promoted non-normative gender behaviors as well as radical political ideologies, and those institutions, as a large segment of the American population had come to believe by the 1920s, were the elite women's colleges.

Coolidge's remarkable attack belonged to a particular historical moment, one in which paranoia and reactionary politics were so strong that the vice-president could take to the pages of a mainstream publication and accuse some of the nation's leading educational institutions of posing a direct threat to the American way of life, while offering little more in the way of proof than the names of a few professors, some campus lectures given by known socialists, and a handful of student clubs. But Coolidge's accusation resonated because it fit so neatly into well-established popular narratives that identified female patriotism with normative gender behavior, and the elite women's colleges with social, political, and sexual radicalism. As we have seen, as early as the 1780s, the mainstream American culture of the white, native-born, Protestant, middle class had defined female citizenship and patriotism in either exclusively or predominantly maternal terms. Champions of women's higher education had made many of their gains by appealing to that ideology, and moments of popular backlash against the figure of the educated woman often resulted from the sense that she was shirking the demands of that citizenship.

In the early twentieth century, as women (albeit primarily white, middle-class women) made unprecedented gains in education, the professions, and public life, and came ever closer to winning the national suffrage, fears began to stir that the nation had become "weakened" and "feminized" by all these changes. Men like Theodore Roosevelt introduced a new discourse on citizenship, one that linked "true" Americanism with the "manly" concerns of military preparedness, national defense, capitalism, and the patriarchal household, and emphasized that female patriotism was best expressed through motherhood and other domestic endeavors. Social and political ideologies that threatened one component or other of this equation, such as feminism, socialism, or pacifism—to name the three most
often identified with the women's colleges—were simply incompatible with this vision. With the United States' entry into World War I in 1917, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the growing hostility toward not only socialist but also feminist or progressive ideologies, and the years of red-baiting that ensued, this discourse was only strengthened. Women who rejected this ideology in favor of personal and economic independence, social and political equality with men, and a variety of other progressive causes, were now not only "unwomanly"—a very familiar charge to them by this time—they had become unpatriotic and potentially subversive as well.

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Virtually from the moment Vassar College opened its doors in 1865, it and the other elite women's colleges which followed have had to answer, deny, or deflect widespread assumptions that they espouse, and encourage their students to espouse, left-wing social and political views, such as socialism, pacifism, and workers' rights, and that they foster a kind of, what we might today call, militant feminism. This stereotype has flourished more at some times than others, and has been especially popular in times of conservative resurgence, but it steadily gained strength in the early years of the twentieth century and truly took on a life of its own in the late 1910s and 1920s. All the more interesting is the prevalence of this belief in view of the significant efforts made by the colleges over the decades to steer a moderate and sometimes conservative course, and the fact that while liberal social and political beliefs often flourished among faculty and students, actual radicals have been rare.

This stubbornly held perception rests on four overlapping factors: first, that by claiming for women the right to an education both equal and largely identical to that offered in the best men's colleges, the elite women's colleges were indeed taking a provocative and radical stance, regardless of how much they then tried to temper it with an embrace of conventional gender norms. Second, as the colleges took on an increasingly, and undeniable, liberal political bent—manifested most clearly by their close and well-publicized ties to the
Progressive Movement at the turn of the twentieth century—they conditioned the broader American public to associate them with left-of-center political, social, and economic ideologies. Third, that the actions of a few, high-profile radicals (self-identified as well as those who identified with causes popularly viewed as radical), who were associated in one way or another with the women's colleges, helped to establish and then reinforce notions that the colleges operated on the fringe of American culture. And last, drawing on the suspicion of autonomous women's environments that was deeply-embedded in Anglo-American Protestant culture, a pervasive public expectation, widely articulated in the press and in works of fiction, that the women's colleges naturally "would" or "should" be somewhat radical; that their very existence was somehow a challenge to the status quo, and that the women they produced would inevitably deviate in some way from normative womanhood.

Taken together, these factors constitute a narrative that resonated with a wide swath of the American public. Eventually, the liberal stance of the colleges proved strong enough to justify many of the suspicions held by conservatives and reactionaries. In more fraught times, some moderates who recognized, or at least sensed, the colleges' implicitly radical educational mission also became susceptible to the argument that other forms of radicalism were apt to breed there as well. Helping this belief along, always, were the newspapers and magazines that saw that the radicalism, or the perceived radicalism, of the women's colleges, was good copy. Gradually, the notion that the elite women's colleges were strongholds of social and political radicalism emerged as a dominant cultural narrative, something that "everybody" knew and was largely impervious to facts.

"Radical" is, of course, a highly subjective term and one more likely to be tossed about indiscriminately than carefully defined and applied. I use it here as I believe it was most widely understood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in reference to opinions significantly at odds with normative (i.e. white, native-born, middle-class, and generally Protestant) American social mores, whether regarding the progress of American life as a whole or, more particularly, the appropriate role and behavior of American women. I
also apply the term to individuals who envisioned a drastic refashioning of American life, as opposed to concentrating on changes that would alter discrete areas within a largely unchanged social, economic, and political structure.

Most of the early leaders and staunchest supporters of the women's colleges were neither radicals nor had any desire to be so labeled. They firmly maintained that women had the same right to education as did men, but, by and large, felt just as strongly that, after graduation, these women would—and should—follow their mothers and grandmothers into a primarily domestic universe. Mindful of criticism and fears that too much education would "unsex" a woman and render her unwilling or unable to perform customary household duties, most of these educators went to great lengths to create academic environments in which conventional femininity was stressed and the basic tenets of the nineteenth-century "Cult of True Womanhood"—piety, submissiveness, purity, and domesticity—respected. Indeed, the belief that an educated woman would make a better wife and mother, the argument that motivated many supporters, was hardly a call for significant social transformation. Not only was "radical" the last label they wanted applied to their nascent enterprises (dependent as they were on the professional and agricultural middle classes for students and tuition), they were themselves somewhat ambivalent about the potential consequences of their cause. Their repeated promises that higher education for women would complement and enhance, but not overturn, late Victorian norms were as much to reassure themselves as to assuage outside criticism.

The suspicion that the elite women's colleges harbored a potentially extreme social and political agenda can be detected in many mid-to-late nineteenth-century newspaper and magazine pieces, as well as in private correspondence, but in the first generation, the far more pressing concern was that the colleges' "masculine" curriculum was inappropriate for and even physically harmful to women. Worries that radicalism could, did, and was perhaps even naturally inclined to flourish at women's colleges did not come to the fore until the end of the
century, when all aspects of the missions and institutional culture of the colleges came under renewed public scrutiny. The same anxieties about the “New Woman,” discussed in chapter three—in particular women's increased presence in the professions and the falling birthrates of native-born, white Protestants—that fueled criticisms of the curriculum and fed suspicions about the single-sex make-up of the colleges, also underpinned concerns that the colleges were natural breeding grounds for radical and even subversive social and political ideologies. At the turn of the twentieth century, as the woman suffrage movement emerged from its post-Civil War doldrums and a new ideology, “Feminism,” which advocated women’s sexual, as well as political, economic, or educational equality, became better known, the sense grew—not exclusively but perhaps most strongly among the white middle class—that the nation was in the midst of tremendous upheaval, and that women, and especially those associated with the women's colleges, were at the center of that maelstrom.

This turn-of-the-century environment—of heightened concerns that the United States might be drifting too far from its traditional moorings and that educated white women were drifting the most dangerously afield—helps account for the increased public attention focused on the women's colleges, but less so for the widespread belief that they were agents and abettors of these changes. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries, not only did most of the presidents and trustees of the elite women's colleges respond to these social and political currents in a fairly conservative manner, they were generally quite forthright, insisting that their ideal continued to be highly educated but always domestic, demure, and conventional women.6 That they failed to counter the growing stereotype that the colleges were hotbeds of radicalism further illuminates the lingering suspicion of the educated, independent woman, and the limited and ambiguous place mainstream American culture was willing to yield to her before it deemed her potentially subversive.

6 For the general political climate of the women's colleges, see Lynn D. Gordon, Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).
One reason some people were so easily convinced that the elite women's colleges were natural breeding grounds for non-normative and even radical social and political ideologies is that, as far as some elements of the population were concerned, it was simply obvious and a matter of course that they would be so. The women's colleges had for the most part gone out of their way to stress conventional, ladylike behavior in their students and decry any calls for radical changes in women's post graduate lives. But the common element on which the colleges were predicated—that women were capable of and entitled to the same classically based, liberal arts education as men—seemed to belie that carefully cultivated, conservative image. As Debra Herman argues, Vassar, and the women's colleges that followed, could not escape being tinged with a radical agenda, because, by claiming for women the same intellectual privileges as men, they themselves had invited such an association:

> Considering the college's potential for changing the existing relationship between the sexes, it was not implausible to regard the founding of Vassar College as a significant manifestation of the women's rights movement, a movement associated in the years after the Civil War with women like Victoria Woodhull, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.7

To many people it seemed a logical enough connection: institutions that justified their existence on the grounds of women's intellectual equality might be inclined to support women's equality in other areas as well. As early as 1869, Caroline Healey Dall, one of the leading feminists of the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as a supporter and keen observer of the early women's colleges, drew a direct and enthusiastic link between women's education and women's rights.8 Nearly four decades later, Bryn Mawr president M. Carey Thomas expressed the same assumption about college-educated women and support for woman suffrage, claiming "It is unthinkable that women who have learned to act for

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8 Caroline Healey Dall, Journal, March 6, 1869 (typescript), Caroline Healey Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS).
themselves in college and have become awakened there to civic duties, should not care for
the ballot to enforce their wishes."\(^9\)

Others saw this link too, but were far less enthusiastic, and the possibility that higher
education might politicize young women clearly troubled many parents. South Carolinian
Mary Elinor Poppenheim, who sent four daughters to Vassar in the late nineteenth century,
wholeheartedly supported the college's educational mission, but also worried that a Vassar
education would bring her daughters into worrisome proximity with the growing women's
movement.\(^10\) Early Vassar graduates expressed frustration with this presumption,
complaining that they and their college were disdained by conservatives who considered
them too radical, and held in contempt by woman's rights advocates because they were not
radical enough.\(^11\)

However flawed, the accusations of radicalism at the women's colleges did not come
out of nowhere. If the colleges' implicitly radical educational mission made them vulnerable
to accusations of further kinds of radicalism, a handful of well-known social, political, or
economic radicals among the faculty and alumnae seemed justify many people's suspicions.
By the early twentieth century, suffrage leaders such as Harriot Stanton Blatch (Vassar, 1878)
and Inez Milholland (Vassar, 1909), and labor supporters like Wellesley professor Vida
Dutton Scudder (Smith, 1884) and Crystal Eastman (Vassar, 1903), were well-known figures,
avowedly socialist, and not at all shy about courting publicity. Their beliefs—outrageous,
offensive, or unnerving to many—as well as their own high profiles often lead to the
mistaken impression that radicals dominated or wielded a dominant influence within the
already suspicious world of the women's colleges.

But the popular association of the women's colleges with political radicalism was too
depthly entrenched in some quarters to be entirely the result of these relatively few

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\(^9\) "Address by Miss M. Carey Thomas, President of Bryn Mawr College," 1906, p. 27. Education Subject
Collection, United States (General), Sophia Smith Collection (SSC).
\(^10\) Joan Marie Johnson, *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges: Feminist Values and Social Activism,
\(^11\) Herman, "College and After," p. 64.
individuals. Far more influential were the actions of a great many turn-of-the-century men and women associated with the colleges who embraced an ever-growing array of reformist causes. The colleges' reputation for radicalism gained greater traction as they became more and more visibly involved in the myriad of causes that made up the "Progressive Movement." Essentially a loosely knit group of social welfare associations and reformist civic and political organizations, the Progressive Movement was dedicated to improving virtually all aspects of American society. If not truly radical—most progressives, despite what their critics claimed, were not interested in abolishing capitalism, doing away with all gender distinctions, or otherwise utterly upending American society—there was still plenty about the Progressive Movement to disconcert conservatives. Although without a unified platform, the movement was largely in favor of woman suffrage, typically pacifist (and thus, to many, anti-military and anti-preparedness), and opposed to the unbridled capitalism that permitted child labor, unsafe working conditions, and other forms of worker exploitation. There were also genuine radicals on the margins: anarchists, socialists, socialist-sympathizers, and feminists.

The large number of faculty, students, and alumnae who embraced a variety of Progressive Era causes helped to make the elite women's colleges true bastions of the movement. Year after year, professors recruited students to their various causes and, after graduation, many alumnae returned home determined to effect similar reform. Prominent reformers such as Florence Kelley, Frances Perkins, and Lillian Wald frequently addressed student audiences and alumnae groups around the country, making, with the help of the press, their opinions known far and wide, and emphasizing the strong grip progressive politics had on the colleges. One historian has called the Wellesley faculty at this time "a hothouse of reform." At Vassar, economics professor Herbert Mills "taught courses with such titles as

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12 For examples of alumnae starting local reform groups and crediting various college professors as their inspiration, see Johnson, chapter 6, "After College: The Activist."
'Social Reorganization' and 'Charities and Corrections,' and sent his students out of Vassar into social work.”15 The Association of Collegiate Alumnae was dominated in these years by the women's colleges, and supported a bevy of Progressive causes such as settlement work and housing reform.16 Once the Progressive label was in place, it became quite easy for critics of the colleges to attribute more radical ideologies to them as well, especially as the national climate toward reform soured significantly at the end of the 1910s.

The very blurred boundaries that characterized liberal politics in the early twentieth century made the women's colleges even more vulnerable to suspicions of radicalism. Progressives often held multiple, distinct, if overlapping, social, economic, and political positions, leading to confusion and enabling critics to misrepresent the positions held by individuals. As historian Landon R. Storrs explains, “Before World War I the boundary between the socialists and progressives was relatively fluid and permeable. In 1912 ‘respectable’ people helped the Socialist Party win 6 percent of the popular presidential vote.”17 The woman suffrage movement was often similarly conflated with socialism.18 With such flexible definitions, it was all too easy to ascribe a radical atmosphere to the strongholds of progressive politics that were the elite women's colleges. In short, if individuals wished to see radicalism flourishing within the colleges, the vocal, if not numerically dominant, suffragists and socialists—as well as the well-known radical speakers who frequented the colleges—provided all the evidence that was needed.

Further facilitating this association between the elite women's colleges and progressive reform were the actions of many students and alumnae themselves. Most of the

colleges were clustered in the Northeast, and students from further away, especially those from more isolated areas, might well have been the principal sources of information about their colleges for the rest of their home communities. Given the strength of progressive sympathies at the colleges, much of this information would have focused on reform and other social welfare movements. According to historian Joan Marie Johnson, approximately two thirds of the southern women who attended the elite northern women’s colleges between 1875 and 1915 came from small towns or rural areas, while the remaining third who came from cities usually hailed from fairly small ones.19 These women, Johnson argues, typically returned to the South, extending the reach and influence of their colleges and mentors, while simultaneously creating for their communities a picture of what kind of woman the elite colleges produced.20

Further helping to distort the colleges’ reputations was the simple fact that the liberal organizations and opinions that appeared moderate to progressives themselves—aimed at reforming, rather than overturning the existing socio-economic system—naturally struck many on the right very differently. Reform could come across as an attack on traditional ways of life. Johnson points out that most of the southern women educated at the northern colleges returned home following graduation and that the bulk of them joined or founded organizations that aggressively supported progressive causes. White southerners often found that some of the values imbibed by their daughters while in college were especially at odds with the South’s entrenched racial and gender hierarchies. Johnson explains:

Having been educated at the best colleges, challenged to think for themselves, and held to high expectations of intellectual ability, southern alumnae...believed in women's equality—or at least their capability. Consequently, they not only sought larger roles for themselves in society but also challenged men and women to reconsider gender roles.21

19 Johnson, p. 160.
20 See Johnson, chapter 6, “After College, The Activist.”
21 Johnson, p. 163.
This by no means applied to all graduates, many maintained conservative social opinions and many others had come from more liberal families to begin with, but certainly a significant number returned to the South eager to support its fledging woman suffrage movement, and a handful eventually became involved with civil rights as well. These women drew a direct line between their college educations and their personal repudiation of female inferiority and white supremacy, leaving no doubt in family’s and neighbors’ minds of the type of influence the elite women’s colleges might have on their students.

While there was a range of political perspectives visible at the women’s colleges at the turn of the twentieth century, it seems clear that progressive sympathies dominated, with settlement work, consumer protection, and, later, woman suffrage, being especially popular. Student newspapers and recollections attest to their prominent place on campus, and, before long, these movements became part of the common image of the American woman’s college, frequently referenced not only in the press but also in popular culture, with the full expectation that a mainstream audience would recognize the allusions.

The settlement house movement was one prominent Progressive Era cause upon which the women’s colleges made a particularly strong mark. Both faculty and students were involved from its earliest days and maintained their close ties for decades. The College Settlement Association (CSA) was founded in the late 1880s by a number of Smith alumnae, and was joined before long by chapters at Bryn Mawr, Vassar, Wellesley, Goucher, and Radcliffe, as well as a local group at Smith. Their mission was to “support the settlement movement financially as well as morally.” with “Volunteer work in the settlement” and “close attention to social justice issues,” expected of the college members.

By 1902, a full third of Vassar’s undergraduates were CSA members, a fact that

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22 See Johnson, “After College: The Activist,” in *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges*.
surely contributed to Vassar's particularly strong reputation for producing reform-minded graduates.25 Several of the colleges established fellowships to enable students and graduates to study for extended periods at various settlement houses.26 Many prominent women reformers, such as early Bryn Mawr graduate and future Wellesley professor Emily Greene Balch and Smith alumna Mary Van Kleeck, were exposed to the movement as undergraduates and then took up residence in settlement houses after finishing their degrees.27 Johnson observes, "Settlement homes were particularly popular with college graduates, who represented 60 percent of the College Settlement Association residents in its first five years. Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley students disproportionately dominated, in part due to the network of professors and students they developed."28 Students were proud of their commitment and frequently exhorted classmates to become involved as well. A 1911 editorial in the Smith College Weekly noted "the particular interest that Smith College has in this organization—for it was started by our graduates," but lamented that Mount Holyoke and Wellesley had surpassed them in membership numbers.29

Among the settlements established by the CSA was Denison House, founded in Boston in 1890 and the third oldest settlement house in the nation. A list of the house's long-term residents (defined by the CSA as those in residence for three months or more) at the turn of the twentieth century, gives a clear picture of the huge influence the women's college community exercised in these years. In their annual reports for the years 1895 though 1904, Denison House reported 134 long term residents, of whom 129 were women, and 59 college-affiliated women. Of those 59, 51 came from women's colleges, the largest group, 25,

27 Sandra Opdycke, "Emily Greene Balch," American National Biography Online (ANB), February 2000; Guy Alchon, "Mary Van Kleeck," ANB, February 2000; For Balch's early exposure to the CSA, see Carrell, "Reflections in a Mirror."
28 Johnson, p. 150.
29 SCW, vol. II, no. 6, November 1, 1911, p. 2.
coming from nearby Wellesley. Denison also welcomed "short term" residents (one to three months) and this group too seems to have been dominated by the women's colleges. The CSA stopped recording the college affiliations of the short-term residents in 1898, but of the 22 recorded between 1895 and 1898, 13 were associated with the elite women's colleges. By 1911, the CSA had chapters at fourteen colleges, and had affiliated with other settlement houses in New York and Baltimore, both well-populated by women's college faculty, students, and alumnae.

Settlement work attracted plenty of attention and a fair bit of skepticism, mockery, and disdain. So bizarre was the idea of genteel young women living apart from their families and in poor, often rough, neighborhoods, that when the Rivington Street settlement opened in 1889, "the first visitor was a policeman who, convinced that the women were opening a whore house, promised to leave them alone if they paid the customary contribution." Nor was the movement universally applauded among the women's college faculty. Mary Augusta Jordan, longtime professor of English at Smith, expressed skepticism about the college settlements, but did concede of her colleagues and students, "They may be wrong, but they certainly feel that they are working in the only way open to them under the circumstances." Richard Harding Davis' 1892 short story, "Eleanore Cuyler," follows the exploits of a wealthy young woman who embarks on settlement work largely out of boredom and the desire to bask in her own good works. Davis is not entirely harsh in his characterization of

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30 The long term resident, college affiliation break-down was Wellesley, 25; Radcliffe, 9; Smith, 7; University of Michigan, 3; Stanford, 2; Boston University, 1; McGill, 1; Vassar, 1; Wells, 1. Residents lists, 1895-1904, Denison House papers, (SL).
31 It should be noted that as these reports tallied the residents by year, a few long term residents, such as headworker and Bryn Mawr alumna Helena Dudley, who was in residence for several years, were counted more than once, as were, presumably, any short term visitors who came on more than one occasion. But this does not diminish the extent to which the greater women's college community dominated the Denison atmosphere in these years.
32 I am fairly sure the CSA founded, or helped found, the New York City (Rivington Street) and Philadelphia settlements. Locust Point Settlement, in Baltimore, was established in 1893 but not formally affiliated with the CSA until 1911. See Handbook of Settlements, Robert A. Woods, Albert J. Kennedy, eds., (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1911), p. 101.
34 Mary Augusta Jordan to Caroline Healey Dall, October 8, 1892. Caroline Healey Dall papers, (MHS).
the movement and its supporters, his heroine, though self-absorbed, is sincere and well-meaning, and he praises the women who actually run the settlement as wise, well-trained, and committed, going about their work "with a quiet matter-of-fact cheerfulness...and common sense."35 But when Eleanore grows "sceptical as to working-girls and the good she did them...and wished she could end it by...being told that it didn't matter, and that she was not to blame if the world would be wicked and its people unrepentant and ungrateful," the narrator implies that the settlement movement is simply not up to the task.36

Alongside this mockery—this sense that settlement work was ineffectual and accomplished little beyond allowing sheltered young women to play at living in the "real world"—there were others who strongly disapproved of settlement work and, especially, of the environment in which it took place.37 In the movement's early years, there is some evidence to indicate that its sponsors and the women's colleges more broadly were mindful of the negative publicity they might incur. When the Wellesley College community first became involved with settlement work in 1892, the New York Times noted that Economics professor Katherine Coman was the "only individual member who allows her name to be publicly connected with the movement."38

More controversial than their efforts on behalf of working-class and immigrant groups, was what the settlements offered to the large number of women who staffed them: a practical and long-term alternative to marriage at a time when many Americans were fretting about the falling birthrates of the white middle class in general and of college-educated white women in particular. Johnson suggests that this option may have appealed to college women just as much as or even more than the opportunity to "do good " in the community.39 The radical potential of the settlement house, not only to transform the lives of the urban poor but also, and more to the point, to transform the lives of the middle-class women who dominated

37 Burrows, Wallace, Gotham, p. 1175.
38 "For the Good of the Masses," NYT, November 6, 1892, p. 17.
39 Johnson, p. 150.
them, was plain.

Settlement work, and the evolution of the social work profession of which it was a part, did not exist in a vacuum; it was part of a larger and ongoing broadening of opportunity for some American women. Over the course of the nineteenth century, native-born white women had succeeded in claiming much of the teaching profession as their own, offering the first concrete alternative to domesticity for "respectable" women; by the turn of the twentieth, they were stretching their wings even more. Decades earlier Catharine Beecher had expressed a grudging admiration for Roman Catholic convents and the avenue they offered women for lives of "dignity" and "service" outside of conventional domesticity, and lamented the lack of a similar outlet for Protestant women. The women's colleges were one answer to Beecher's call; the settlement houses provided another. As one historian has observed, "[T]he settlement house was the first meaningful alternative to motherhood or teaching... it allowed women to extend their special skills and virtues into the public arena."

That the settlement house represented another step on a radical continuum was very clear, and in some ways, it may have represented the most unnerving change yet. If the elite women's colleges were increasingly seen as places where gender norms were suspended, critics could take some comfort in the fact that for most women this would only be a temporary interlude. But a sojourn in a settlement house could last indefinitely. As historian Robyn Muncy argues, "settlements promised women independence from their families, unique possibilities for employment, and the sort of communal living arrangement they had cherished in college." In fact, to some observers, settlement houses may have appeared even more radical than women's colleges because they were mixed-sex environments in which women dominated. Men participated in the movement but not nearly in the numbers that women did, and as a result, "life in the American settlements" raised the specter of turning "gender relationships upside down: women on top; men on the bottom."

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41 Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform p. 9.
42 Ibid., p. 9.
of growing concerns that all-female environments might be unhealthy and dangerous as well as simply at odds with normative American life, an institution that allowed women to continue to live apart from male control and to a large extent away from male influence, even after college, fit oddly with the American social landscape and was bound to cause alarm.43

The association in the public mind between the women’s colleges and settlement work—and of social work in general—was so strong that it became a common feature in the fiction of the period. Dear Enemy (1915), Jean Webster’s follow-up to her immensely successful Vassar novel Daddy-Long-Legs (1912), focuses on another Vassar alumna’s attempts to bring efficiency and the modern social sciences to a run-down, dismal orphanage, despite obdurate trustees who “didn’t take much stock in this new-fangled scientific charity.” When questioned about her qualifications for such work, Webster’s dedicated and resourceful heroine offers, “[M]y college education and a few lectures at the School of Philanthropy, also a short residence in the college settlement.”44 Others authors were less positive. The protagonist in Nalbro Bartley’s A Woman’s Woman (1919) tries to admire her daughter Harriet’s decision to devote her life to social work, but has some reservations, fretting, “at seventeen her daughter was convinced she had a mission in life and was planning on a career—a trained statistician, aloof from contact with the poor, but with a cold-blooded theorist’s ability for endless figures and undeniable deductions!”45 Kathleen Millay also invoked this

43 The original American settlement house was founded by a man—an Amherst College graduate who had encountered the settlement movement in England and sought to extend it across the Atlantic, and men, especially college men, were active in the movement in the United States. Nevertheless, women bore the lion’s share of the responsibility of establishing, staffing, and publicizing settlement houses in the United States and American public opinion, from an early date, most associated settlement work with women. Carrell, pp. 5-6, 12-14. For college men and settlement work, see Emily Mieras, “A More Perfect Sympathy: College Students and Social Service, 1889-1914,” PhD dissertation, College of William and Mary, 1998, particularly chapter 5, “Spreading ‘Good News’ The ‘Laboratory’ of the Northwestern University Settlement House.”


45 Bartley does not explicitly state that Harriet attends a woman’s college, referring only to the “New York social-service school” to which she had won a scholarship. However Harriet is endowed with so many of the stereotypical attributes of the early twentieth century women’s college student—poorly groomed, slightly tomboyish, impatient with conventional women, academically brilliant, concerned with women’s issues, determined to never marry, and, towards the end, involved in a passionate romantic friendship with another woman—that it seems clear to me that Bartley expected her readers to make the connection. Nalbro Bartley, A Woman’s Woman (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1919), p. 43.
stereotype in her novel *Against the Wall* (1929), but took an even more negative view that settlement workers were at best naïve do-gooders and, at worst, spoiled dilettantes. Her scornful heroine observes:

> What do most of your hybrid college graduates go in for anyway? With all their pretty little diplomas? Settlement work. And I suppose they only accept them there because they volunteer their services—and can afford to work for next to nothing with dad standing the bills. What do they know about helping anybody? If they ever came upon a real live harlot on a rampage they'd faint dead away!46

Settlement work was not the only progressive cause with a strong presence at the women’s colleges; the Consumers’ League was also very popular. Intended to educate consumers about exploitative labor practices and to pressure employers to raise workplace standards, it was not the sort of organization to endear itself to business interests. The League established its ties with the women’s colleges early on. Frances Perkins, secretary of the New York City branch, and future Secretary of Labor, spoke at the very first meeting of the League’s Smith College chapter.47 The National Secretary, Florence Kelley, was a frequent visitor to many of the campuses, and addressed the Wellesley community more than once prior to being guest of honor at the 1903 formation of the college’s own chapter.48 The League was also conspicuously well-staffed with women’s colleges graduates, faculty, and administrators: Perkins had graduated from Mount Holyoke. Bryn Mawr alumna Pauline Dorothea Goldmark held multiple positions within the League and in 1907 established a path-breaking investigation of canneries in New York State.49 Her sister Josephine Clara

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47 *SCW*, vol. II, no. 6, November 1, 1911, p. 7.


Goldmark, another Bryn Mawr graduate, chaired the League’s committee on labor laws and provided critical research used in *Muller v. Oregon*, the landmark Supreme Court case which upheld maximum working hours for women—a cause dear to the hearts of many progressives.\(^{50}\) Mary Emma Woolley, president of Mount Holyoke for nearly four decades (1901-1937), served as one of the League’s vice presidents.

Students and younger alumnae were no less dedicated. In 1909, two socially prominent young Bryn Mawr graduates quietly took jobs at a variety of silk mills in Pennsylvania. For three weeks, they observed working conditions, boarded with the families of other workers, and carefully compiled information on wages, work hours, and general factory conditions. The two women, who were working for the Consumers’ League on behalf of a pending child labor bill, drew very negative conclusions about the mills and were quick to share their results with the press.\(^{51}\) Some students supported the League so zealously that it caused embarrassment to some of the more conservative elements at the colleges. The Vassar campus chapter investigated working conditions in local shops until the college’s president ordered them to stop. Undaunted, they instead turned their attention to publishing a list of statewide League-approved shops in the college newspaper.\(^{52}\)

This intense and early involvement with the settlement movement and the Consumers’ League may have paved the way for an embrace of broader and more radical labor reforms. Certainly, as the years passed, many faculty, students, and alumnae sought increased avenues through which to effect change. In the 1890s, Denison House leaders aided in the formation of a “union of women engaged in the tailoring trade,” and Denison's headworker, Helena Dudley, was active in the labor movement.\(^{53}\) A questionnaire complied by the CSA in 1914 asked specifically, “Are you in sympathy with organized labor?” and


“Are you a Socialist?” Only three of the 65 respondents said that they were “turned Socialist” as a result of their settlement experience, though several others indicated a degree of sympathy with the movement and with organized labor. What is interesting is that these questions were asked at all—the only other political issue specifically mentioned was equal suffrage—and might indicate that the authors of the questionnaire expected to find a link between settlement work and left-leaning politics. Other cases are less ambiguous. In 1912, two Wellesley professors, Ellen Hayes and Vida Dutton Scudder, the latter of whom, according to historian Patricia A. Palmieri, “proudly proclaimed that she belonged to—and paid dues to—fifty-nine reform organizations,” became the target of irate parents, journalists, and college trustees when they lent their support to striking mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The chair of the Wellesley English department sharply reprimanded Scudder, arguing that by supporting the strikers, “Scudder had associated the college with the forces of anarchy.” Ultimately, the college resisted calls that it demand Scudder’s and Hayes’ resignations, but the glare of publicity was an unwelcome and uncomfortable experience.

As a general rule, faculty members stood a bit to the left of their students, but labor sympathies were in no way limited to them. As early as 1898 college settlements were being credited with, or perhaps more accurately, blamed for, instilling labor sympathies in well-to-do young women. In January 1910, in the midst of a large and well-publicized strike of female shirtwaist makers, a group of Smith students started a campus crusade to educate others about sweat shops and child labor, “holding an exhibition for the display of wearing apparel approved of by that organization,” and “foreswearing any save such approved feminine apparel.” The timing was surely not coincidental and the resulting press coverage

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54 “After Twenty-Five Years—Questionnaire, compiled by Mrs. Thayer and Miss Florence Converse,” pp. 37-42. Denison House Papers, Reel 4, SL.
57 Palmieri, In Adamless Eden, p. 131.
served to associate the actions of the students with those of the strikers in the minds of readers. Wellesley students contributed $1000 to support the strikers, despite the “undesirable prominence” to which their action brought the college.60 Perhaps because “college girls” always made good copy, newspapers and magazines made a point of emphasizing the labor sympathies of many women’s college students and alumnae. This public association of the colleges with radical causes was only furthered by reports of numerous students and alumnae arrested for picketing alongside the shirtwaist makers. In fact, many opponents blamed privileged women for encouraging the strikers and sustaining them with material aid.61

But when it came to controversy, the Consumers’ League, settlement work, and similar endeavors paled in comparison to the question of national woman suffrage, and it should come as no surprise that the American public firmly associated pro-suffrage sentiment with the women’s colleges. What is perhaps more surprising is the extent to which apathy and even negativity toward the movement existed on the campuses. Hard numbers are unavailable, but while pro-suffrage sympathies seem to have prevailed—at least by the 1910s—the colleges were hardly the bastions of suffrage fervor that one might expect and that much of the contemporary public believed. From the mid-1890s through the first decade of the twentieth century—the years when the stagnant woman suffrage movement recovered its vitality—there was no real dominant viewpoint at the women’s colleges, despite the clear perceptions, well-articulated and broadcast in the press, that the campuses were suffragist breeding grounds.

Far from encouraging pro-suffrage sympathies, some presidents and administrators actively discouraged formal discussion of the topic on campus. Stella Gilman, the wife of

60 “Wellesley is for Suffrage,” NYT, February 13, 1910, p. 8.
one of Radcliffe's most important founders and herself an early advocate of the college, not only opposed woman suffrage, but lent her name to the Massachusetts Anti-Suffrage Association; Henrietta Seelye, the wife of Smith's first president, did the same. President James Monroe Taylor of Vassar went so far as to institute a ban on suffrage discussion and exerted all his efforts to keep suffrage speakers—both pro and anti—off the campus. A social conservative and firm believer that college life should be about tranquil scholarship and at a remove from social and political involvement, he made it clear to Vassar undergraduates that he did not consider suffrage an appropriate subject. In 1909, he gave an address to the Alumnae Association entitled “The 'Conservatism' of Vassar,” in which he reiterated the college's “belief in the home and in the old-fashioned view of marriage and children and the splendid service...wrought through these quiet and unradical means.” He conceded that there were other worthy ways of contributing to the public good, but strongly implied that college women were still too young to make such important and lasting decisions.

Taylor received a great deal of praise for this address, including letters of congratulation from the presidents of Smith and Goucher Colleges, who applauded his views and seemed to commiserate with his position. Another endorsement of Taylor's address came from the president of the University of Michigan, whose sympathetic comment—“I can well imagine how you may be intruded upon by all sorts of representatives of 'causes' who want to convert your girls to their doctrines”—seemed to imply that women's colleges might have been thought especially vulnerable to radical causes.

As the suffrage movement gained more adherents at Vassar, Taylor clashed openly with both students and faculty over the appropriateness of representatives of the college taking a public stand. When he resigned in 1913, he denied that it was over these disputes,

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62 Horowitz, _Alma Mater_, pp. 98; 193.
64 L. Clark Seelye to Taylor, 6 March 1909, James Monroe Taylor Papers, (VC); Letter, John Goucher to Taylor, 8 March 1909, Taylor Papers, (VC).
65 James Burrill Angell to Taylor, 8 March 1909, James Monroe Taylor Papers, (VC).
but he was undeniably exhausted and exasperated.\textsuperscript{66} Taylor's troubles at Vassar, and perhaps especially the fact that his actions had failed both to keep the topic off the campus and Vassar out of the press, may have influenced other, similarly minded college presidents to employ a lighter touch. Smith's influential first president, L. Clark Seelye, who held office until 1910, thought woman suffrage unwise, but did not go to the same lengths to forestall discussion, allowing a suffrage club and approving some pro-suffrage campus speakers.\textsuperscript{67} The anti-suffragist John Goucher of the Woman's College of Baltimore (later Goucher College) seems to have either recognized the futility of tamping down on pro-suffrage sentiment among the students and faculty, or was maneuvered into a more moderate position. When, in 1906, the National Woman Suffrage Association held its annual convention in Baltimore, and invited student representatives of the elite women's colleges to act as ushers—attired in cap and gown no less—on “College Night,” President Goucher was greatly displeased to learn that the college's dean, John Van Meter, had granted permission. Only the realization that withdrawing from the convention would offend the other colleges kept President Goucher from overturning Van Meter's decision.\textsuperscript{68} Radcliffe's president in these years, Le Baron Russell Briggs (1903-1925), was at best lukewarm on the question of woman suffrage, but understood that he could only do so much to control the issue among the students. He permitted the formation of a campus suffrage club and allowed suffrage moderates to address the students, but actively discouraged the involvement of any well-known, militant, suffragists.\textsuperscript{69} His colleague, President Caroline Hazard of Wellesley (1899-1910), took a similar approach. Though personally opposed, she made no recognizable attempt to control

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{66} Daniels, Page, “Suffrage as a lever for change at Vassar College,” \textit{Vassar Quarterly}, (Summer 1983), p. 33.


\textsuperscript{68} Knipp, \textit{The History of Goucher College}, p. 91.

\textsuperscript{69} Le Baron Russell Briggs to Mary Coes, April 13, 1910, Le Baron Russell Briggs papers, Box 6, Radcliffe College archives, (SL).}
the issue at the college, and when, in 1910, students requested permission to form a campus suffrage club, it was granted.\textsuperscript{70}

Other presidents favored suffrage, but it was some time before any of them provided open and active support to the movement. Historian Lynn Gordon speculates that this stance was due to “fear of adverse public reaction and possible diminishing enrollments,” but also that “in many cases, their own belief in separate spheres caused presidents and deans to insist that college women should be and would be a conservative social force.”\textsuperscript{71} In 1959, Mabel Newcomer, emeritus professor of economics at Vassar, recalled how, “when I, as a brash young instructor, chaperoned some Vassar students to a suffrage rally the night before the New York voters approved the suffrage amendment in 1917, I was reproved by the head of my hall...Women's education was still on trial and must not be confused with other doubtful causes.”\textsuperscript{72}

Caroline Hazard's successor at Wellesley, Ellen Fitz Pendleton (1911-1926), had pro-suffrage sympathies, but she does appear to have stepped gingerly around the issue for a few years.\textsuperscript{73} Virginia Gildersleeve, who became Barnard's dean in 1911, supported the movement and allowed students to participate in suffrage activities, but had to tread carefully about hostile parents and trustees.\textsuperscript{74} President Luella Clay Carson of Mills College (1909-1916) was in office during the 1911 California suffrage referendum. Carson was pro-suffrage, but avoided making any statement on the issue in her 1909 inaugural address, and seems to have kept a low profile about suffrage all together.\textsuperscript{75} Her energies might simply have been focused


\textsuperscript{71} Gordon, \textit{Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era}, p. 194.


elsewhere, but it is also plausible that she held herself aloof from the movement to avoid entangling Mills in any controversy. Mary Emma Woolley of Mount Holyoke (1901-1937) is remembered as a prominent suffrage advocate, but she also took her time in espousing the cause—even refusing in 1905 to endorse a lecturer from the College Equal Suffrage League.76 Even Bryn Mawr’s M. Carey Thomas (1894-1922)—a vocal, uncompromising, and often polarizing advocate of truly equal education for women and of the necessity of their economic independence—was slow in coming to terms with the suffrage question. Like many of her colleagues, Thomas feared negative reactions from Bryn Mawr parents, but her biographer, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, argues that her elitism was the real culprit, explaining, “As...Thomas struggled to become a lady and a spokeswoman for higher education, the American women’s righters seemed wanting in manners and taste.”77 It was not until around 1905 that Thomas, for a mixture of professional and personal reasons, felt comfortable lending her weighty name and Bryn Mawr’s reputation to the suffrage cause, having come to believe that “[w]omen’s work in the world can no longer be done by indirection and by influence...to be a power behind the throne is an indignity the modern woman rejects.”78

It is tempting to look at the colleges' early twentieth century leaders and see a division along sex lines, with women being largely in favor of equal suffrage, and men largely opposed. But age and generation played a role as well. The anti-suffrage Seelye (born 1837) and Taylor (born 1848) were both succeeded by younger, pro-suffrage men born in the 1870s. Likewise, Radcliffe’s first president, and a key force behind its creation, Elizabeth Cary Aggasiz (born 1822), never supported suffrage. The college’s first dean, Agnes Irwin (born 1841), belonged to an anti-suffrage organization; her successor, Mary

Coes (born 1861), may have been opposed as well.\textsuperscript{79} Not that generation is a wholly reliable indicator—for example, the anti-suffrage Caroline Hazard and pro-suffrage M. Carey Thomas were born less than seven months apart in the 1850s—but it clearly did play a part.

Among those who kept their feelings to themselves or sat resolutely on the fence, professional ambition and calculation likely played a role in their vagueness and hesitation. Smith's second president, Marion L. Burton (1910-1917), was pro-suffrage and eventually supported the movement with enthusiasm, but he does not appear to have made a public statement on the issue until 1917, when he offered the less-than-ringing endorsement that "I certainly do want women to have all their rights."\textsuperscript{80} Burton was a young man—only in his early 40s—engaged in Smith's biggest fundraising campaign to date, and possibly already envisioning a future at a larger, coeducational university (he was later president of the universities of, first, Minnesota, and then Michigan).

Burton's colleague, Ada L. Comstock, whose suffrage stance can best be described as aggressively undecided, may have walked a similar fine line. Comstock was a rising star. The first dean of women at the University of Minnesota, she was wooed away in 1912 to become dean at her alma mater, Smith, where she was so well-regarded that she was appointed acting president for the 1917-18 academic year. She served two years as president of the American Association of University Women, and, in 1923, became president of Radcliffe. In a 1909 article for the \textit{Smith Alumnae Quarterly}, Comstock acknowledged having political interests and a desire to participate in public life, admitting, "I should like to go Congress, to sit upon the Supreme Bench (and upon juries, too, for that matter)," but immediately followed with, "I can...be forever content to leave the machinery of government, like the locomotives and steam boats and other unwieldy mechanisms, in the hands of men...After all, driver and passenger are in the same car." She accused both sides of lacking

\textsuperscript{79} For Agassiz, see Finding Aid, Elizabeth Cary Cabot Agassiz Papers, SL; for Irwin, see Susan E. Marshall, \textit{Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 44; for Coes, see "Mary Coes," \textit{Who's Who...1914-15}, p. 189.
a coherent platform, asserting that, "the only arguments less convincing than those which oppose Equal Suffrage are those which uphold it...I turn with alarm from the fiery orator who declares woman to be the superior of men, to shrink from the embrace of the lady with puffs who believes the home to be the only appropriate setting for members of my sex." She pointed out that woman suffrage would "add a new element of confusion to politics" but insisted that the franchise would in no way make women "coarse and mannish" so long as "human nature endured." She closed her article with a plea, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to simply be left to sit on her fence.\textsuperscript{81} But in saying nothing, Comstock said a great deal. She argued that the sexes were essentially the same in their morality, intelligence, and concern for the public good, but she also implied that sex distinctions, and thus normative womanhood, was naturally ordained. She rejected the idea that women were purely domestic beings, but professed contentment with leaving politics to the men. Her position might not have made her any friends, but neither would it have made her many enemies.\textsuperscript{82}

Faculty members, less burdened with the weight of their colleges' reputation, could perhaps afford to be more straightforward. Many were active and vocal suffragists whose actions did influence the popular perception of the colleges as bastions of the movement. Wellesley's faculty had a large pro-suffrage contingent, some of whom, like Ellen Hayes and Katherine Coman, had been vocal about the issue as early as the 1880s. Others, like Emily Greene Balch, were initially more diplomatic in their support but eventually became active in the movement.\textsuperscript{83} In 1915, approximately twenty-five members of the Bryn Mawr faculty marched in a suffrage parade, and later that year, in a campus straw poll, the faculty voted in favor of suffrage 48 to 7.\textsuperscript{84} Pro-suffrage faculty members at Vassar were numerous and also, by the early 1900s, intensely frustrated by President Taylor's refusal to allow them to openly discuss the issue. Like many of their similarly-aggrieved students, they turned to off-campus

\textsuperscript{81} Ada Comstock, "Neither Fish nor Flesh nor Good Red Herring," \textit{SAQ}, October 1909, pp. 32-33.

\textsuperscript{82} With thanks to Helen L. Horowitz for first suggesting to me that Comstock's ambivalent suffrage stance may have been guided by professional ambitions.


\textsuperscript{84} "Eighty-three per cent of College for Suffrage," \textit{The (Bryn Mawr) College News}, vol. II, no. 4, October 21, 1915.
was rare for a Barnard suffrage meeting to attract even fifty attendees.\textsuperscript{91} A 1914 campus poll revealed that fifty-nine percent of the Vassar College student body was pro-suffrage, hardly an overwhelming majority.\textsuperscript{92}

Even among students genuinely sympathetic to the cause, few could be classed as truly bold and aggressive supporters. Once suffrage clubs were established on campus, a hard-won victory in some cases, attendance at meetings was often anemic.\textsuperscript{93} Like Bryn Mawr's President Thomas, some young women feared the social consequences of vocal support and many others were simply indifferent to the issue. The more dedicated among them deplored the lack of activism and commitment they saw on campus and pro- and anti-suffragists alike wondered in the editorial pages of the college newspapers why the student body could not even sustain a vibrant debate. The \textit{WCN} editorial mentioned above was of the opinion that “most of us are too busy to be vitally interested in this great issue.” A Smith student agreed, marveling that “the biggest of all women’s movements—Equal Suffrage...is seldom mentioned in our conservative community. As educated women do we not owe an intelligent interest to this problem?” Two years later, the situation had apparently not much improved, with another student lamenting, “Smith has always had the name of being behind the times in regard to her attitude or rather lack of attitude toward woman suffrage.” An astounded classmate concurred “at the present time only 25 per cent of the eligible students are members of the Suffrage Discussion Club. How about the remaining 75 per cent? To quote the words of more than a few of them, they ‘aren’t interested.’”\textsuperscript{94}

This relative indifference was not due to any lack of exposure to the subject. Pro- and anti-suffragists alike considered the women's colleges an important constituency to win over. A 1908 editorial in the \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} argued that the “college girl” was one of

\textsuperscript{91} “Barnard Girls and Suffrage,” \textit{NYT}, December 18, 1910.
\textsuperscript{92} The \textit{Vassar Miscellany}, \textit{Supplement for April}, vol. 1, no. 8, March 27, 1914, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{93} For student observations and complaints about this, see \textit{WCN}, vol. xxi, no. 3, October 17, 1912, p. 4; \textit{SCW}, December 2, 1914, March 3, 1915, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{WCN}, October 17, 1912, p. 4.; \textit{SCW}, vol. IV, no. 2, 1 October 1913, p. 4; \textit{SCW}, March 3, 1915, p. 4; Ibid., vol. VI, no. 4, October 20, 1915, p. 4.
two groups of women upon whom the hopes of the woman suffrage movement rested.95 Although they would often be frustrated with the results, pro-suffrage leaders had early on targeted the women’s colleges as favorable recruiting grounds—a further indication of the extent to which many Americans considered the women’s colleges and progressive and/or radical social movements to go hand in hand. Leading suffragist Anna Howard Shaw tried to shore up interest among college women by emphasizing the debt they, and women’s higher education more generally, owed to the suffrage movement.96 In 1906, the National American Woman Suffrage Association added to its annual meeting a specially-designated “College Night” at which speakers from the women’s colleges dominated. All seven of the listed speakers were associated one way or another with the colleges, either as presidents (Mary E. Woolley of Mount Holyoke and M. Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr), professors (Lucy M. Salmon of Vassar, Mary Augusta Jordan of Smith, and Mary W. Calkins of Wellesley), or alumnae (Eva Perry Moore of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae and Maud Wood Park of the College Equal Suffrage League).97 Jordan was actually an avowed anti-suffragist who was likely there to argue for the other side, but the newspapers failed to point that out, focusing instead on suffrage converts. Students acted as ushers, and “some of the young women were heard to declare that they were for suffrage, first, last and all the time from now on.”98 Campus suffrage clubs did their best to secure prominent suffragists as speakers and college newspapers drew students’ attention to local, off-campus suffrage events. Even at Vassar during the Taylor years, information made the rounds. No doubt this abundance of attention furthered public assumptions that the women’s colleges were adamantly pro-suffrage, a situation dedicated suffragists likely found highly ironic.

Anti-suffragists, or “Antis,” made much of these repeated visits and campaigns,

95 The other constituency was working women. C. Cobden Sanderson, “Woman Suffrage in America,” Chicago Daily Tribune, February 16, 1908, p. F5.
98 Baltimore News, February 8, 1906, from the “Miller NWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks, 1897-1911.”
loudly decrying their rivals' activities in the press and alternately damning the women's colleges for their radical tendencies and casting themselves as the students' guardians against indoctrination. Many Antis, especially if they themselves had connections with one of the women's colleges, greatly resented Anna Howard Shaw's aforementioned comment that the colleges owed their existence in part to the suffrage movement. Annie Nathan Meyer, the founder of Barnard College and a suffrage opponent, was appalled by what she saw as the infiltration of the women's colleges by pro-suffrage advocates. She felt that students could be easily manipulated, due to a combination of "noblesse oblige" and a misplaced sense of "loyalty to sex." She assured young women readers that, "[t]hose who are opposing the movement are loyal to the highest interest of womanhood," and that "[a] fight by a woman against the extension of the suffrage is a fight for, not against, her sex." Meyer attributed pro-suffrage sympathies on campus to outside agitators, and though she acknowledged the pro-suffrage stance of Bryn Mawr's M. Carey Thomas, she nevertheless made it clear that, "I have talked with many a college President and professor, other men and women, who deplore with me the cruel advantage that is taken by shrewd women of the untrained emotions and the highly aroused sex-consciousness of the freshman." The Antis doubtless got much mileage out of their campaign to protect college students, though how much they actually believed their own and the press' hype about the women's colleges as pro-suffrage bastions is unclear.

The tug-of-war, fought by pro- and anti-suffragists, over the allegiance of the elite women's colleges and their students kept the matter in the public eye and contributed to the conventional belief that pro-suffrage sympathies dominated on campus. The sizable number of presidents and faculty who were outspoken suffragists and whose names appeared on the letterhead of organizations such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association

(NWSA) and various chapters of the College Equal Suffrage League (CESL) emphasized the connection. In 1915, of the nine officers of the CESL’s national chapter, seven were connected with one or more of the elite colleges. The small but dedicated minority of pro-suffrage student activists who did not shrink from and often courted publicity outright furthered this reputation as well. In her study of the CESL, Patricia Marzzacco writes of the women’s colleges:

[The college suffrage clubs did not have particularly large memberships, but the members they did have were deeply committed, well organized, maintained a high level of visibility...because of this...equal suffrage groups of these campuses were more influential than either their membership numbers of the pro-suffrage numbers from campus polls imply.]

Even when pro and anti passions were aroused on campus, as they were increasingly by the 1910s, woman suffrage never became the dominant campus political issue. But this lukewarm state of affairs was rather dull and more sensationalist stories, such as the exploits of Vassar alumna Inez Milholland, could be counted on to sell plenty of newspapers. Milholland was still a student when she used a megaphone to disrupt the Republican Party’s 1908 victory parade with an appeal for woman suffrage, fascinating the public and bringing Vassar’s President Taylor to despair. That same year, “heeding” Taylor’s ban on formal suffrage discussion, she held the first of her celebrated suffrage meetings in a graveyard just beyond the campus property line, a publicity stunt that succeeded magnificently and eventually became the stuff of campus legend—immortalized in a novel about Vassar life written more than two decades later. Attendged by about fifty students and alumnae, as well as by such prominent radicals as Harriot Stanton Blatch, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Rose

101 They were M. Carey Thomas (president, Bryn Mawr), Sophonisba Breckinridge (Wellesley, ’88), Ethel Puffer Howes (professor, Wellesley and Smith, Smith, ’81, Radcliffe, ’01), Maud Wood Park (Radcliffe, ’98), Lucy M. Salmon (professor, Vassar), Dr. Lillian Welsh (professor/physician, Goucher). I’ve taken these names from the 1915 CESL letterhead.
Schneiderman, Milholland’s stunt was compared provocatively, by at least one reporter, to similar exploits by Russian revolutionaries. The press adored her and missed no chance to cover her increasingly radical political activities or to emphasize her Vassar connection. A January 1910 feature in the *New York Evening Journal*, titled “Scenes in the Life of Miss Milholland,” placed side by side vivid illustrations of Milholland (complete with cap and gown) receiving her Vassar degree, campaigning for suffrage (gesticulating forcefully in front of a “Votes for Women” placard), and then being arrested for picketing on behalf of striking shirtwaist makers and being brought before a judge (charged with, the newspaper made sure to point out, “inciting a riot.”) Milholland worked tirelessly on behalf of the suffrage movement, though two 1913 parades, one in Washington, DC, and the other in New York City, may have comprised her finest hour. Riding a white horse, “Milholland was an imposing figure in a white broadcloth Cossack suit and long white-kid boots. From her shoulders hung a pale-blue cloak, adorned with a golden maltese cross.” Though the undoubted star of the show, she had plenty of company from her alma mater and the other women’s colleges. In her study of the Seven Sister colleges, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz writes, “The seven colleges marched triumphantly in New York’s great suffrage parade, each student group proudly carrying its college banner.”

Such dedicated and vocal suffragists may have been the on-campus minority, but the press was more than willing to cover their activities and this swell of publicity did much to convince the general public that the elite schools were cranking out militant suffragists at an ever-increasing rate. In the end, the actual number of suffragists, dedicated or otherwise, did not really matter. The colleges did not have to be dominated by suffragists for the public to be convinced that they were dens of suffrage fervor; because mainstream Americans already assumed that the women’s colleges were naturally prone to radicalism, the vocal pro-suffrage

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106 *NYT*, quoted in Plum and Dowell, p. 45.
All the same, pro-suffrage sympathies at the colleges were not static, and by 1915 things were changing rapidly. In October, Bryn Mawr held a campus straw poll in which pro-suffrage students crushed antis, 320 to 70. Barnard did the same, with a nearly identical result, 354 to 66. That same fall, "Smith students," often regarded as more conservative on the suffrage issue, "decided for suffrage with a straw vote of 509 to 149," and at Mount Holyoke, where "suffrage interest...was at length becoming militant," 150 students marched in a local suffrage parade. At Vassar, where the Suffrage Club had either offered or agreed to tone down its activities during the college's extensive fiftieth anniversary celebrations, sentiment was more muted, but nevertheless seems to have been moving in a steadily pro-suffrage direction. The suffrage referenda held in Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania in 1915 (all of which were defeated), and the enormous publicity they generated, were likely behind this sudden swell in support. But in spite of the overwhelming support indicated by the campus polls, no sooner was the issue voted down that campus newspapers were once again complaining about student apathy and empty suffrage club meetings. The popular opinion that pro-suffrage sentiment dominated at the women's colleges was probably, at least by this point, correct, but the notion that the campuses were bastions of roiling, militant suffragism was as misguided as ever.

Once their intensely pro-suffrage reputation was forged, problematic though it was, it took little time for the women's colleges to be branded with a pro-socialist label as well. Some of the colleges were considered more radical than others, but that radical thought

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108 "Eighty-three per cent of College for Suffrage," The (Bryn Mawr) College News, vol. II, no. 4, October 21, 1915; "What Other Colleges Do," The Vassar Miscellany News, vol. I, no. 9, 12 November 12, 1915, p. 4; Cole, A Hundred Years of Mount Holyoke, pp. 267-68; In October 1915, the Vassar chapter of the CESL asked permission to invite the controversial Inez Milholland to speak on behalf of suffrage. The student submitting the request reminded President MacCracken that "We have waited to do anything until the fiftieth anniversary celebration would be over." "Woman Suffrage at Vassar," folder 24, "Suffrage Club." (VC).
flourished at them all did not seem to be in doubt. In the spring of 1909, the *New York Times* observed, "[T]he appearance of thirteen Vassar seniors at a Socialist meeting...reported with such astonishment by the newspapers last week, is no surprise to those who have been acquainted with the trend of the student life for the last year."  

Some editorials warned that the women's colleges, so closely tied as they were to the American middle class, might become unwitting tools of socialist leaders, while others fretted that they had consciously and enthusiastically embraced socialist ideologies.  

Much of this fairly sudden conviction that the colleges nurtured socialist sympathies was probably due, at least in part, to the fact that many of the most prominent suffragists with known connections to the women's colleges—Harriot Stanton Blatch, the ever-active Vida Scudder, and media darling Inez Milholland, just to name a few—were also vocal socialists. Many critics suspected that that undergraduate admiration, something akin to "hero worship," of these charismatic figures, already appealing because of their suffragist credentials, was the real reason socialism had gained any traction at the colleges. This was certainly the opinion of one reporter who explained:

> All of the women's colleges within recent years have had their little groups of girls who considered themselves extremely advanced...Their radical ideas, however, gained no more dangerous expression than the wearing of low collars when high ones were in fashion, or in insisting on wearing walking boots to a Faculty tea, to display their independence of spirit and freedom from conventions. The little groups were never very influential, and the different members were referred to in some such fashion as "Oh! she's a nice girl, but just a little cracked. She'll get over it when she's married."

This reporter was fairly sure he knew where to place the blame, at least at Vassar, for the sudden swell of socialist feeling, continuing, "it is safe to say that matters would not have come to such a pass if Socialism had not got very much mixed up with the equal suffrage..."  

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110 "Colleges As Sponsors of Cults," *NYT*, 5 January 1911.  
111 "Vassar Students Are Now Radicals."
question."\textsuperscript{112}

Under such circumstances, it was an easy step from viewing the women's colleges as up to their necks in the suffrage movement to crediting them as socialist havens, and even recruiting grounds—and to those Americans who genuinely feared and disdained the rapid social and political changes of the day, it might have seemed a very logical connection as well. In Great Britain, the women's movement was increasingly militant and associated with socialism, and not only was this well publicized in the United States, but, according to historian Ellen Carol DuBois, by the early 1910s, "A new generation of American suffragists—college-educated, middle-class women bored by the 'pink parlor teas' of the aging suffrage establishment—were especially quick to pick up the inspiration of the British militants."\textsuperscript{113}

Around this same time, right wing organizations and periodicals upped the ante, doing their utmost to link the pro-suffrage movement with all the changes modernity had wrought on women's lives. Armed with catchy slogans such as, "The ballot is merely the appetizer to the 'feast of feminism,'" it became common for many conservatives to link "feminism" and the woman suffrage movement with socialism and present them all as a single dangerously radical package.\textsuperscript{114}

This is not to say that socialist sympathies did not exist at the elite women's colleges. They did, and likely were most numerous in the years leading up to World War I. The press reported frequently on the increasing popularity of Socialism in American colleges and universities, particularly on the East coast. In 1912 the \textit{New York Times} commented, "One year ago the number of important colleges and universities in this country in which the Socialists claimed their propaganda had a foothold numbered only eleven. Within the past year the increase has been 400 per cent...hardly any sizable university being without its group."\textsuperscript{115} Most of the institutions listed were all-male or coeducational, yet it as the

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} DuBois, \textit{Woman Suffrage & Women's Rights}, p. 268.
\textsuperscript{115} "Socialism's Growing Grip on American Colleges," \textit{NYT}, April 7, 1912, p. SM3.
women’s colleges that were singled out for special attention. The article emphasized that socialists had been particularly clever and adept there, because they faced more institutional barriers to organization than at other schools. Three Vassar professors, it was said, kept significant socialist libraries in their own homes for the perusal of their students and “four Wellesley professors...are said to have made systematic visits to women’s colleges throughout the Eastern States in behalf of Socialist organizations, their work having been so successful that they expect every women’s college soon to have its local.”116 As with woman suffrage, there are no hard numbers, and, once again, the actions of a few prominent socialists affiliated with the women’s colleges—such as Crystal Eastman, and the ubiquitous Vida Dutton Scudder and Inez Milholland—likely distorted the picture, giving the colleges a higher pro-socialist profile than they merited.117 Nevertheless, the popularity of campus socialist societies, the apparent lack of concern with which many students openly identified themselves as socialists, and a plethora of anecdotal accounts, make clear that the movement had made some definite headway with early twentieth-century women’s college students, though how extensive its influence was, and how much its popularity was merely wrapped up with pro-suffrage sentiment—as so many in the press and among the general public believed—is impossible to say.

Just as they shared female collegians’ concern with settlement work and issues of social welfare more generally, many male college students at this time also expressed socialist sympathies, but the women’s colleges seem to have been particularly vulnerable to these perceived links with socialism. One reason for this was the surfeit of media attention that had focused on, and often exaggerated, the growing popularity of both suffrage and socialism on their campuses. Another was the less tangible but powerful cultural assumption that radicalism would quite naturally find a welcome place in so non-normative a place as the

116 Ibid.
women's college. But just as important was the growing extent to which Americans seemed to view socialism and other forms of political radicalism, at least among the elite, as a gendered phenomenon. Support for socialism and other leftist causes among some college men was balanced by the increased tendency of some of their classmates to act as strikebreakers, an action many young collegians understood as public displays of masculinity—a necessity in a culture that continually told native born white men that they had been softened and “over-civilized” by modern life.118 While such actions were not universally praised, they did garner a great deal of attention and tempered concurrent portrayals of college men as social and political radicals.

College women almost never acted as strikebreakers until the more conservative 1920s, and even then did so only rarely. Historian Stephen A. Norwood attributes this aversion to the very real risk of violence and to women students’ general lack of confidence in exploring the world beyond their colleges’ gates, explaining, “restrictions on women students’ leaving campus also remained much more stringent than at men’s schools; as a result they were much less confident about exploring the outside world than men were.” It is true that most of the women's colleges maintained stricter campus rules than was typical among men's and coeducational colleges, but, as we have seen, female students were quite capable of finding their way to settlement houses, strikes, and suffrage parades, and sometimes even participated under direct faculty encouragement or supervision. Norwood also notes, more persuasively, that the women's colleges were much more likely to produce students “more open to pro-labor views,” and thus less inclined to act as, or even support, strikebreakers.119

In such an environment—where strikebreaking was considered an avenue for callow collegians to prove their masculinity and women were increasingly identified with social work, labor reform and, of course, woman suffrage—it is entirely possible that radical

119 Ibid., p. 340.
politics took on a distinctly female cast, at least among the elite. This certainly seems to have been the case by the end of the 1910s, when the image of the “parlor Bolshevik”—white, native-born, well-to-do men and women who supported radical causes vocally and often financially, but did not fully grasp the consequences of the ideologies they were spouting—became a favorite target of the right wing. Women were considered to make up the bulk of the parlor Bolsheviks, while male supporters were depicted as cowards, pacifists, and draft dodgers, and condemned in undeniably feminine language. According to historian Kim E. Nielsen, “Theodore Roosevelt derided the masculinity of these men and warned that the ‘dilettante sentimentalism’ of ‘the parlor of pink-tea or sissy Bolshevism dear to the hearts of so many of our people’” would encourage immigrants and less intelligent native-born Americans to embrace Bolshevism. By loudly trumpeting the right of women to receive the same education as men and by allying themselves so strongly with the Progressive movement, the women’s colleges both contributed to this perceived connection between elite women and radical politics, and made themselves increasingly vulnerable to it. Before long the idea of the “college-as-radical-haven” became yet another staple of the popular American narrative of the women’s colleges, feeding and reinforcing the prejudices of those who already found the colleges and the people associated with them convenient and comforting whipping posts.

By 1917, the elite women’s colleges—liberal, progressive, but hardly extreme leftist institutions—had been repeatedly represented to the American people as fertile soil for radical ideologies. The genuinely transformative implications of the colleges’ stance on women’s education had created a space within the emerging narrative of the women’s colleges into which allegations of radicalism could be easily and plausibly inserted, and the progressive social and political ideologies so prominently associated with the colleges

120 Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood*, p. 34.
spurred this idea. For those skeptical or frightened of the vast changes at work in the nation, this picture of the women’s colleges was easy to accept—after all, to many people, the colleges themselves were the agents of these unwelcome changes. But increasing numbers of socially and politically moderate Americans were paying attention to the idea as well. In the latter half of the 1910s, as reform victories mounted, women edged ever closer to winning the vote, labor unions strengthened, and, eventually, radical political doctrines shifted from theory to reality in some parts of the world, anxieties mounted significantly.\textsuperscript{121} In this new light, the political activities and sympathies linked to the women’s colleges began to seem significantly less benign.

The increasingly militant anti-woman suffrage movement, or “Antis,” and its journal, called first \textit{The Woman’s Protest} and then the \textit{The Woman Patriot}, may have been the single biggest culprit in branding the women’s colleges—both directly and indirectly—as actually dangerous to both national security and to that amorphous notion beloved of the political right: “American values.” In its efforts to forestall the passage of a federal suffrage amendment and prevent the further extension of the franchise at the state level, the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (NAOWS), an amalgam of many state-level organizations, took deliberate and systematic aim not only at the suffrage movement but at many of the Progressive women’s causes associated with it. As strongly connected with Progressive politics and, at least in the public mind, with woman suffrage, as they were, the women’s colleges were strongly affected by the Antis’ scorn, abuse, and aspersions.

Anti-suffragists had long sought to make converts to their movement by linking woman suffrage with unpopular causes and presumed dire consequences to the nation. One favorite tactic was to appeal to widespread American racism and anti-immigrant sentiment by stressing that woman suffrage would enfranchise not only the “respectable” white, middle-
class, and usually Protestant, women, who were most publicly identified with the movement, but African-American, immigrant, and working-class women as well. This argument, which had at times actually been deployed by supporters as well as opponents of woman suffrage (the idea being that supposedly ignorant or less "civilized" working-class or non-white men should not get the vote before more "respectable" and presumably more intelligent native-born white women) was undeniably potent, making headway with many white women who otherwise would have supported suffrage. Another popular technique was to warn that enfranchising women would signal the end of the American home, as women would either lose interest in domestic matters or be kept from them by the political responsibilities that had been imposed upon them. With the end of the home and the increased presence of women in the public sphere, the collapse of the nation's "Anglo-Saxon" civilization would not be far behind. Anti-suffrage literature was filled with articles accusing woman suffragists of indifference to their womanly responsibilities and cartoons depicting suffragists' neglected children, emasculated husbands, and disordered homes. The women's colleges, their presidents, faculty, students, and alumnae, had long been the targets of such accusations and were particularly vulnerable to the Antis' increasingly vitriolic rhetoric.

By the early 1910s, the anti-suffragists had also discovered, and pounced upon, the popular association between woman suffrage and socialism. From its very first year of publication in 1912, The Woman's Protest, NAOWS' official organ, hammered at this theme.

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122 One example of this attitude can be found in a letter written by the wife of a Vassar trustee to Vassar's prominent history professor, and suffragist, Lucy M. Salmon: "[Y]our movement asks for the admission to rights of many millions more of uneducated, ignorant foreigners, most of them under the rule of force and the fear of their men." Caroline S. Atwater to Lucy Maynard Salmon, November 18, 1909, VC, "Woman's Suffrage at Vassar," File 23. For this strategic use of racism by both pro- and anti-suffragists, see Newman, "The Making of a White Female Citizenry: Suffragism, Antisuffragism, and Race," in White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 56-85.

relentlessly. Some issues contained columns which reprinted other press pieces linking, or seeming to link, the two movements, or merely offered editorial opinions connecting them, and not always bothering to back up their assertions. Typical of these unattributed, unsubstantiated comments was, "All suffragists are not Socialists, but it is admitted that all Socialists are suffragists. During the past year it has been most significant to notice how many of the leading suffragists are becoming Socialists."

More broadly, *The Woman's Protest* and the movement it represented cast itself in opposition to what it saw as a rapidly spreading new ethos of womanhood—feminism. To them, "feminism" summed up everything that seemed to be wrong with the modern woman: she was too "selfishly" focused on her own ambitions and desires, she demanded political "rights" but ignored her womanly "responsibilities," she neglected her family—or neglected to have one at all—and denigrated motherhood and homemaking. They also associated feminism with a more relaxed moral code, pre-marital sex, and same-sex sexuality. Bold headlines such as "Suffragist Leader Endorses Free Love" warned that woman suffrage would bring moral disorder along with political transformation. Combining vitriol, derision, and condescension, the Antis portrayed most suffragists as the naïve dupes of their sinister and indecent leaders, proclaiming:

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124 Beyond the journal itself, few records of *The Woman Patriot* appear to have been preserved, so it is difficult to judge the extent of its influence among both general conservatives and the right-wing fringe. J. Stanley's Lemons' *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s*, especially chapter 8, "The Spider Web," (pp. 209-225), contains the best discussion I have found of *The Woman Patriot* and the significant role it played in the harassment and red-baiting of feminist and other progressive women's organizations in the 1920s. In *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues* (Kathleen L. Endres, Theresa L. Lueck, eds, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 446.), David E. Spencer says circulation numbers of *The Woman Patriot* were unreported, but that the journal was published weekly from 1918 to 1922, semi-monthly between 1922 and 1931, and then monthly until it folded in 1932, a timeline consistent with the Red Scare and the mellowing, but still strong, anti-feminist, anti-bolshevik tenor of the rest of the decade.


Probably comparatively few of the women who have thoughtlessly contributed their time and money to the suffrage campaign have ever thoroughly understood feminism or what it means. This is true of the rank and file, the innocent and credulous, who believe in or vote for woman suffrage under the impression that it would benefit conditions. The leaders of the suffrage movement, however, thoroughly understand what feminism desires and is trying to achieve, and it is significant that among the most radical feminists we find leading suffragists lending their names, in the company of leading socialists, in pleading for revolutionary doctrines that shock the average decent man or woman.127

Month after month the Woman's Protest wrapped all of these concerns up in the same neat package—described as “The serpent of Suffrage, with its ill-concealed fangs of Feminism... tempting the women of America to eat the apple of domestic discord”—and presented it to readers as both the cause and result of modern life and the decline of traditional womanhood.”128

The Antis and their allies did not spare the women’s colleges, which they portrayed as bastions of suffrage, socialism, and feminism—and unladylike bastions at that. An unattributed comment in the November 1915 issue of The Woman's Protest recounted the multiple attempts of an anti-suffragist student at Radcliffe to wear a badge proclaiming her political stance. Her mother, trying to procure more badges, was quoted as saying, “‘My daughter has had several of these, but the Suffragists at the college grab them off her and throw them away.’”129 In 1918, the president of NAOWS used the lower marriage and childbearing rates of women's colleges graduates to make her case that such institutions were at the heart of the threat to American society and the family, but reassured her readers that “in spite of some of our women's colleges and suffragists who largely use them to exploit their propaganda, there is still one line of defense. Do not give these women political power [sic] over the mothers of the race.”130 The following year, the editor of The Woman Patriot noted, “The Socialist and Suffrage Clubs at Wellesley College are to be united, with full approval of

members of the Faculty,” and just a few months later called Barnard College one of New York City’s two “hotbeds of socialism.”\textsuperscript{131}

Tarring the women’s colleges as feminist strongholds was even easier than had been marking them as suffragist or socialist bastions. Already firmly identified with the cultural archetype of the New Woman—modern, educated, adventurous, \textit{independent}—the colleges could be understood as feminist hotbeds to anyone who wished to see them in that light. As Nancy Cott argues, feminism went beyond suffrage, beyond legal equality with men, “stressing not only equal citizenship but also economic independence and what they called ‘sex rights.’”\textsuperscript{132} This was unnerving enough for many men and women, but even more radical was feminism’s “awareness that women did not necessarily operate in or from one domestic sphere...Feminists offered no sure definition of who woman was; rather, they sought to end the classification \textit{woman} [sic].”\textsuperscript{133} Not only the differences between the sexes, but also clearly articulated, socially constructed gender norms and expectations, had always been at the foundation of American life—though just what those differences were varied by generation, racial, ethnic, and class groups. To throw into question the entirety of what woman could be was to upend many Americans’ fundamental understanding of life.

Feminism, in short, represented potential sexual, and thus social, anarchy. This was far more radical than anything the women’s colleges had ever consciously advocated, but to critics that truth mattered no more then had the students’ apathy toward woman suffrage or the fact that, despite all the talk of “race suicide,” marriage rates among women’s college alumnae were actually going up in these years. That the women’s colleges—which had from the start appeared to question that there even were fundamental “truths” about women’s nature, which stubbornly maintained that a broad liberal arts (as opposed to “womanly”) curriculum enabled students to be the best \textit{kind} of women they \textit{chose} to be, and which seemed to many not only hostile to a traditional woman’s life, but to actually foster an “unnatural” and

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
“deviant” social atmosphere—nurtured feminism seemed to many people a self-evident truth.

In *Feminism, Its Fallacies and Follies* (1916), husband and wife team John and Prestonia Mann Martin put many of these ideas into particularly pungent words, asserting that “a college education results in an after struggle for economic independence with all the...anti-social consequences—marriage refused or postponed, children discovered to be a fatal hindrance to a career, health marred or ruined...a twist given to the nature away from domestic life.” To the Martins, any kind of college education for women was potentially problematic, but the disproportionate attention given to the women's colleges, the attacks on their inappropriately masculine curriculum, and authors' tendency to quote Bryn Mawr's M. Carey Thomas in connection with most of their complaints about higher education, indicate which kind of colleges troubled them the most. Arguing that “abounding vitality, amiability, and cheerfulness are more valuable assets to a normal woman than stores of learning on abstruse topics,” they called on colleges “not to anticipate that any but unfortunate women will be required to earn a livelihood outside of the home after marriage” and to “safeguard the interests of the majority, who should become wives and mothers, by first supplying their needs...admitting, for instance, that the fondness and aptitude of young men for stiff mathematical problems, is not a good reason for loading the course in physics for young women with mathematical problems.” Finally, it was past time for “the success of a woman's college...in part be measured by the proportion of its graduates who marry happily. A high proportion of homes is more to be desired than a high proportion of post-graduate theses. In college year books should be recorded in place of honour [sic] the children born to women graduates—more conspicuously than the salaried places they have won or the academic distinctions gained.”

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135 Ibid., p. 164.
136 Ibid., p. 168.
These criticisms and associations between the women’s colleges and woman suffrage, socialism, and feminism—whether presented together or separately—took an intense and sinister turn in April 1917 with the entry of the United States into World War I. Anti-suffragists lost no time in asserting, however shakily, that pro-suffrage feeling and national loyalty were incompatible. The basis of this opinion seems to have been the generally pacifist orientation of the leading suffrage organizations. As more Americans began to ponder the likelihood of war in 1916 and 1917, a national debate arose on subject of preparedness. *The Woman’s Protest* advocated preparedness early on and was careful to remind its readers that suffragists preferred a nebulous idea of world peace to “the maintenance of adequate national defense.”  

A young college woman who strenuously objected to both anti-suffrage and preparedness...demanded to know who was in charge. Upon being told, she said: “You ought to be shot—and I would like to do the shooting.” From this, it would appear that here are militant pacifists who are not so much opposed to the use of arms as to the organized and orderly use of arms for National defense only.  

Five months later, *The Woman’s Protest* alleged that the entire purpose behind “The so-called ‘Woman’s Peace Party’” was to further the aims of woman suffragists worldwide, and that, having failed internationally, they were redoubling their efforts at home. Moreover, they emphasized that “The suffragists...have officially refused to indorse [sic] any measures for the military protection of the United States,” and contrasted that stance with NAOWS’s January 1916 resolution that “adequate measures for National Defense should receive the support of every loyal American” and “That this Association appeals to the mothers of the

137 “Preparedness or Pacifism,” *The Woman’s Protest*, October 1916, p. 16.
country to teach their children reverence for authority, obedience to law and willingness to
sacrifice selfish interests for the country's good." The Antis did concede that there were a
few, individual suffragists who did support preparedness, but did not temper their assertion
that suffragism and patriotism were basically incompatible.139

The anti-suffragists continued in this vein after the United States finally entered the
war—aspersions cast on patriotism during an actual war being much more effective than any
during a theoretical one. A flurry of articles warned in essence that a vote for suffrage
equaled a vote for the Kaiser.140 The turmoil culminating in Russia’s Bolshevik revolution in
late 1917 allowed them to amplify their rhetoric. In September 1917, Alice Hill Chittenden,
president of the New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, wrote to the
president of Vassar—Taylor’s successor, the pro-suffrage Henry Noble MacCracken—
impugning his patriotism and accusing him of implying that the anarchy bred by any
revolution was a model that New York State ought to emulate, and threatening to forward her
letter to the press.141 The president of the American Constitutional League, Charles S.
Fairchild, sent a much-publicized letter to Congress in December 1917, warning that:

Pro-Germans, pacifists and socialists hope to Russianize this country, by passing
a Federal suffrage amendment and then demanding a referendum to men and
women voters on the war...Every patriotic American must see the peril of
doubling the pro-German, pacifist vote at this time, even without the tragic
example of Russia, showing that weakness in America now would let the Kaiser
win this war.142

The Antis had long proclaimed an intimate connection between suffrage and socialism. Now
with the Bolshevik revolution, they had a very unappealing portrait of socialism in action

139 “Preparedness or Pacifism,” p. 19.
140 Margaret L. Robinson, “Suffrage and Socialism. The Kaiser’s Allies,” The Woman’s Protest, February
1918, p. 10; “Is Woman Suffrage Pro-German?” The Woman Patriot, October 26, 1918.
141 Alice Hill Chittenden to Henry Noble MacCracken, 20 September 1917, “Woman Suffrage, folder 26,
‘Suffrage. MacCracken correspondence, June 1917-18, and n.d.,” (VC). Though Chittenden’s letter is
headed “An Open Letter,” I’m not sure that she actually had it published. It is not mentioned by the New
York Times, which would have certainly published it in the heated run-up to the 1917 New York suffrage
referendum. There are also no newspaper clippings relating to it in the Vassar College suffrage collection.
with which to frighten their compatriots and undermine their opponents.

These attacks would not have been so effective were it not for the drastic shift rightward that the political climate took following the United States' entry into the war. It was not only that war fever and distaste for Bolshevism made pacifism, socialism, and many of the organizations (including most pro-suffrage groups) that were popularly associated with them seem increasingly undesirable, but also that the whole unwieldy progressive coalition that had accomplished so many social, economic, and political reforms, was also significantly weakened. As historian Joan M. Jensen writes, pacifist women were very much divided over what to do now once the United States committed to war. Should they work toward a peaceful future, and in the meantime support the war effort and do what they could to alleviate suffering, or should they redouble their efforts to oppose the war? The suffrage movement faced a similar dilemma, partly because the suffragist and pacifist movements were so intertwined, and partly because many suffragists felt that, unrepresented as they were politically, this war was not truly their fight. Dissension over the war greatly weakened many progressive organizations at precisely the moment when the national political climate was turning hostile to pretty much any sort of reform. Many moderates opted to support the war, and withdrew their active support from pacifist and suffragist organizations, driving those organizations to the left and isolating them even further from the mainstream.143

Simultaneously, patriotism itself became increasingly gendered. Along with outdoors adventuring and rough and often violent sports, military service was embraced as an antidote to the "softening" of native-born, white American men about which Theodore Roosevelt and G. Stanley Hall had so apocalyptically warned. According to this theory, women's increased presence in public life, as reformers, teachers, and other professionals, though admirable in some ways, had led to a "feminizing" of the nation. As historian Kathleen Kennedy writes, many Americans, "Fearful that American citizenship had lost its virility...looked to a

distinctly male institution—the military—to restore it.” Women had a role to play, too, but as mothers. Taking a page from his race suicide book, Roosevelt proclaimed, “Motherhood... was women's most important duty to the nation and ultimately women's greatest achievement. Women who properly performed their functions as mothers deserved the same honor... as the men who properly performed their roles as soldiers.”144

Pro-preparedness women, many of whom contributed first to The Woman's Protest and later to The Woman Patriot, eagerly took up this theme, arguing that “National citizenship... required manly men and mothers who were willing to sacrifice for the sake of manhood of their sons”—women who were not mothers, apparently, had no role to play. These prized qualities—virile, militarized manhood and supportive, mothering, womanhood—only took on greater importance once the nation actually went to war.145 Women who deviated from this course, and especially women who had deferred or foregone marriage and motherhood in favor of a “selfish” professional life and the public sphere, were now not only unfeminine, they were unpatriotic.

In March 1918, The Woman's Protest, noting the new national climate, and perhaps mindful that national woman suffrage was likely to triumph, but unwilling to abandon its broader anti-feminist agenda, switched its focus and tactics. Merging with another prominent anti-suffrage periodical, The Remonstrance, it renamed itself The Woman Patriot and cited as its raison d'etre, “For Home and National Defense Against Woman Suffrage, Feminism and Socialism.” Anyone who advocated a different kind of womanhood, this new slogan not-so-subtly declared, was a danger to the moral and physical safety of the nation. Of course, anti-suffragists had been making these kind of comments for several years, but now they not only amplified their rhetoric, but also operated in a political environment that was increasingly receptive to their beliefs. To the editors of The Woman Patriot, “the ideal female patriot was one who centered her life on her family... Women were to be subordinate members of

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144 Kennedy, Disloyal Mothers and Scurrilous Citizens, p. 9.
145 Ibid., p. 12.
families led by strong and able men...The feminist disavowal of this ideal served as proof of feminists' subversiveness."146

The Armistice in November 1918 might have been expected to exert at least a mellowing influence on this rhetoric, but in fact it only grew stronger, as socialism, and particularly its Russian, bolshevik incarnation, seamlessly replaced Germany, at least in the eyes of many Americans, as the principal threat to the nation. Bolshevism was doubly terrifying because of the way it appeared to attack both the political and domestic underpinnings of American life. As historian Kim E. Neilsen argues in her study of anti-feminism and the Red Scare, “To many Americans, the true nightmare was Russian Bolshevism, for reportedly it went beyond politics and economics to gender and sexual disorder...Antiradicals charged that nontraditional gender roles were 'proof' of un-American politics.”147

In such a charged environment, characterized by militarism, anti-feminism, and the sudden wrenching rightward of the American political center, it was easy for many conservative and reactionary groups to both maintain their offensive against progressive women's political organizations, and to expand it to include social movements and ideologies that were also not to their liking. As Neilsen explains, “they worried that women remained a weak point where foreign radicals could infiltrate. Many Americans saw proof of Bolshevized gender disorder in the proliferation of female ‘parlor Bolsheviks,’ in the alarming radicalism of professors at women’s colleges, and in the female activism in possibly radical political groups.” Grouping all progressive women under the controversial and sexually-charged label of “feminist,” equating suffragism and pacifism with cowardice and treason, and arguing that the Progressive agenda was really Bolshevik-tinged radicalism in disguise, they impugned at a stroke both the patriotism and morality of progressive women and managed to rob them of much of their credibility.148 At the same time, the anxieties and

146 Neilsen, Un-American Womanhood, p. 43.
147 Ibid., p. 28.
148 Ibid., p. 3.
paranoia that dominated the years immediately following the war made moderate men and women newly susceptible to this extreme, right-wing propaganda, and many eagerly embraced the idea that non-normative women and women's organizations were at the heart of the matter. Identified as they were, whether accurately or not, with "masculine" standards of education, "race suicide," professional women, woman suffrage, socialism, pacifism, and changing sexual and gender mores in general and with the figure of the New Woman in particular, the women's colleges could not help but be caught up in this backlash.
wondered if the trustees could be persuaded to vote him a year's sabbatical starting the following January.  

Their worries were not misplaced. Neilson's feared breakdown did not materialize (nor, apparently, did the sabbatical), but the 1920s and early 1930s was a difficult time for the elite women's colleges, and, possibly, nobody felt this more keenly than their presidents. The third generation had been ushered in by the Red Scare and its backlash against progressive women's causes and the institutions that nurtured, or at least appeared to nurture, them. An October 1919 editorial in the extreme right-wing journal *The Woman Patriot*, titled “Feminism and Insanity,” summed up the case against the women's colleges:

> The insane asylums are crowded with women whose minds have been affected by puerperal mania, largely the result of dread of motherhood due to ambitions cultivated by a diseased brain or feminist propaganda, and yet, in...our women's colleges, young girls are constantly being taught to seek the careers of men and to look with horror upon marriage and motherhood. Nature herself tries to remedy the evil by making many of these women choose spinsterhood—and many such women, misled by their own abnormal ambitions, are actually preaching them as glorious ideals to young girls, without realizing that it is a pathological symptom of a disease that may end in infanticide.

Three years later, an elevator manufacturer named Alonzo B. See, who appears to have had no connection with or any particular knowledge of any of the women's colleges but delighted all the same in abusing them to the public, sent a similarly virulent screed to the *New York Times*, announcing, “Of all the fool things in the world I think the college for women is the worst. When they graduate...they are thoroughly ignorant of the things they should know, and they have their brains twisted by studying psychology, logic and philosophy and a lot of other stuff not only utterly useless but absolutely harmful—a lot of stuff which could have been concocted only in the diseased brains of college professors.” Not content to merely criticize, See urged action, adding, “If I had my way I would burn all

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4 George McCullum to Mary Van Kleeck, June 10, 1927. Mary Van Kleeck Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, (SSC).

5 "Feminism and Insanity," *The Woman Patriot*, October 18, 1919, p. 8.
the women's colleges in the country."

By the early 1920s, these pieces and others like them, nasty and ill-informed though they were, nevertheless represented very familiar territory to the colleges. While certainly unwelcome, especially in such fraught times, such attacks no longer caused undue alarm. But what was troubling to the colleges was how, in the years following World War I, such extremist rhetoric and the anti-feminism on which it was based, appeared to move into the mainstream, undermining the colleges' standing among the white middle class that had traditionally supplied both their students and their funding, and threatening their continued growth. This growing criticism, coming as often as not from progressive voices, including many advocates of women's rights and higher education who had been their allies in years past, targeted the colleges' carefully nurtured woman-centered culture, labeling it either detrimental to the development of "normal" women, or simply outdated, quaint, and faintly ridiculous. Their curriculum, once hailed as proof of women's intellectual equality with men, now stood in the way of truly "important" education, whether that was training for the business world (evidently the emblematic career of the "modern woman"), or preparation for efficient homemaking and motherhood. Some of these voices acknowledged the important pioneering role the colleges had played (though often in very condescending terms), others just snorted in derision, but their collective point was clear: whether in education or social environment, the women's colleges were out of step with the needs of modern women.

Comfortable in their honored and recognized place at the vanguard of women's higher education only a few years earlier, the elite women's colleges now found themselves increasingly derided as dangerous on the one hand and irrelevant on the other. This was the challenge to the colleges in the third generation: how to adapt to the rapidly changing ideals, expectations, and demands of the modern woman and her education, without compromising either their educational standards or their ideals. To a large extent, they pulled off this difficult feat, but not without a fair bit of stumbling, or, in the end, a drastic weakening of the

6 "A.B. See Would Burn all Girls' Colleges."
woman-centered, always potentially-radical, culture that had made them so revolutionary and unique in the first place.

The colleges largely considered World War I, and in particular the varied forms of war service impressively rendered by their students and alumnae, to be a vindication of their general culture and environment and, especially, of their traditional, zealously maintained, liberal arts curriculum. Elizabeth Cutter Morrow, the president of the Smith College Alumnae Association, one of the college’s most powerful trustees, and its future acting president, perhaps put it best. In an October 1919 statement to the college community, pointing to the uncertainties and increasingly complicated nature of the postwar world, Morrow discussed the countless roles the college woman would be called on to play, and emphasized, “No vocational school can make her all these things but Smith College must prove by its flashlight examples...that it can fit any woman for the great emergency of existence—for the eternal surprise of everyday living.”7 But much of the mainstream American public saw matters differently; their attacks on the curriculum not only continued, but also grew nastier, more condescending, and ever more pointed.

To many of these critics, the point could not have been more obvious: having proved over the course of two generations that their brains and intellectual stamina were equal to those of their male counterparts, college women now required a more appropriate, more “womanly,” education. No less a supporter of the elite women’s colleges than Henry Noble MacCracken, Vassar’s much-loved president between 1915 to 1946, considered this to be a logical and desirable stage in the progress of women’s education. MacCracken was a firm believer in the liberal arts, but also felt it was just silly not to recognize and accommodate that “there are areas of special interests reserved by custom of sex” and that “the consideration of women as women, of life in the family, wifery, housewifery, maternity,

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7 Smith College Weekly (SCW), October 22, 1919, p. 2.
nutrition, the arts and sciences of the home, are natural introductions to the fields of biology, political science, law, and morals, where women are the students.” In other words, not only would education aimed in part at women’s domestic futures not be amiss, there was no reason why the traditional liberal arts curriculum could not be interpreted in a more gender-specific and, at least in MacCracken’s view, gender-appropriate, way. Barnard graduate Eva vom Baur Hansl, writing in the January 1922 edition of the *Journal of the American Association of University Women* (*JAAUW*), argued, “[T]he early feminists had to prove that they were just as good as men, intellectually, but have they not proved it, sufficiently, after half a century of higher education and good scholarship, to make safe certain modifications in their courses which would tend to make the women of today, not just as good as men, but better women?”

Furthermore, went this argument, students and alumnae even of the elite women’s colleges, where a rigorous liberal arts program prevailed, recognized the gap between their studies and their probable future roles as homemakers, and wished their studies to be amended accordingly.

In his memoirs, MacCracken recalled some student unhappiness in the early years of his tenure with the wholly academic nature of the curriculum. In 1916, Mina Kerr reflected that as “a student at Smith College, I often pondered the fact that, while the majority of the graduates were going into home-making, the preparation was Latin, Greek, French, German, mathematics, philosophy, astronomy—all possible subjects except those which had a direct bearing on the future occupation of most of us.” Many students, including a number who intended to work after graduation, worried that they would be unprepared for domestic life, should they choose to enter it. This attitude did not necessarily indicate an embrace of domestic science or any similar program, nor did it argue women should not study the liberal arts at all, but it did rest on the assumption that educated women, because they were women,

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10 MacCracken, pp. 26-27.
would be happier in their adult lives if they acquired certain skills while in college. Hansl
probably spoke for a fair percentage of her contemporaries when she asked, “Surely there
must be a way to give traditional courses...a slightly different application, which shall make
them more directly applicable to the life of women as women [sic] without sacrificing any of
their cultural or disciplinary value to the student, in her career, in her life, and in the eternal
quest of fitting herself into the scheme of things.”12

A letter to the *Smith College Weekly* in October 1920 summed up this attitude very
well. After cataloguing the lack of either clear vocational training or any discussion of
housewifery and home life, the student explained, “Far be it from anyone to decry the
prevalence of liberal arts courses; but there would be more and greater interest in those very
courses if they could be used and applied through the medium of practical courses.” She then
went on to make very clear what was at stake, not only for the students, but for the colleges
as well: “Every modern women’s college is going to be forced to face this question...Women
are going to need something tangible...And they are going to demand something to fulfill
that need. If they cannot get what they want at college they will go somewhere else for it.”13

The colleges’ task in the interwar years was to persuade the public that the liberal arts
curriculum was, in fact, not only not harmful to “normal” women, but also relevant to the
needs of the modern, educated woman. Given the general tenor of the times, it might be
expected that at least some of the colleges’ leaders might have been tempted to convey at
least a friendlier attitude toward educating women for their domestic futures, if only to
placate their critics. But in fact, only Vassar made a deliberate move in this period toward a
more explicitly “womanly” approach to higher education, and this attempt was mostly a
failure. Smith briefly hosted a program that was meant to help educated women more

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12 Hansl, pp. 39-40.
13 *SCW*, October 20, 1920, p. 2.
effectively manage and reconcile their domestic and professional lives, but the program, though genuinely transformative in many ways, sounded too much like home economics and vocational training to the faculty and students, and it, too, disappeared quickly.

The few colleges that had inched toward incorporating some sort of “practical” or “womanly” coursework in the previous decade, now either played down those programs or backed away completely. Home economics had always been a less controversial subject in the West, and while that likely accounted for its longevity at Mills, the subject does not seem to have been very popular there either. The program in the 1920s and 30s was a ghost of its former self, with many of its courses in nursing, laboratory sciences, and the fine arts moved to other departments. Mills' president in these years was Aurelia Henry Reinhardt, a champion of liberal arts education for women, and while she does not seem to have overtly attacked home economics (probably, at least in part, because the program had already been in place when she took office), she was clearly well content to let it stagnate.14

Vassar’s attempt to modernize its curriculum and prove its relevance to the needs of modern women was called “euthenics.” Commonly defined as the science of “efficient living,” the euthenics program was, at least initially, the brainchild of Julia Lathrop, a Vassar alumna, trustee, and, after Jane Addams, probably the most prominent female social reformer of the early twentieth century. Lathrop was a dedicated social feminist, believing that women had a particular responsibility to exercise their feminine nurturing influence not only on the private home but on the greater household of the nation. She was also a disciple of Ellen Swallow Richards, another Vassar graduate, the founder of domestic science, and the person who originally coined the term “euthenics.” Lathrop had been elected to the Vassar Board of Trustees in 1912 and immediately began to push for some sort of incorporation of euthenics into the curriculum, though euthenics was as diffuse an idea as domestic science and it is

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14 This opinion is based on the overall decline in home economics offerings at Mills in the 1920s, the lack of any evidence in Reinhardt's papers or other surviving college records that she regretted this trend, and her belief, expressed in her April 14, 1937 “Vocational Day Address,” that college women “should be saved from the university which makes students think only about play, work, wage, craft, and professions. The student must first get the unselfish inspiration for thinking, learning, knowing...To do follows afterward [sic].” Mills College, Office of the President, Aurelia Henry Reinhardt Papers (AHR), (MC).
unclear precisely what Lathrop had in mind in terms of curriculum additions. In any event, she and her allies were blocked by then President Taylor, whose liberal arts purism and suspicion of anything that might connect the college woman with the outside world ensured his opposition, and there matters stood until Taylor's retirement in 1913.\textsuperscript{15}

The appointment of Taylor's successor, MacCracken, and his tumultuous first years on the job, gave Lathrop and her allies their chance. Though he had been their choice, the more conservative trustees clashed with MacCracken almost immediately, realizing they had underestimated his liberal politics and sensing his determination to drastically restructure and democratize college governance, and in 1918 they tried to force him out. MacCracken was saved in large part by the support of the female trustees and, according to historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "felt grateful to the women on the board who had supported him, and wanted to strengthen their hand." Throwing his weight behind Lathrop's euthenics proposal, "proved to be his strategy."\textsuperscript{16}

But MacCracken was not merely throwing the female trustees a bone. His interest in a more modern and experimental approach to women's higher education, and one that took into account that the students involved were in fact women, has already been noted. A pure product of the Progressive era, the careers of women like Lathrop were in full accordance with MacCracken's view of educated women. Moreover, according to his biographer, the experience of World War I and the upheaval in its aftermath, had convinced him that now more than ever the liberal, enlightened values of the university were desperately needed in all areas of life and that a sense of social responsibility must be inculcated in college students.\textsuperscript{17}

In euthenics, MacCracken saw a single program for harnessing the educated woman's influence and deploying it just as much in the outside world as within the family. As he


\textsuperscript{16} Horowitz, \textit{Alma Mater}, p. 297.

recalled toward the end of his life, “[a]ll of this great new development of the control of the environment, which had been loosely defined as the sphere of Euthenics...now became not only the legitimate but actually the central pivot of the new education.”

But Vassar’s euthenics program was, to put it charitably, a disappointment. The response of the faculty ranged primarily from indifference to outright hostility, and when put to a vote in 1924, it just squeaked by, in spite of the fact the entire program was to be funded by a gift of $250,000 (later increased to $500,000) from trustee Minnie Blodgett, and existing departments had no reason to fear for their own budgets. Of the faculty members who did support it, many do not appear to have been hugely committed either to it or to its overall vision of women’s education. While there were some true believers, Horowitz argues that most “yes” votes resulted either from intense lobbying or the appealing prospect of increased laboratory and office space in the proposed Euthenics building. The most fervent opposition came from some of the most established and venerated members of the faculty, including Herbert Mills and Mabel Newcomer. The college’s distinguished professor of psychology, Margaret Washburn, may have been the most adamantly opposed, believing that euthenics was “neither a science nor a social science” and that it “did not belong in the Vassar curriculum;” Washburn’s accusation that he was “driving women back into the home, from the slavery of which education has helped us to escape,” deeply wounded MacCracken.

The fervor of the opposition is all the more revealing because the program had been meticulously designed so as not rock the boat. In their proposal to the faculty, supporters emphasized that the euthenics program and major would be made up entirely of courses, many of them quite advanced, that were already in the curriculum. Many such classes were even taught by hostile faculty members, the implication being that opponents simply did not realize what euthenics was, and if they gave it a chance they would discover it to be fully in line with their own beliefs and scholarship. The courses listed ranged from “Botany 27-28:

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18 Henry Noble MacCracken Papers, uncatalogued (VC), quoted in Daniels, pp. 125-26.
20 Daniels, p. 138; MacCracken, The Hickory Limb, p. 59.
Horticulture,” “Physiology 14: House Sanitation,” and “Psychology 17: Child Psychology,”
to “Chemistry 51-53: Chemistry of Food and Nutrition,” “Economics 21: Labor Problems,”
and “Physiology 13: Physiological Aspects of Industrial Occupation.” Courses that might
seem especially aimed at women’s domestic futures, such as “Economics 101: The Family”
and “Physiology 102: Child Hygiene,” were weighted with considerable prerequisites. But
the opposition was mostly unmoved, and being outvoted on the issue, even by a tiny margin,
probably did little to mollify their hostility.21

Vassar implemented its euthenics program in two ways: its introduction into the regular
college curriculum, and extra-collegiate seminars or “institutes” that were held at the college
and open to the public. The undergraduate component of the euthenics program was an utter
failure. Many of the college’s most distinguished professors remained hostile, and their
attitude doubtless influenced many students. According to Vassar historian Elizabeth A.
Daniels, though the program attracted widespread interest among the alumnae, “the
undergraduates...scarcely considered it, except for availing themselves of the opportunity to
take child-study, the single aspect of the program which attracted general interest.” In fact,
child study was so popular that it became its own concentration after only a few years, further
weakening euthenics as a discrete undergraduate program.22

Euthenics failed at the undergraduate level because of faculty hostility and lack of
significant student interest, but its prospects were also diminished by MacCracken’s refusal
to work very hard on its behalf. Having thrown his weight behind the initial proposal and
forcing euthenics onto the college agenda, he then largely abandoned the cause, flummoxing
and frustrating his onetime allies. MacCracken had been instrumental in getting the program
approved in the first place, and he spoke warmly in its favor, both during its tenure and after
it had been dissolved, but it seems that his actual enthusiasm may have been short-lived. His
biographer notes the curious way he went about introducing the idea to the faculty, “first

21 “Proposed Grouping of Studies Within the Field of Euthenics,” c. 1923, Euthenics subject file, 10.44,
(VC).
22 Daniels, pp. 138-39.
1930 "Family Strife is Subject of Vassar Study," were only a little better, and a 1927 *Boston Transcript* piece titled "Lauds Student Who Goes to College for Good Time: Dr. Annie L. Macleod of Vassar Department of Euthenics Approves Idea," did nothing to make the program sound either serious or important.\(^{27}\) In his memoirs, MacCracken recalled wryly that the "public relations attending Euthenics were amusing," and expressed frustration that no matter how careful and creative he was in explaining both the idea of euthenics and the college's summer institutes, "the reporters immediately doubted it. 'The School for Bored Wives,' and nothing I could say would stop it."\(^{28}\)

Regardless of what his personal commitment to euthenics may or may not have been, this was definitely not the image of Vassar that MacCracken wanted to project. It was one thing to reinterpret the curriculum in such a way as to depict the college as friendlier to conventional ideas of womanhood; it was quite another to emphasize that to the point that it threatened to undermine Vassar's six-decade legacy as a pioneer for women's liberal arts education. Moreover, at a time when MacCracken was spearheading fundraising campaigns and courting wealthy donors, euthenics might have seemed a little too close for comfort to vocational training—the same association that had helped to doom domestic science at the colleges a generation before. If euthenics had proved more popular with students, MacCracken probably would have fought harder on its behalf, but as it was, it is easy to understand why he allowed the collegiate program to fizzle. Confining euthenics to the summer institutes, which were in any event more popular with older alumnae and members of the public than with the students or recent graduates, allowed Vassar to have it both ways. It provided students (or, rather, the few who expressed any interest) with exposure to current ideas on efficient homemaking and an ideology intent on helping women fuse family and intellectual life, but at the same time, it left the sacrosanct liberal arts curriculum well alone.

\(^{27}\) Jane Eddington, "Housekeeping is Exalted to Rank of Science," *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1929; "Family Strife is Subject of Vassar Study," *Buffalo Courier Express*, January 24, 1930; "Lauds Student Who Goes to College For Good Time," *Boston Transcript*, 1927, Euthenics subject file, (VC).

The only other organized attempt to make the women's college experience more relevant to "real" life, was Smith's Institute for the Coordination of Women's Interests, and it fizzled just as quickly. In 1917, in his first address to the college, Smith's incoming president, William Allen Neilson, fiercely defended the liberal arts curriculum, but he also recognized the need to make it more obviously relevant to students' entire lives, whatever those might turn out to be. Believing that, "a liberal arts college...should be concerned with the training of personalities," Neilson's ideal was to produce graduates with minds so well trained—principally by the liberal arts—that they could make life decisions with greater clarity and pursue their goals more efficiently and happily. While Neilson does not appear to have been implacably opposed to any kind of coursework that might address domestic life, he was clearly more concerned with instilling in his students the right philosophy, rather than equipping them with particular knowledge or skills. Unlike MacCracken at Vassar, Neilson was careful to avoid sweeping changes and to confine any initiative explicitly dealing with women's interests as women to extra-curricular activities and extra-collegiate organizations, but in the end he was no more successful. The fate of the Institute for the Coordination of Women's Interests does a great deal to further illustrate the difficulties faced by any such attempt at the colleges to bridge intellectual culture with a "woman's" life. Even when the reforms were never meant to affect the curriculum, and many of the goals outlined aimed at tangible methods of helping working women, hostility and suspicion on the part of the faculty, and the general indifference of the students, proved formidable obstacles.

As Neilson's goal was to make the Smith experience more responsive to the varied needs and ambitions of its students, his vision included bringing college education into greater harmony with the realities of marriage and motherhood.29 There is some evidence to suggest that Neilson was receptive to the idea of home economics education, including a claim by his biographer that in 1924 he proposed a home economics major, made up purely of existing liberal arts courses, but he certainly never got anywhere with it and appears to

have easily dropped the subject.\textsuperscript{30} In 1927, mindful that "[t]he direction in which pressure is most frequently applied from the outside...is that of training for the management of the home and the rearing of children," he raised the possibility, but did not formally recommend, that Smith meet "such demands by the organization of summer courses which might...prepare girls specifically for the management of homes...and obviate the dilution of the cultural forces of the regular terms."\textsuperscript{31} Once again, the idea went nowhere and, once again, Neilson seems to have been content to let it die. Whether he was largely indifferent to the issue and thus easily dissuaded, enthusiastic but realistic in the face of opposition, or, having observed euthenics' failure at Vassar, convinced that a similar program at Smith would suffer a similar fate, home economics or any other kind of explicitly "womanly" course of study never moved off the back burner, if, indeed, it spent much time even there.

Still, Neilson recognized that \textit{something} needed to be done. Along with outside calls for a more womanly approach to education, there was much discontent on campus. The students might not be clamoring for education in homemaking, but there was clear resentment of the strict course requirements and a desire for more explicitly pre-professional training. Moreover Neilson, personally, firmly believed that women could, and should, combine marriage and motherhood with a profession, and was interested in practical ways of helping them to do so.

It was perhaps this combination of sympathy toward the plight of the working wife and


\textsuperscript{31} According to his biographer, Margaret Farrand Thorp, Neilson felt a "woman's education should take account of her most usual profession, homemaking," and that in 1924 he "appointed a faculty committee to plan an inter-departmental major in home economics," but was ultimately blocked by the faculty. Unfortunately, she offers no notes or list of sources and it is unclear from where she got this information. A 1927 article in the New England Home Economics Association newsletter mentions that a "pre-vocational" course in homemaking had been proposed but noted that no action had yet been taken. But it is just as likely that Neilson was not especially enthusiastic toward home economics so much as he was aware that the public was clamoring for "womanly" education and that many students saw a real disconnect between the liberal arts curriculum and their postgraduate lives. It is telling that, according to Thorp, Neilson's proposed concentration in home economics was made up of "chemistry, biology, economics, sociology, and art," that it, courses that were already well-established in the liberal arts curriculum, rather than any specialized, "womanly" classes. Thorp, p. 214.

\textsuperscript{32} "Memorandum for Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees of Smith College, October 15, 1926," p. 3. Institute for the Coordination of Women's Interests Collection (SC).
mother, and evident willingness to experiment, at least a little, with new ways of educating
women, that prompted Ethel Puffer Howes to approach Neilson with her scheme to ease the
combined demands of homemaking and professional life. Howes was a former professor of
psychology who had earned her bachelor's degree from Smith in 1893 and a PhD from
Radcliffe in 1902. She had enjoyed a successful university teaching career for about a
decade before leaving the workforce marry and start a family, but her retreat into exclusive
domesticity seems to have rankled her. By the early 1920s, she was thinking seriously of
ways to assist women like herself, not only practically, but also in creating what she called a
new "psychology of action." To Howes, the needs of women in this area were threefold:
along with training in more efficient homemaking and an infrastructure that provided tangible
assistance, women needed to feel at ease with their choices, They needed a "positive
affirmation...not, as now, a deprecating, apologetic adjustment of two aims...warring with
each other."34

Howes was laying the groundwork for such a program as early as 1922 and was on the
lookout for an existing institution with which to affiliate. Smith, her alma mater, was her first
choice, and by 1925 she had brought her project to the attention of an enthusiastic Neilson,
who called it "by far the most fitting way of meeting the demand that we should undertake
work especially appropriate to a woman's college."35 Though Howes was sympathetic to the
needs of educated homemakers, especially those who were struggling to find ways to use
their cultural educations in their daily lives (and the constituency, arguably, toward which
Vassar's euthenics institutes had been aimed), her philosophy focused on knocking down
what she saw as the false barrier between a woman's family and professional life, and, more
concretely, locating and creating resources that would help the modern woman manage her
multiple interests and responsibilities. Her plan called for formal research "into existing

33 For Howes' education and career, see Elizabeth Scarborough, Laurel Furumoto, "The 'Intolerable
Choice': Ethel Puffer's Struggle with the Marriage versus Career Dilemma," in Untold Lives: The First
34 Ethel Puffer Howes, "Memorandum on a Proposed Institute for Coordination of Women's Interests,"
1925, p. 1, Institute Collection, (SC).
35 W.A. Neilson to Ethel Puffer Howes, June 9, 1925, Institute Collection, (SC).
conditions as to use of training after marriage of women college graduates, professional women or apprentice trained women," and also suggested investigating professions that might prove especially friendly to women with families. She also planned surveys of various organizations such as cooperative nursery schools, laundries, and home assistance programs that could aid working women and proposed building one or two model, experimental institutions.36

Notably, the only significant difference between Howes' original 1922 outline and the one adopted by the Smith trustees at the end of 1925, was the initial suggestion for an "[e]ndowment of courses (in women's colleges, at first) for Education in Parenthood and Wifehood."37 This was either rejected by Neilson or the trustees or never formally raised at all; the closest the Institute came was the establishment of a nursery school affiliated with the college, where students taking education and child psychology courses could observe and interact with young children.38 The plan that was adopted clearly demonstrated just how far Neilson and the trustees were prepared to bend. They were willing to concede that as a leading women's college they had at least some responsibility for helping women reconcile the demands of domestic life with intellectual or professional interests, but they would only do so in a purely separate, supplementary fashion.

Not surprisingly, the Institute's tangible manifestations at Smith—the cooperative nursery, the investigations into cooperative kitchens and home assistance programs—received the most public attention, especially since Howes never succeeded very well at conveying the philosophy behind her program. Doubtless spurred by her own personal experience, Howes had come to believe that the perceived divide between intellectual stimulation and family life was a major cause of unhappiness for educated women and proposed early on that the Institute conduct a formal investigation of "Frustration of trained

37 Howes, "Foundation to Study..."
38 Thorp, p. 212.
ability as a possible cause of mental instability." Summing up the Institute's own investigations, as well as all other studies she could find on working, married women, Howes reported in 1928 that "educated women, who can do individual work, need it for their own mental health; they are far happier when they have it...[I]t is not argument, persuasion or inspiration these women need, but the prosaic organization of a domestically feasible and socially acceptable—and accepted—daily order."

Howes saw her ideas as something quite new and was continually vexed when they were sloppily associated with the home economics movement. In a 1927 statement to the Smith trustees, she lamented, "[T]here is at this moment a strong movement toward a so-called re-orienting of women's education, which assumes the paramount importance in education for all women, of home-making studies...With this movement our own program has sometimes been confused, from our insistence on the necessity of a reconciliation between home and professional interests." Contrary to domestic science, which had been envisioned as the scientific application of women's traditional domestic concerns to the public sphere, and to home economics, which by the 1920s had become increasingly conservative and domestic in its concerns, Howes' proposed "psychology of action" was actually premised on the quite radical grounds that intellectual stimulation was every bit as vital to a woman's happiness as domestic life, that, in the modern world, such stimulation would come most often in the form of paid work, and, finally, that this reality of womanhood needed to be not only facilitated through support networks and programs, but accepted and not apologized for.

Sponsoring the Institute can be seen as a canny, as well as a practical, stroke on Neilson's part. Predicated on the belief that all women wanted to be wives and mothers, but

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41 Ethel Puffer Howes, "Memorandum to the Trustee's Committee of The Institute for the Co-ordination of Women's Interests, Outline for a Program for Two Years' Research, 1928-30, October 15, 1927," p. 1. Institute Collection, (SC).
also insistent that even "normal," "well-adjusted" women wanted their domestic lives enhanced by some sort of intellectual or professional activity, the program had at least the potential to placate some of those critics who complained that the women's colleges disdained conventional womanhood. As Neilson put it in an October 1925 interview with The Christian Science Monitor, "Constantly I am asked what are we doing for women as women. The Institute will be a step in that direction," and to another journalist that same month, "[I]ts purpose...is to find a solution for the problem which confronts almost every educated woman today—how to reconcile a normal life of marriage and motherhood with a life of intellectual activity, professional or otherwise." But at the same time, being unconnected with the curriculum and staffed with its own employees rather than any of the college faculty, it could in no way "contaminate" the college's liberal arts curriculum with training for, or even very explicit consideration of, homemaking and childrearing.

In the end, though, Howes' "psychology of action" failed to find a tangible means of expression at Smith. Funded by a three-year grant from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation, the Institute operated from 1928 to 1931, but was unable to secure subsequent funding and folded when the grant ran out. Howes had hoped that some elements of the program (it is unclear which) would eventually be incorporated into the curriculum, with the college presumably taking over some of all of the costs, but this plan failed utterly—not a surprise given the predictable faculty hostility and the difficult economic times. From the limited surviving sources, the Institute appears to have been well-received by the alumnae and by the general public, but never moved beyond the margins on campus life—following much the same pattern as euthenics at Vassar, and reinforcing the views of liberal arts traditionalists that such programs, if they were necessary at all, belonged to extra-collegiate or post-graduate life.

42 "An Institute to Co-ordinate Women's Interests Launched," The Christian Science Monitor, October 22, 1925, Morgan-Howes Papers, (SL); "College to Reconcile Interests of Women," New York World, October 9, 1925, MacCracken Papers, Box 81, Folder 82, (VC).
The issue of the relevance, or lack thereof, of the elite women's colleges, also extended to the post-World War I debate on the merits of single-sex versus coeducation. The 1920s saw an unprecedented number of women pursuing higher education—283,000 in 1920 as compared to 85,000 in 1910—and a majority, 85 percent, were enrolled in coeducational colleges or universities. This difference was mainly a matter of numbers—there were simply more places available in coeducational universities—but all the same, there was a definite cultural trend toward coeducation in these years, though it may be more accurate to say that the trend was away from single-sex colleges. Some Americans saw women's colleges as relics of a Victorian past, representative of a time when young women either needed protection from men, or needed colleges of their own because the established ones would not admit them. Others believed the colleges' combination of an all-women's environment and a "masculine" curriculum to be genuinely harmful to students, and still others fell somewhere in between. But all of these opinions were based on the notion that "healthy" womanhood flowed first and foremost from frequent and positive interactions with men. The women's college student was either being unfairly denied a "normal" social life, destined as a result to a life of lonely and embittered spinsterhood, or she was in danger of becoming a damaged, deviant, psychological wreck, incapable of sustaining a relationship with a man even if she wanted to. One way or other, such critics argued, the woman's college was out of step with modern American mores.

As discussed in chapter four, the idea that women's colleges were dangerous precisely because they were female-dominated environments was rooted in long-established Anglo-American prejudices and was articulated with increasing frequency in the pre-World War I years. The narrative that dominated the 1920s and 30s was really much the same. It made good use of earlier attacks on the colleges' "masculine" liberal arts curriculum and apparent

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predisposition to radical politics, but it was franker, more widespread, and more likely to focus on psychological and sexual themes. Some critics turned their attention to the older, but still apt to resonate, concern that the colleges explicitly denigrated marriage and motherhood, promoting “race suicide,” feminism, or “sex antagonism,” while others emphasized that the very environment of a women’s college was so artificial, so rigorously policed, and so devoid of the male companionship young women needed, that it inevitably “warped” the students in some way, often damaging them beyond “repair.”

These ideas found expression in many forms—including the same “highbrow” publications like Harper’s in which the women's colleges were defending and marketing themselves—but it was the “college” fiction of the 1920s and 30s that played the greatest role in communicating and amplifying the message that women’s colleges were unwholesome, even toxic, places. Entirely different from the more juvenile series fiction of the previous generation, and often penned by disgruntled or disillusioned alumnae, these novels exploited sensationalist stereotypes about the colleges and vividly illustrated the dangers that seemed to lurk behind their respectable, even stuffy, exteriors.

The ease with which well-established stereotypes about the colleges’ curriculum, apparent feminist proclivities, and supposed hostility to conventional forms of womanhood could be conflated into one, over-arching narrative of dangerously undesirable education, is well-illustrated in Mateel Howe Farnham’s 1927 novel Rebellion. Returning to the Midwest following graduation, Bryn Mawr alumna Jacqueline is unenthusiastic about helping to run her widowed father’s household and casts about for something more exciting to do. To her dismay, her father rejects her plans to become a social worker and accuses her of considering housekeeping beneath her. College, he raves, has turned her into a creature that “any man with common intelligence or the slightest resect for himself or decent worthy womanhood would snap his fingers at the thought of marrying.” Jacqueline’s aunts are not quite as nasty, but they too worry that college has worked fearful changes on their niece. They disapproved of “young ladies being deliberately unfitted for matrimony by being sent to college,” and
[a] philosophy like this: 'Any fool can get married... Any idiot can have a baby... Even rabbits are mothers. But it requires brains to succeed in a profession, to compete with men on equal terms... If you must marry, make marriage incidental to a career. Don’t become merely a wife and mother. That way lies the loss of all that the higher education of women stands for.'

Nearly a decade later, author and economist Willis J. Ballinger, in a spectacularly nasty article in *Forum and Century*, concurred, accusing the women’s colleges of “booming spinsterhood, encouraging marriage failures, ordaining a bitter and senseless feud between the sexes.” Until the isolated women’s colleges were moved near “a reasonable supply of high-grade males,” and took care to prevent “the unnoticed woman from crawling into her shell and taking the intellectual veil,” and until the colleges “will put before a young girl, as attractively as possible, the choice of a career in marriage or business, when these colleges will have supplied some leadership for making marriage, respectable, desirable, and as worthwhile as science and intelligence can make it,” Ballinger warned, “the feminist will win the contest by default.”

Other writers were more temperate, but made essentially the same point: single-sex education, and especially the women’s colleges, led to bad marriages or to no marriages at all. In 1923, Louise Fitch, a prominent member of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), drew a connection between sex-segregated education and so-called “sex antagonism,” arguing that in the eastern United States, it was common to hear “such strange theories as birth control, women’s party or other startling movements being discussed in public,” whereas west of the Mississippi, “[m]en and women... work and play together and think nothing of it.” But, Fitch continued, “the women of the East cannot be blamed for their ways of doing and thinking,” because they were the products of a dangerously faulty educational system, and lamented that “the majority of girls from well to do families in the

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47 Ibid.
things is likely to happen: The development of her emotional nature may halt while her
intellectual development leaps ahead; or she may find in other girls the substitute which
forms an outlet for her emotions." In a way, Yost's less dyspeptic criticism was actually
more damaging, because it implied that there was really nothing the women's colleges could
do to fix the situation, that their very make up, more than their ideology, was the culprit. Her
stark assertion that "it may be of value to recognize that since college girls, being human, are
likely to warp in a biologically unnatural environment, there is an older generation's
paramount duty to provide a natural one," doubtless resonated with many of her
contemporaries.

This theme, that the "warping" of college girls was inevitable in a single-sex
environment, featured prominently in the college fiction of the period. Kathleen Millay's
Against the Wall (1929) emphasizes the general psychological damage wrought by an
environment that is both highly structured and "unnaturally" all-female. On numerous
occasions the heroine, Rebecca Brewer, refers to her college as either a prison or a madhouse,
and when she suffers a minor breakdown at the end of her sophomore year, she knows
exactly where to place the blame. The environment of the woman's college is so destructive
not only because of its lack of men, but also because of the strict oversight and old-fashioned
code of conduct enforced by nervous college officials, fearful for their students' reputations,
yes, but for the college's most of all. Following her breakdown, a disgusted and angry
Rebecca proclaims that the problem, "wasn't nerves—it was virginity! Virginity gnawing at
her vitals like a pack of hungry wolves! Nervous breakdown—? Oh, that was all right—no
disgrace about that! You might die, but you'd do it nicely!"

Even if students did manage to see men off campus, the damage has been done. When
a possible summer romance presents itself, a paralyzed Rebecca attributes her extreme
nervousness around men to "that damned...nunnery I've been living in," and explains that

56 Ibid., p. 196.
57 Ibid., p. 197.
“when girls show a tendency to study...they’re carefully guarded and watched every minute so that nothing can happen to them while they’re imprisoned all together. So when they come out for a breath of air, they get nervous...at the very first man they see.”59 Fed up with college and fearing for her sanity, Rebecca drops out before graduation, but the author hints darkly that irreparable damage might already have been done.

Still, as unfortunate and inconvenient as nervous exhaustion and unease around men might be, the novels make clear that the situation could be worse. Both Wanda Fraiken Neff’s *We Sing Diana* (1928) and Warner Fabian’s *Unforbidden Fruit* (1928), emphasize that in so unnatural an environment, it is almost inevitable that young women will be driven into some sort of self-destructive sexual behavior, which they define as either promiscuous heterosexuality—Fabian make dramatic reference to the “sly lecheries” and “crude and calculated harlotry” that pervade the women’s college—or lesbianism.60 When Neff’s heroine, Nora, stumbles upon two classmates kissing, she is at first appalled and then sadly resigned, reflecting that “[i]t wasn’t their fault. They hungered for affection.”61 Nora grows bitter, not toward her fellow students, but toward the college, which forces students to either sneak out to meet men, risking expulsion and disgrace, or else turn their attentions to female classmates. In *Unforbidden Fruit*—possibly the most widely read of the adult college novels of the period and eventually made into a movie, *The Wild Party*, starring Clara Bow—one of the main characters, Sara, spends most of the story on the verge of a breakdown. She explains to a friend that, yes, “[i]t is nerves, of a kind; a highly specialized kind, as they would say in Hygiene if Hygiene dared to face a case like mine.”62 When she consults a doctor, she is told that marriage will cure all her symptoms, but in the meantime she is advised to take cold baths, get plenty of exercise, and practice mental control. Eventually, a desperate Sara jumps mindlessly into a self-destructive affair with a man she barely knows,

59 Ibid. p. 384.
jeopardizing her own education and bringing about the expulsion of her best friend, who had tried to cover for her with the vigilant college authorities.

Fabian’s other characters are more or less just as unstable and all of them are depicted as dangerously obsessed with sex. They have numerous affairs, including at least one with a professor, display what the author describes as an unhealthy interest in the sex lives of other people, and are happy to engage in reckless, irresponsible behavior for the sake of a temporary thrill. At the end, pondering the unhappy circumstances of her friends, one character muses:

What was the answer to it all, this disrupting, commanding impulse which had swept her companions before it like a conquering wave? Was it a...localized phenomenon, an exaggerated tendency due to a super-feminized environment...Surely women in the outer world...did not let this one motive bulk so large in their more complex lives.63

Even if women’s college students somehow manage to avoid all of these pitfalls, the novels warn that they are still in danger, because they are innocents at the mercy of the bitter and cynical adults around them. In the novels of the late 1920s and early 1930s, faculty, staff physicians, housemothers, and college presidents are almost uniformly portrayed as more concerned with image and prestige than with mentoring and looking out for the young women in their care. This theme appears in many of the novels, but it entirely dominates Mary Lapsley’s The Parable of the Virgins (1931). More sympathetic and nuanced than most such novels, Lapsley nevertheless trades in and exploits the all of the same stereotypes, ultimately delivering the same harsh and damaging verdict about the colleges, even as she treats her characters with more respect and compassion. While she does examine what she agrees are the inevitable consequences of isolating young women for so long without “normal” male companionship—the story features the full array of hetero- and homosexual flirtations and affairs, most of which end badly—her real focus is on what the years of tension and scrutiny from the “outside world” have done to the colleges, and what they, in

63 Ibid., pp. 317-318.
turn, are doing to their students.

The president of Lapsley’s fictional Walton College is under constant stress to reassure the public, and perhaps more importantly, wealthy alumnae, that, contrary to the wild stories they read in the press, “Walton girls” are models of demure womanhood. American women as a whole might be more sexually knowing and experienced, but as far as the college is concerned, their students must be as innocent and unsullied as their Victorian grandmothers. The president and his staff, desperate to protect the college’s good name and increase its endowment, are willing to protect this illusion at any price, and shrug their shoulders at the consequences.

*The Parable of the Virgins* features a host of characters who among them represent pretty much every stereotype ever floated about women’s colleges, but it is the gifted Crosby, a hard and cynical poet who engages in multiple affairs with both men and women, and Mary and Jessica, who are roommates and lovers, who get most of the attention. Crosby, who would have fit very well into Fabian’s salacious *Unforbidden Fruit*, is a genius who, Lapsley makes clear, would thrive in an environment that gave her the freedom to explore her talents. But instead, the college, fearful of her unconventional nature, tries to control her with endless rules and only pushes her into greater acts of rebellion. Crosby, who seems to be deathly bored rather than truly unkind, toys with the emotions of admiring freshmen, has several unhappy affairs, and clearly picks her paramours and favorites, at least in part, to cause trouble among her friends. Lapsley is subtler than most other authors of “college girl” fiction, but her point is the same: in a healthier, more “normal” environment, Crosby would be a healthier, more normal person.

Mary and Jessica’s situation is more serious and tragic. Their relationship is an open secret among the upperclassmen, who, interestingly given the tenor of the times, do not react harshly, but nor do they encourage younger students to follow the same path--warning them quite frankly not to be too “slushy” in their admiration of older students, as “[i]t makes a girl
conspicuous, and the college authorities do not approve."\textsuperscript{64} Both Mary and Jessica are overwhelmed and confused, but feel they have nowhere to turn; Mary, in particular, longs for "comfort, perhaps slightly astringent advice," but that was "something you didn't get at Walton where you were either bullied or cajoled."\textsuperscript{65} Instead, they get the college physician, Dr. Royal, who disdains compassion and understanding, and deliberately sets out to frighten and shame them into "behaving" themselves. She warns Jessica of "awful illnesses brought on by dissipation," and plunges her into a "sickness of fear." She is even harsher with Mary, whom she likens to a predator and considers the real "culprit."\textsuperscript{66} After telling Mary that Jessica fears and hates, rather than loves, her, and that she, Mary, is mentally unstable and dangerously selfish, Dr. Royal threatens to have her expelled as "an immoral influence." and to tell her family exactly why.\textsuperscript{67} When a devastated Mary kills herself shortly thereafter, Dr. Royal refuses to accept any responsibility and instead coldly blames it on Mary's "abnormal nature," and, significantly, on whoever made the unwise decision to send her to a woman's college in the first place. The college's only real concern is with hushing up the whole thing, and when one student bravely suggests calling in a psychiatrist to tend to the traumatized Jessica, the president refuses, citing the need for discretion.\textsuperscript{68}

Unlike so many of her contemporaries, Lapsley does not the blame with "spinster" professors and the warped personal example they supposedly set. In fact, Dr. Austen, the one adult depicted in a positive light, was clearly modeled on Vassar's famous (and unmarried) Lucy Maynard Salmon. Austen stands out among the faculty for treating students like thinking adults, both in and out of the classroom, and her reaction to Mary and Jessica's tragedy likely reflects Lapsley's own view:

They swung together, these children...crowded into an abnormal environment; then

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. p. 251.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p. 217.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., pp. 251-52.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., pp. 289-90, 293.
all at once the Administration was upon them, raising shocked hands and clamoring of sin. If the college only started its campaign against crushes before they got so intense,—or, better still, if it treated them in less breathless a fashion...If the Administration didn't talk in hushed whispers and avoid the word homosexual...one could hope for some results. It was a bad enough problem anyway, why make it worse by hedging?69

But even the sympathetic and thoughtful Austen accepts that the women's college environment is itself most of the problem, that it is a place where young women are subjected to intolerable psychological and emotional pressures, and then pounced upon by an administration that cares only for appearances. Is it any wonder that the most vulnerable among them end up snapping, one way or another?

This, then, was the colleges' reality in the third generation: their well-established reputation for "masculine" education, radical ideologies, and their apparent dominance by and cultivation of "undesirable," non-normative women, had done more than alienate what might be called the "usual suspects"—conservatives, reactionaries, and anti-feminists. They were also increasingly offensive to large swathes of their traditional allies and constituency, the progressive men and women who believed in education and equality for women, but envisioned the modern female ideal in a very different way. Beset on all sides, college officials were constantly rushing to placate one or other angry or patronizing critic, while at the same time, some of their more radical attempts to appease their critics, such as Vassar's eugenics program or Smith's Institute for the Coordination of Women's Interests, were contemptuously rejected by their own students. Little wonder that Smith's President Neilson seemed on the verge of collapse.

In the 1830s, dreaming of a way to revolutionize higher education for women, Mary Lyon had envisioned a "permanent institution for the education of young women, where expenses should be so moderate as not to debar those of limited means, and advantages so

69 Ibid., p. 315.
and while they, too, were fond of using words like "inefficient" and "impractical" to describe their colleges' courses of study, both their complaints and their suggestions for change differed quite a bit from those voiced in the national, more public, debate. Many students did wonder if programs that so completely ignored their likely futures as wives and mothers made much sense, and campus publications of the period do contain the odd query about "domestic" training. But there is no evidence to suggest that the dominant feeling on any of the campuses was that a more "womanly" curriculum—and certainly not the home economics programs popular at many state universities—ought to supplant the liberal arts, or even share equal billing with it.

Most student discontent was fairly mundane and did not make as good copy as the public rantings of other critics. What frustrated and angered students was how little say they had in determining their own courses of study within the existing curriculum. In the early 1910s, the course requirements at all of the elite women's colleges mandated study of a wide array of disciplines over a four-year period—an approach that might have made the students "well-rounded" but left them with little time to study a chosen field in any real depth. Many students felt that their educations were too superficial and feared they would graduate little better prepared for a profession than they had been upon entering college. As the 1910s progressed, and certainly by the 1920s, as more and more college women planned on entering the workforce, these concerns only grew. An exasperated 1915 editorial in the Bryn Mawr campus newspaper was typical: "To come through four years of college and still be completely in the dark as to what one's 'proper' job may be seems incredibly stupid." In 1924, a Vassar student complained of the typical college program that, "[m]ost courses make a pretense of having as their aim the development of thinking power, but few live up to it. After four years of this game of brain-stuffing, the student has a college education." Even at Radcliffe, where distribution requirements were somewhat laxer than at the other colleges,

73 Margaret Young, "Our Handicap Race," *The New Student*, vol. III, January 5, 1924, p. 3.
there was much unhappiness. A student writing to *The Radcliffe News* in 1921 spoke for many of her classmates when she observed, "Somehow, there seems but little room left for the courses [students] really want to take. As a result, they usually have to do without some knowledge that they hoped to get in their college course."\(^{74}\)

Their concerns were not unfounded. A visitor to the Bryn Mawr campus in 1921 warned students that real world experience was more valuable than even the most intensive academic training.\(^{75}\) A few years later, a guidance counselor at Barnard expressed to the *New York Times* that "[t]he college woman who succeeds in business today owes her alma mater very little thanks. She is the victim of one of the most perfect systems of unpreparedness and misguidance ever devised."\(^{76}\) For a generation of students very interested in business careers—one newspaper reported that it was the number one post-graduation goal among the Smith class of 1927—such comments were most troubling.\(^{77}\)

Students also voiced dissatisfaction with the lack of attention paid to actual vocational training, though it is unclear exactly what they would have liked to see instead. Certainly the opinion expressed in a 1916 Bryn Mawr editorial—that "College training should undoubtedly help us to be wage-earners"—would have been popular on all of the campuses.\(^{78}\) Another piece called for "an Introductory Course in Jobs," which would familiarize students with the growing possibilities for women in the workforce and what courses might best prepare them.\(^{79}\) But while these sentiments were popular, even in the more "practical" and jobs-oriented 1920s and 30s, they did not amount to a concerted push from the students at any of the colleges to introduce extensive vocational programs into the curriculum.

If the colleges were reluctant to introduce much in the way of actual vocational

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\(^{77}\) "Ladies Prefer Business," *The New Student*, vol. 6, no. 35, June 8, 1927, p. 1.


training, they were well aware that increasing numbers of students were planning on some sort of paid employment following graduation, and were supportive of this trend. At Mills, which was already friendlier to vocational training than most of the other colleges—by 1916, it offered “teachers’ certificates in music supervision, home economics and physical education”—a personnel bureau was established where, according to the San Francisco Call, “[b]y means of a series of psychological tests, students...are directed into the occupation in which they have the greatest natural opportunity for success.”80 The colleges also reminded students of the Intercollegiate Bureau of Occupations, founded by women’s college alumnae the previous decade to expand women’s professional opportunities beyond teaching, and they continued to sponsor campus talks regarding vocations for educated women.81

It is difficult to say just how many students at the various colleges were actively engaged with the clamor for curriculum reform, either participating formally on student committees or simply paying careful attention to the debate. Certainly the level of coverage devoted to the issue in the campus press and alumnae publications would indicate that the issue was a popular one. As a front-page story in a 1915 edition of the Smith College Weekly put it, “One needs only to ask at the table some day, ‘Do you think that Latin or Greek should be required for freshman?’ or, ‘I think that everyone should be made to take a course in Zoology,’ In nine cases out of ten the discussion that follows will be a lively one.”82 Nor was individual student interest confined to their respective colleges; campus newspapers frequently reported on the issue’s progress at other institutions, and especially at the other elite women’s colleges. In 1923, the Bryn Mawr newspaper mentioned that students at Mount Holyoke had presented a model of their ideal curriculum to their professors—who had, so it was reported, received the plan with delight.83 Such stories kept the community

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informed, and communicated to the faculty and administration that the students were in earnest.

Whether or not students recognized it, generally speaking, the various college administrations were sympathetic to their complaints, and, if not always in agreement about what exactly ought to be done, there was much mutual feeling that the existing curriculum was too rigid and badly in need of an overhaul. At Vassar, the curriculum was revised multiple times during the interwar period, allowing for both greater flexibility and specialization, and grouping related classes into sequential programs (an early version of the college major). Requirements were also loosened and reorganized into broader distribution sets, and in 1922 the once sacrosanct Latin requirement was dropped so long as a student substituted it with a second science class. In 1927, the distribution requirements were revised again, this time around four major areas, “Arts, Languages, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences,” and, “for the first time in Vassar’s history, no single course was required.” Not that this was the end of the curriculum tinkering; the rules were rewritten and simplified at least two more times between 1927 and 1940, always due, at least in part, to student demand.84

Though it happened in different ways and at different speeds, a similar process was at work at the other elite women’s colleges. As early as 1922, not only did Barnard students meet with a significant measure of success in their demands for a more interdisciplinary approach to learning and a greater overall voice in their own educations, but their activism encouraged their counterparts at many other women’s colleges as well.85 Under the guidance of President Neilson, the Smith curriculum in the 1920s and 30s maintained its firm liberal arts basis, but also become cautiously but steadily friendlier to some kinds of pre-professional training. Smith’s strategy seems to have been to encourage students to view the existing liberal arts program through a personal, vocational, lens, rather than to create many courses

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85 “Student Curricular Committees,” The New Student, vol. II, no. 12, March 10, 1923, p. 3.
that dealt directly with one or other professional fields. In 1926, Neilson noted that, already, "[t]he so-called 'Interdepartmental Majors' have a vocational tendency. One is a grouping of studies preparatory to the study of medicine, and another prepares students to take positions in Public Health," and that "[I]n the Departments of Botany and Art, a few students are being prepared for minor positions in landscape architecture." In these years, too, the art department was hoping to prepare interested students for museum work, while the music department had for some time been placing students as music directors in various public schools.

To aid students in tailoring the liberal arts curriculum to their individual needs, Neilson had gone to work on what he called a "Special Honors" plan almost as soon as he took office, creating a system where especially strong students could experiment broadly in their first two years and then be freed from most other course requirements to work intensively on special projects. This innovation was not only popular at Smith, but was widely imitated at other American colleges, including Mills, where it was received with much student enthusiasm. In 1927, Smith introduced a broadly similar plan for all students, one that "simplified the whole curricular structure, releasing freshmen and sophomores from a too rigid prescription of studies, and...provided also for increased specialization by upperclassmen in their major subjects."

Goucher spent years reorganizing not only its curriculum but also its various academic departments, holding fast to its liberal arts core while creating more courses in the social sciences, relaxing core requirements, and clearing out what remained of the "practical" courses that had crept in during the war years. In 1931, the trustees approved these changes, confirming the place of economics and sociology, fine arts, physical education, and political science, alongside the more traditional fields like biology, chemistry, history, Latin,
mathematics, and Romance languages, maintaining, "standards of academic excellence...while the means to attaining them remained flexible."\(^8\)

Even Bryn Mawr, always the most inflexible in its devotion to the pure liberal arts and contemptuous of attempts to insert any kind of "specialized," "practical," or, worst of all, "womanly," courses, recognized the need for reform. President Marion Edwards Park, who succeeded the redoubtable M. Carey Thomas in 1922, encouraged the establishment of a student curriculum committee, and carefully weighed their recommendations along with those of the faculty. The process took years, but by the early 1930s, majors had been reconstructed, more room made in the system for student-faculty consultation, and the number of required courses reduced by nearly half, allowing for "a far wider margin for the choice of free electives."\(^9\)

An observation of the Vassar curriculum in these years, that "Vassar was creeping towards a new kind of curriculum in which the course of study was determined by the student, not the college," can be applied just as easily to the other women's colleges.\(^9\) This was due in part to broader educational trends that emphasized the importance of cultivating the individual and individually guided learning. Student interest in specialization and preprofessional training, rather than the cultural studies that had dominated for centuries, was in evidence at virtually all liberal arts institutions at this time. The increasingly outspoken student body, newly confident in demanding the course of study it wanted, as opposed to previous generations that would have either petitioned meekly for changes or simply accepted the decisions of their elders, was likewise not a phenomenon limited to the women's colleges.\(^9\) In fact, one professor, writing to the *New York Times* in 1927, made clear that the situation at men's colleges was even worse, that "[t]he colleges for men are gradually

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with the faculty, because "the ablest scholars are in great coeducational universities. With rare exceptions, they cannot be induced to stay in women's colleges." While she acknowledged that chauvinism contributed to that fact, the main problem was lack of resources; "[t]he endowments available for women's colleges have not ordinarily been large enough to pay for the most characteristic and important attributes of university education, large libraries and ample laboratories that all students need." Peixotto and others of a like opinion saw no real future for women's colleges, predicting that they would disappear all together or else would fade into obscurity and obsolescence.

The elite women's colleges were not the intellectual and pedagogical backwaters that many critics believed, and they themselves, of course, looked at the matter rather differently. Nevertheless, most of their presidents, trustees, and other leaders recognized the essential truth at the heart of Peixotto's argument: their goal, to be truly first-rate, modern liberal arts colleges, required resources they simply did not have, and if they wished to maintain their cherished place at the vanguard of women's higher education, something had to be done.

These issues were hardly new, and it was not as if a switch was suddenly flicked at the beginning of 1920, alerting the colleges to their problematic situation. Faculty salaries, always low, had been an issue from the start, and concerns about losing gifted professors to other, higher-paying institutions, a constant worry. Even at Bryn Mawr, where M. Carey Thomas had designed a system in the 1880s to attract the best young (usually male) professors, limited their teaching hours so they could keep up with their research, and generally paid them better than their counterparts at the other women's colleges, retention was a problem. The need for increased dormitory space, more classroom buildings and office space, and enlarged and well-equipped libraries and laboratories was likewise nothing new, nor had the colleges spent the previous two generations waiting passively for some philanthropist or another to notice them. But there was an increasing sense of urgency.

94 Peixotto, "The Case for Coeducation."
95 For examples from two colleges, see Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas, pp. 242, 346; Thorp, Neilson of Smith, pp. 163-67, 282-83.
Between World War I—which had worsened inflation, directed fundraising efforts elsewhere, and generally thrown most American institutions into at least temporary turmoil—the growing popularity of coeducation, and the avalanche of bad publicity heaped on the colleges in the late 1910s and 1920s, the colleges knew it was critical that they somehow strengthen their positions.

To some extent, the colleges were victims of their own success. As their reputations advanced and higher education for women became more popular, enrollments had increased, steadily to the point where the colleges had outgrown their resources—resources that had been fairly meager to begin with. As the president of Smith, the largest of the colleges, observed in 1919, "We are endeavoring to carry on an institution for two thousand young women with an equipment calculated for one thousand." 96 Moreover, notions of what was required of a college curriculum had changed drastically since the mid-nineteenth century, and the imperative of keeping up with an explosion of new knowledge, particularly in the social sciences, had strained the colleges' finances to the breaking point. The only solution was to substantially increase their endowments.

Though the colleges were engaged in raising money more or less continually starting in the early 1920s, their fundraising in these years can be separated into two periods. The first wave, which occupied most of the 1920s and in which the colleges worked largely on their own and concentrated on alumnae giving, and the second, starting toward the end of the decade, when they redoubled their efforts by working together to raise public awareness of the importance of women's higher education and to court bigger donors with no particular connection to any of the colleges.

Generally speaking, the first wave was a success. By 1927, all of the colleges were on much firmer ground, but they were still far behind the leading men's institutions. In 1928, Harvard had an endowment of $82 million; combined, the elite women's colleges had less than half that, coming in at $39.8 million and ranging from Vassar's $6 million to Mills' $1.4

96 Quoted in Thorp, p. 282.
The vast majority of the money, at all of the colleges, had come from alumnae, who contributed in huge numbers but usually in quite small amounts. Following alumnae contributions, the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, which pledged a variety of matching funds, was likely the greatest contributor. Otherwise, gifts from persons or institutions largely unconnected to the colleges were few.

The problem for the women's colleges was that their alumnae, though exceptionally generous and energetic in their fundraising, simply did not command the same resources as the male alumni of Harvard, Yale, Duke, or Stanford. As one historian of Vassar put it, "[t]he underlying fact-of-life for the women's colleges in the 1920s was that their alumnae were dependent upon money drawn from the males of their families...Many of the jobless alumnae had no money of their own, no checkbooks, and no financial clout. Accordingly, they had to ask their husbands to untie the pursestrings...if any money were to be forthcoming for their alma maters...As the husbands' colleges usually came first, their own came second." Nor was the situation of the unmarried, professional women among the alumnae much better. While they enjoyed full control over their money, the majority were employed in less-than-lucrative fields such as teaching and social work, and even those who came from well-off families did not necessarily have access to family funds. The significant sums that the alumnae did raise is indicative far more of their collective devotion to their colleges than of their net worth—to give just one example: of the nearly 10,000 Wellesley alumnae in 1921, 96% contributed to the colleges' semi-centennial fund, as did more than 90% of students who had left before graduation.

To overcome this handicap, the colleges understood, or came to understand, that they had to be more aggressive and reach beyond their own immediate circles. Their leaders were all

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99 Daniels, p. 168.
100 Hackett, pp. 213-14.
of the opinion that, as MacCracken wrote in 1925 to President Guth of Goucher, "the money is there, the disposition to aid education is there, and it is purely and simply a question of organization to lay the correct information before the right people to bring success to any deserving movement." The task before them was first to increase awareness of the colleges and their mission—which included countering some of the more negative assumptions about them—and then to convince the public that they were a cause worthy of support.

The idea that the colleges should pool their resources and work together to tackle this problem appears to have originated with MacCracken. Certainly, he believed that the colleges, having so much in common, would find a formal association mutually beneficial. In 1915, immediately after his inauguration, he had called a meeting with the presidents of Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley, and suggested they work together to find a solution to their common, vexing admissions problem. Though some of the female presidents and administrators, many of whom were MacCracken's age or older and had spent most of their careers in one or other of the colleges, found him highhanded and presumptuous, inclined toward impetuosity and over-enthusiasm for untried, "half-baked," notions (among which they, doubtless, included eugenics), they did find this association useful and continued it informally for the next decade. In 1925, President Marion Edwards Park brought Bryn Mawr into the group, and the following year Barnard and Radcliffe joined as well. The Seven College Conference (which gave rise to the nickname "Seven Sisters") was formally established in 1926, and the first item on its agenda was the development of more aggressive and wider-reaching fundraising methods. MacCracken was much given to self-congratulation, but his observation that the women's colleges, "scarcely known to the general public in any accurate way...had decided to hang together, so as not to hang separately,"

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101 MacCracken to W.W. Guth, April 4, 1925, MacCracken papers, box 80, folder 80.47, "Goucher College" (VC).
students to be out and about at night, something which, significantly, "no college employment bureau would feel itself justified in recommending...for women students and no parents, it is safe to say, would be willing to allow their daughters to undertake such jobs."

Nor was it wise to encourage women students to go heavily into debt to paid for their educations, as that would surely delay and perhaps even harm their marital prospects. It it not difficult to imagine the seven presidents, leaders of the institutions widely thought to be the greatest national purveyors of "race suicide," taking a wry, ironic pleasure in warning that, "[a]lready college women are criticized (we believe unjustly) either for not marrying or for postponing too long the establishment of a home. College debts," they continued ominously, "would delay still further the possibility of marriage."107

What is most striking about the colleges' various endowment campaigns is the extent to which their language echoed the Republican Motherhood ideals that had flourished more than a century earlier. Appealing in 1920 on behalf of Smith's "Four Million Dollar Fund," former President Seelye praised the college-educated woman in general, but emphasized, "'There is no field where the value of their intelligence is more apparent than in the home where they have made excellent wives and mothers,'" a technique which struck one writer for The Christian Work as "finer" than Mount Holyoke's strategy of reciting "the work of graduates who had made names for themselves in science and teaching and administration."108 In a 1927 appeal, the colleges emphasized that women, as "the mothers and teachers of the next generation," required as good an "an education as their brothers, as solid, as intelligent and as far-seeing."109 Their approach did not disparage the professional or unmarried woman, but, perhaps remembering that earlier criticism of Mount Holyoke, did not exactly play up her accomplishments and value either. In November 1928, speaking on behalf of the seven colleges, financier Thomas W. Lamont (husband of Smith alumna and longtime trustee

107 "A Crisis for Women's Colleges."
109 "Women's Colleges Ask for 'Fair Play.'"
themselves immune to the concerns of the day. Taking into consideration the paucity of records and the very different personalities of the colleges' leaders in these years, it is difficult to ascertain how much they themselves might have worried about the effect of the women's college environment on their students' "normal" development. What is clear is that, one way or another, the issue was on their minds, and that over the course of the 1920s and 30s, they made a point of publicly reaffirming their commitment to healthy (i.e., heterosexual) and well-regulated womanhood. This was hardly new territory; they had borne the burden of protecting their students' femininity, and publicizing that femininity, in one way or another since the 1860s. Accusations that there was something about women's colleges that either actively promoted or failed to guard against what was widely perceived as sexual deviance, were just the latest attacks against which they had to defend themselves. Without addressing the issue explicitly, many of the colleges took steps not only to calm the public, but also to reconfigure campus life in ways that would promote mixed-sex sociability and discourage too intense an attachment between female students.

In her study of the seven sisters colleges, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz argues that there was a strong element of social engineering at the colleges at this time. In the 1920s and 30s, all of these colleges embarked on significant building campaigns and focused primarily on dormitories, the design of which, "sprang from the new concerns about women's nature that surfaced after the war." Smith constructed eight large, virtually identical, dormitories in the 1920s, forming what came to be known, not quite correctly, as the Quadrangle. Unlike the nineteenth-century living quarters at virtually all of the elite women's colleges—whether in Vassar or Wellesley's large, single, buildings, or Smith and Bryn Mawr's smaller, "cottage-style" housing—students frequently shared large rooms or suites, Smith built its new dormitories "with single identical rooms lining a long corridor," and large, airy, inviting parlors on the ground floor in which students could entertain male visitors. The design of

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116 Ibid., p. 314.
the Quadrangle buildings served multiple purposes. President Neilson and Dean Ada Comstock (shortly to assume the presidency of Radcliffe) felt keenly that housing all Smith students on campus would promote a more democratic social spirit and, hopefully, refocus students on their studies and campus activities as well. But the new dormitories also “attempted to separate women in private, breaking up the intimate life women created with each other to move them into public areas under supervision.”

While the sheer size of Smith’s building program in the 1920s serves most clearly to illustrate this determination to reconfigure campus life in ways that reflected the perceived needs of modern, and “normal,” college women, much the same thing was happening at the other colleges as well. At all six of the other “Seven Sisters,” dormitories were either built or redesigned so that “[p]ublic areas took on a grand treatment; private ones, spartan modesty.” In an inevitable recognition of students’ desire for a more active, less-restricted, mixed-sex social life, the colleges also relaxed or did away with entirely many of the rules that had for decades governed student conduct. Starting in the late 1910s, Goucher, “reflecting the growing freedom of young people in society,” steadily loosened its restrictions on social life, and by the 1930s, the college had conceded that “men may call any evening, and students may go out after complying with a minimum of formality in the office of the heads of the halls.”

Administrators at Wellesley and Mount Holyoke, under pressure from students vexed that they could now vote in federal elections but still had almost no say in the making and enforcement of campus rules, eased rules about chaperonage and weekends away from campus. The colleges tried to maintain bans on smoking, a habit that had been only a decade earlier associated with, as historian Paula Fass explains, “Prostitutes and women in liberated bohemian and intellectual sets,” but they were fighting a losing battle. Though

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117 Ibid., pp. 308-09, 315.
118 Ibid., p. 318.
119 Ibid., pp. 287-92.
Gildersleeve established paid, year-long maternity leave for female faculty, and made an explicit connection between the new policy and the importance of women leading "normal" lives, asserting, "[i]t is of great importance that our teachers should be normal and interesting human beings, with as full and rich lives as may be...Neither the men nor women on our staff should be forced into celibacy and cut off from that great source of experience...which marriage and parenthood offer."126

These actions were not solely, or even primarily, a response to accusations that the elite women’s colleges deliberately maligned conventional womanhood and, perhaps unwittingly, encouraged homosexuality. The colleges would have recognized that this issue would be an important component of the modern, college-educated woman’s experience, and, in their quest to remain not only relevant but at the cutting edge of women’s higher education, that they would have to address it some way. But it was nevertheless a useful way of emphasizing publicly that they, too, recognized marriage and motherhood as woman’s default “setting,” however much they wanted her to be able to combine domestic life with intellectual or professional pursuits as well.

The colleges also sought to address the issue of homosexuality within their own communities in ways more direct and aggressive than redesigning dormitories and seeking ways to help students juggle both marriage and a career. Though most of the precise actions of presidents, faculty, and administrators remain murky, it is certainly clear that the issue was on their minds. As discussed in chapter four, around the turn of the twentieth century, college authorities began to pay closer attention to student “crush culture,” and sought to discourage the formation of “exclusive” friendships. This pattern continued in the 1920s, and though there is a paucity of surviving sources, the growing popular understanding of lesbianism, the

126 Quoted in Lillian Faderman, To Believe in Women: What Lesbians have done for America, a history. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), pp. 246-47. Faderman also notes that Gildersleeve herself never married and had long relationships with two female members of the Barnard faculty, and notes the Gildersleeve’s report on the maternity leave program “seemed pointedly to emphasize her encouragement of her faculty’s heterosexuality and to ignore the possibility that there were roads to ‘full and rich lives’ outside heterosexuality (as she herself had discovered.” Faderman, p. 247.
increasingly aggressive mainstreaming of the happily and healthily heterosexual female ideal, and the general black cloud under which the colleges found themselves in the early 1920s, all suggest the possibility that the campaign was enhanced as well.

At the same time, many of the colleges seem to have started paying increased attention to the mental health of their students. In 1922, Smith announced that all students would be given a series of psychological tests and the results kept on file. The following year, Vassar appointed a psychiatrist, Austen Riggs, to its staff. Riggs' primary responsibilities were to give mandatory lectures on mental hygiene and provide treatment to any students in need. Such an appointment was necessary, President MacCracken told the trustees, because "The number of cases of mental fatigue and of nervous diseases among students, while not large, is serious enough to warrant action." The mental hygiene movement, which was popular in the 1920s, cast a wide net, but its primary purpose at the colleges was to find "ways to prevent and treat mental disturbances in college students before they led to academic difficulties and failures," and work with departments of psychology to "design tests that would help predict which student would be most likely to experience maladjustments while in college."

It is easy to overestimate the connection between the colleges' enthusiasm for mental hygiene and their heightened concerns about lesbianism among the students. Psychiatry was very much in vogue in the 1920s and it not surprising that the colleges, with their customary vigilance over students' physical health, would also wish to oversee their mental health. But nor does it strain credulity to imagine mental hygiene classes being consciously deployed by the colleges in an attempt to ensure "healthy" social and sexual behavior, or that a tendency toward any kind of non-normative sexual behavior was among the "nervous diseases"—to use MacCracken's term—at which all those psychological tests were aimed. At Vassar, at

least according to Mary Lapsley's Vassar novel, *The Parable of the Virgins*, the freshman mental hygiene class was where students were first warned, though often quite vaguely, against crushes. But whatever was in Vassar's class, it was evidently appealing to other college officials, for within a few years, at least Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, Smith, and Wellesley had established similar courses.

These concerns were not focused solely on the students; faculty and administrators came under scrutiny as well. At Radcliffe in 1924, the process of hiring a new instructor, Marjorie Adams, was complicated by what were clearly concerns about lesbianism. Replying to a query from Radcliffe's president, Ada Comstock, Adams' former colleague asked around and later reported, "Miss Stratton was here...and I asked her about Marjorie Adams. She said that there had been a case of a very foolish attachment in her preparatory school, a school in which we later found such things were quite prevalent. Marjorie talked the thing over....very frankly the fall she came to us. She said that she realized what a fool she had been and that she was going to make every effort not to let her emotions get the better of her in the future, and so far as we know there has been no criticism of her on that score since."

Interestingly, the colleague placed the incident squarely within the schoolgirl crush narrative, emphasizing that Adams' behavior was the immature, but largely harmless, result of a common phase of girlhood, exacerbated by an all-female school environment—a narrative with which Comstock, president of one women's college and alumna of another, would have been well familiar. And just in case Comstock harbored doubts, the colleague added that Adams, "has since been at Camp Agawam for three years. Her record there was very good. I feel sure that would not have been asked to return if there had been any question about her attitude with the girls."

There were doubtless other such incidents and perceived incidents as the colleges

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131 Prescott, p. 119.
132 Marjorie Bourne to Ada L. Comstock, August 5, 1924, Comstock Papers, Box 1, Radcliffe College archives (SL).
more aggressively courted public favor and the general American public became increasingly hostile both to unmarried women and to women in positions of authority. As Jackie M. Blount argues in her study of schoolteachers and same-sex desire, "doubts about single women teachers soon became outright denunciations as public perception shifted from regarding spinster teachers as good, upstanding members of their communities to castigating them as sinister, deviant women who corrupted children." Blount's work focuses on elementary and secondary school teachers, but her observations can be applied to college faculty as well. Vassar's President MacCracken considered his college's female-dominated faculty to be something of a headache, and commented in his memoirs, "Man was not meant to live alone, but it should be added that women were not meant to live together." Given that he was a fierce defender of women's colleges, this crack was doubtless aimed at the female professors, especially the older, unmarried women who lived on campus. In the mid-1930s, Wellesley's new president, Mildred McAfee (Horton), despite, or perhaps because of, being herself unmarried at the time, "criticized the single woman teacher who loved to attend undergraduate dances, who got terribly excited over the social life of students, and who encouraged girls to drop in to talk about trivialities," and worked to bring male professors to the college because it was "healthier to have the faculty nearly even" and she thought it important to "introduce some regular family life into the picture that was a healthier state of affairs than a too exclusively female community."

By the 1930s, this enhanced scrutiny of and ambivalence toward unmarried female faculty was very much part of a greater trend toward "masculinizing" the elite women's colleges. As we have seen, American culture had long been suspicious of and uncomfortable

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with autonomous female environments. From their nineteenth-century beginnings, the colleges had been frequently represented in the press and popularly understood as environments either entirely made of women or where women at least dominated. To a large extent, this was always an exaggeration; most of the colleges had male presidents, male-dominated faculties, and significant numbers of men among their trustees. (Of course, compared to coeducational colleges and universities, it is true that the faculty and administrations of the women's colleges would have appeared to be dominated by women).

Of the ten colleges examined here, six had had a woman president (or in the case of Barnard, dean) by 1910, but of that six, Radcliffe had no female faculty (because it shared its faculty with Harvard), and its first president Elizabeth Cary Agassiz had been succeeded by a man, and another two, Mount Holyoke and Mills, were still proving their higher education bona fides, having only recently transitioned from seminaries (which had a strong tradition of female leadership) to colleges. Only Wellesley, with its founder William Durant's belief that his college should echo Mount Holyoke and have a woman president and all-female faculty, matched the dominant public perception. At Vassar, Smith, and Goucher, male presidents and largely male faculties had always been the rule. When women were hired it was usually as junior professors or assistant teachers, positions with lower salaries, less prestige, and often little or no power. Even Bryn Mawr always had more men than women on its faculty, though its feminist president, M. Carey Thomas, had herself attacked Vassar and Smith for their lack of women professors. But, more often than not, when hiring women, Thomas "hired graduates of Bryn Mawr as assistants, a position quite subordinate to that of the professors."138

In any event, accurate or not, the idea of women's colleges as the autonomous domains of non-normative women was pervasive, and surely got a boost from the large amount of press coverage detailing female professors’ reform activities in the early twentieth

136 Horowitz, Alma Mater, p. 181; see also Palmieri.
138 Ibid., pp. 113-16, 180-81.
century, as well as, increasingly, the public backlash against the "spinster professor" who denigrated marriage and motherhood to her impressionable students. By the 1920s and 30s, the colleges, to varying degrees, were taking steps to counter this image. MacCracken recalled that when he had become president of Vassar in 1913, "men of the faculty numbered about a quarter of the whole body, and nearly all of them were heads of departments," and he noted that "sex antagonisms" between self-defensive men and jealous, resentful women, were so extreme that faculty meetings were battlefields and three departments permanently split because of conflict. In his memoirs, in which he discussed the older, most distinguished women professors (such as Lucy Maynard Salmon, Margaret Washburn, and Abby Leach) with a combination of withering condescension and the kind of bemused tolerance one is expected to show one's elders, however dotty, MacCracken acknowledged that "[m]en by themselves were not wholly free from such squabbles," but pinned most of the trouble on obdurate female faculty, who, when they were not united against male interlopers, were invariably fighting amongst themselves.139 President Neilson of Smith seems to have had a better relationship with female faculty, and was genuinely committed to easing women's path into the professions, but he too had a marked policy of "recruiting men and promoting them more often than women," a policy "[s]o restrictive...that several departments were left without any women" at all.140

This concern about unmarried women in positions of authority extended even to Radcliffe, which shared, or rather, rented, Harvard's, entirely male faculty. When Radcliffe was searching for a new dean in 1920, President LeBaron Russell Briggs received a polite but very firm letter from a recent alumna, reflecting on the inevitable problems of a women's college and spelling out the reasons why he should only consider a married woman for the position:

140 Palmieri, p. 262.
I have always felt that a woman's college inevitably sacrificed something that should go in to the education of a woman...but this one-sidedness can be counteracted to a certain extent by having a married woman in the position of Dean. There is a mellowness and understanding of life that is a part of a woman who is happily married and who has a family of children,—that is rarely found in an unmarried woman.¹⁴¹

This is not to say that there was a purge of high-ranking women, and typically unmarried, professors and administrators, far from it. In 1923, Ada L. Comstock succeeded Briggs as Radcliffe's president. Wellesley's Ellen Fitz Pendleton was followed by a woman (albeit one who greatly favored male faculty), as were M. Carey Thomas at Bryn Mawr and Virginia Gildersleeve at Barnard. But they were losing ground, and much of this “phasing out” was clearly deliberate. While not all of reasons behind this were consciously anti-feminist or homophobic, the aversion to powerful, usually unmarried, women was clear. Gildersleeve, who herself prioritized the hiring of male faculty and unapologetically paid even single male instructors more than single women, nevertheless bemoaned the blatant discrimination “against single women for academic and administrative positions” that overtook the academic world following World War I. Gildersleeve's own policy was rooted in complex motivations that had much to do with maintaining a faculty that Columbia University would be willing to work with, but in her memoirs, published in 1954, she made clear that the underlying cause lay with “certain less responsible psychologists and psychiatrists” who attacked unmarried women teachers as repressed and unhealthy.

The trend against hiring and promoting women professors in general and unmarried women in particular was not the only way in which unmarried female faculty were increasingly marginalized at the very colleges of which they had for so long formed the backbone. The third, or interwar, generation of students had little use for them and, it often seemed, just as little respect. If the notion that the teacher/student relationship should reproduce the mother/daughter bond—a central tenet of Mary Lyon's theory of women's education and an approach the founders of Wellesley and Vassar had hoped to imitate—had

¹⁴¹ Susan C. Lyman to LeBaron Russell Briggs, July 5, 1920, Briggs Papers, Radcliffe College archives (SL).
receded with the emergence of an independent campus culture, most students had continued to view female professors with admiration and, not infrequently, as role models. But in the third generation, Horowitz argues, "female faculty and administrators became Others... Students' respect for their faculty no longer extended automatically outside the classroom: few thought of modeling their futures after unmarried women professors."¹⁴²

A significant part of this generational chasm can be attributed to the burgeoning middle-class youth culture of the 1920s, in which the influence of peer society grew while that of the family, church, and other traditional sources of authority declined. Many older Americans, and not only those on the more socially conservative side of the social spectrum, bemoaned the seeming iconoclasm and hedonism of the postwar generation. Dean Virginia Gildersleeve looked at the Barnard students of the 1920s and did not like what she saw—pleasure-oriented, increasingly individualistic, and lacking in college spirit. But, as Horowitz points out, "College women did not suddenly become hedonistic: they had been so for decades. What happened in the 1920s is that their hedonism turned to focus on men."

The crux of the problem was not that students were demanding an unprecedented level of freedom in their academic and social lives, that was happening at all colleges and universities in this period, it was that the women's college culture clashed so strongly with what most students now recognized as desirable and "normal" life. The female faculty felt betrayed and many became embittered. The increasing hostility toward them and the possibilities for an independent woman's life that they represented were one thing when they came from the outside world—this was, after all, the same generation that had been damned as "unsexed" and judged guilty of race suicide, they were used to such criticism—but to be rejected so strongly within their own communities, and by the very young women whom they had intended should inherit the female culture that had sustained them and nurtured women's accomplishments, was an exceptionally harsh blow.

The premier example of this third generation "masculinizing" of the women's colleges,

¹⁴² Horowitz, Alma Mater, p. 293.
and how it was supported not only by men but also by many, and perhaps even most, of the younger alumnae, is the sour note under which Mary Emma Woolley, Mount Holyoke's president for nearly four decades, left the college, and the unexpectedly harsh and prolonged battle over her successor. As historian Lillian Faderman details in her study of Woolley's life and career, the Mount Holyoke that Woolley inherited in 1901 was a stagnating institution and hardly more than a college in name only. Only seven members of the faculty held PhDs, and the majority did not even have college degrees. Most of them were older women (many themselves graduates of the old Mount Holyoke Female Seminary) whose education had stopped at the seminary level. Over the years, Woolley increased the endowment and put into a place a plan quite similar to M. Carey Thomas' at Bryn Mawr: She raised faculty salaries to attract highly-qualified women professors, “gave sabbaticals to faculty members without advanced degrees so they could attend graduate school and...convinced the trustees to support faculty development and gave professors time to do their research.” Before long, the trustees were hailing her as the “second founder” of the college.

Woolley's vision for Mount Holyoke was indeed an echo of Lyon's, albeit one updated for the twentieth century. Woolley's ideal of the educated woman was one who paired education with social service, women who worked “among all sorts and conditions of people, into the desolate places of the earth, into the slums of our cities...into the obscure corners of service.” By any standard, Woolley's tenure at Mount Holyoke was a success, but by the mid-1930s the trustees and many alumnae were counting down the days until her retirement, and making it clear that they saw no reason to guarantee that her successor would be a woman.

The trustees and alumnae were partly motivated by a simple desire for change. Woolley had, after all, been in office for more nearly four decades and had passed her

143 Faderman, To Believe in Women, p. 218.
144 Ibid., pp. 219-20.
145 Anna Mary Wells, Miss Marks and Miss Woolley, pp. 211-22, quoted in Horowitz, Alma Mater, p. 304.
146 Mary Woolley, Inaugural address, Mount Holyoke College, May 15, 1901, quoted in Faderman, To Believe in Women, p. 218.
seventieth birthday, and many felt simply that it was time for a changing of the guard. But
the way in which her retirement was handled and her successor chosen, made it clear that
more was at stake. Woolley, for all her manifold accomplishments on behalf of the college,
thoroughly embodied the image of the unmarried woman professor that had become so
troubling in the third generation. She had actively supported throughout her life a large
number of feminist and progressive causes and organizations, such as woman suffrage, the
National Consumers' League, and the American Civil Liberties Union. She had also
maintained a hard line throughout her presidency against domestic science or any similar
plan of study, and, as Faderman writes, "consistently refused to pretend that Mount Holyoke
aimed at creating better wives and mothers." But most problematic of all was Woolley's
longterm partnership with Mount Holyoke English professor Jeannette Marks, whose politics
were even more radical than Woolley's own, and whose abrasive personality seems to have
won her several enemies among the more powerful and conservative trustees. Not only did
this relationship reflect a kind of woman's life that was increasingly out of fashion, if not
outright suspicious, but Woolley had herself clashed with the trustees for years over Marks,
defending her politics and her right to speak and write freely. By the 1930s, the leading
trustees were not only thoroughly fed up with both Woolley and Marks, they had also, more
ominously, come to see women like them "as bad examples for Mount Holyoke students."

Woolley announced that she would stay in office until 1937, so she could preside over
Mount Holyoke's centennial celebrations, and the trustees got right to work searching for her
successor. Their choice, Roswell Ham—described by Faderman as "an undistinguished
professor who was unable to get promoted at Yale," and by Horowitz as a young man "with
an attractive wife from a prominent family," who would help "set the proper 'social tone' for
the community"—spoke volumes about their priorities.

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147 For an overview of Woolley's life and career, see Faderman, To Believe in Women, chapter 12, "The
Struggle to Maintain Women's Leadership: Mary Emma Woolley."
148 Faderman, To Believe in Women, p. 218.
149 Ibid., p. 230.
It was not just that Ham was male, jarring though that was. What was even more
insulting was Ham's lackluster reputation and the trustees' implication that it did not really
matter, that what was truly important, what was truly needed, was a patriarchal figure who
would exercise a fatherly control over students, attract male professors to the college, and
whose wife was there to aid her husband in his work and set a proper "womanly" example to
the undergraduates. To many, this seemed an insult not only of Woolley, her
accomplishments, and the generation and kind of educated womanhood she embodied; it was
also clearly understood as a dismissal and even a repudiation of Mount Holyoke's century-
old tradition of female leadership and what might be called, anachronistically, "female
empowerment." One hundred years after Mary Lyon had launched her vision of a seminary
as a women's community, one in which young women could receive, at the hands of women
teachers, the best education available, and absorb a philosophy that assured them that a
woman's personal fulfillment and public usefulness was not to be found only, or even
primarily, in marriage and motherhood, Mount Holyoke seemed to have eagerly embarked on
a very different course.
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William A. Neilson Papers, Office of the President
Laurenus Clark Seelye Papers, Office of the President
Institute for the Coordination of Women's Interests Collection

Sophia Smith Collection, Northampton, MA
Suffrage Collection
Mary Van Kleeck Papers
Women's Education Collection

Vassar College Archives, Poughkeepsie, NY
Sarah Josepha Hale Papers
Helen Drusilla Lockwood Papers
Henry Noble MacCracken Papers
James Monroe Taylor Papers
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Woman's Suffrage at Vassar Collection

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Amherst Student
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The (Bryn Mawr) College News
Chicago Daily Tribune
The Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women (Radcliffe College) Catalogue
The Delineator

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The Journal of Home Economics

Journal of the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors

The Ladies' Home Journal

The Los Angeles Times

Life

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The New Hampshire Sentinel

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The New York Evangelist

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The Radcliffe Magazine

San Francisco Chronicle

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**Dissertations & Theses**


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