

# Speaking without Words: Silence and Epistolary Rhetoric of Catholic Women Educators on the Antebellum Frontier, 1828–1834

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Silence has long been discounted as unrheterical, but this article explores emerging theory on silence, especially religious women's silence, that suggests otherwise. The silence of two Catholic nuns on the American frontier is examined alongside epistolary responses to confrontations with Protestant politicians.

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## Preface

My family's ties to St. Louis can be traced back to the founding of the city by Pierre Laclede in 1764. Growing up Catholic in St. Louis, I was surrounded by a stereotypically large family amid a large Catholic community. My great uncle, Bill Messmer, was a Jesuit who worked in Belize. All this and more contributed to my fascination with Catholicism, which eventually led to my research. I began by asking my grandfather for old family letters, records, or anything written by women in our family pertaining to their Catholic education. He was quick to respond in the negative, letting me know that we had writings from male relatives, but not females. I began to wonder why the voices of my female relatives were missing.

A few months later, while conducting archival research at a community of Catholic sisters for this project, I came across a similar lack of voice. After returning home, I wrote a column for my school newspaper about a private meeting with one nun who shocked me with her feminist beliefs. I wrote about how she and other nuns disagreed with priests, accepted people of every sexual orientation, and, in her own words, "deliver masses." Three days after the article went to press, I received an email from the convent's archivist, who had befriended me, informing me that the nun had misspoken—nuns do not "deliver entire masses." I issued a clarification, though I disagreed with this course of action, knowing that there could be negative ramifications if the statement were misconstrued by the diocese. In hindsight, I recognize the need for the clarification in order to protect the sister from retribution, but I regret that I too have participated in the silencing of Catholic women.

Historically, these scenarios have remained behind convent doors, making it difficult for the public to determine where and how feminism and Catholicism collide. Undoubtedly, some Catholic women choose to walk a fine line between feminist integrity and involvement in the faith they hold so dear, and in doing so they remain silent. To many, this would seem to be a silencing or an embargo on one's speech, instead of a well-thought-out rhetorical decision, but the fair critic must consider how modern sisters, such as the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth (SCN), have advanced their access to power and self-autonomy through silence. In this paper I argue that the rhetorical silence and epistolary rhetoric of two prominent, well-remembered Catholic women demonstrate how the public silence of nuns can win private confrontations with male leaders.

## Introduction

The contributions of nuns in America “remain unexplored by historians” and invisible to the rest of society (Kenneally ix). Kathleen Cummings cites the “virtual absence [of nuns] from narratives of American women’s history”; although in recent decades nuns have become more visible, yet they are still silent on most issues (2). Some nuns, who were frequently in the public eye, traded their habits for lay clothes because they considered the antiquated style of the habit a social impediment that barred comfortable interactions with modern society. Cynics might also consider nuns’ increased participation in mass, public disagreements with male leaders, and even their support of “altar girls,” school-age girls who assist with the mass ceremony, an honor once exclusive to boys. These advancements—made within a patriarchal system—have enabled nuns to dispel rumors and misconceptions that nuns are submissive and unrhetorical.<sup>1</sup>

Rhetoricians should take a closer look at two of the most common rhetorical practices deployed by Catholic nuns: silence and epistolary rhetoric. Two exemplary Catholic feminist rhetoricians of the nineteenth century are Sister Catherine Spalding of Nazareth, Kentucky, and St. Rose Philippine Duchesne of St. Louis, Missouri. Both Spalding and Duchesne adhered to rhetorical silence as a means of power, not passivity, and when they saw fit, these religious women punctuated periods of silence with epistolary rhetoric in order to confront political figures.

### Broken Silence: An Explanation of Epistolary Rhetoric

It is far easier to see the power of silence in a verbal conversation than in written correspondence, which some interpret as devoid of silence. Nevertheless, epistolary rhetoric is incontrovertibly intermingled with silence. Letters are punctuated with silence—what is glossed over or lacks commentary—but letters also serve as the means of punctuating long periods of silence. Composing letters enables women to “[speak] with an immediacy and intimacy [that is] unavailable in face-to-face conversation” (Decker 5). The public-private dynamic of the letter can be compelling and has the power to “bind [any] correspondents” together (Foley 239). Letters also provide a comfortable distance between letter writers and hostile challengers, especially considering the mob-like mentality of Americans who spewed anti-Catholic sentiment—or in a few reported instances committed acts of murder and arson (Mattingly 178; Webb 484). Letters were a safer, more pragmatic choice for the nuns as opposed to the more public response taken by Catholic religious men. Spalding’s and Duchesne’s letters speak volumes to the rhetorical practices of Catholic religious women’s speech and silence. This paper will discuss and analyze Spalding’s life and letters on the American frontier of Kentucky, after which my focus will move westward to the French frontier village of St. Louis, where Duchesne penned one letter that remains notorious in accounts of antebellum St. Louis history.

### Working with Rhetorical Silence

Before undertaking a rhetorical analysis of Spalding and Duchesne, I will first undertake a survey of a reemerging rhetoric: silence. The study of rhetoric is word-heavy and predominantly guided by principles of language, yet by no means is rhetorical silence a new concept. Cheryl Glenn is a premier scholar on the study of rhetorical silence; her book, *Unspoken*, only scratches the surface of rhetorical silence. She compares it to speech, saying it is “as powerful as speech,” and equally matched in its ability to “deliver meaning,” but that “silence itself is not silent” (xi,

10). In other words, silence is a response, an opinion, a reaction, or a stance; it communicates a message without words. A lull in conversation could communicate fatigue or disinterest, or even a desire to remain mysterious, whereas an absent public opinion could indicate a lack of concern or a calculated attempt at disconcertion. Glenn also lays out a number of concepts that add nuance to understandings of rhetorical silence.

First and foremost, silence is pervasive. It occurs in every sentence—usually without acknowledgment—but is often overlooked or disregarded. Its pervasiveness frequently “goes unnoticed” in rhetorical exchanges and everyday conversation because it “exist[s] in overlapping states” (Glenn 10). Silence overlaps with speech, and vice versa. Scholars of rhetoric focus on speech more than silence due to speech being easier to dissect and more conducive to theorizing; rhetoricians are more comfortable understanding speech because the speakers’ intentions are decipherable and clearer. What is more, many consider speech a positive form of communication and silence a negative one (Glenn 5). Misconceptions about silence as the “background” of communication are insidious in Western culture and the value it places on speech communication (Glenn 5). Therefore, silence, especially women’s silence, is discounted as unrhetoical.

It is easier for language proponents to see the power of silence when silence is punctuated with speech. Long bouts of silence in conjunction with a persuasive moment of speech “can rattle [a] conversation” (Glenn 6). Public speaking instructors will often commend the “well-placed pause” for its ability to startle an audience or emphasize a pertinent point. While silence fares well with speech as its counterpoint, the agent is not dependent on speech to assert his or her power. In fact, silence works well alone, as “a vehicle for the exercise of power in all its modalities,” so long as it is designated intentional and not forced (Achino-Loeb 3). Glenn calls attention to one pertinent caveat: “[N]ot all silence is particularly potent” (xi). She draws distinctions between silence and silencing, “a strategic choice or . . . an enforced position,” respectively (13). The crux of my thesis rests on this dichotomy. To reiterate an earlier point, critics dismiss nuns’ silence as submissive; they are quiet in order to be obedient to the Church. My argument is pragmatically grounded in one disclaimer: even though some nuns use silence conscientiously or deliberately, many nuns have had silence imposed on them. Silence can be advantageous to most nuns, who are pacifistic and unwilling to incite conflict. When nuns are confronted with issues of gender and power, speech responses may be insufficient, given the hostile context they might face. Speech can jeopardize a nun’s accumulation of power within her parish and her community.

Glenn gives a nod to Anne Askew, a religious martyr of the sixteenth century who was pressed to respond to accusations of Lollardy—unorthodox or “radical Protestantism”—and give to a jury the names of others in her sect, but instead Askew remained silent even under torture (2). To the hierarchal superiors who engaged in a power struggle with her to force her to speak, Askew gave back silence. This historical anecdote illuminates silence as a means of power and not enforced oppression because Askew, without words, “‘named’ the significance of her own impending silence” (Bokser 17). Similarly, Julie A. Bokser analyzes the rhetorical silence employed by seventeenth-century Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Sor Juana, a radically outspoken and androgynous poet and writer, successfully countered “opposition from the Church authorities” with “silent innuendo” (7, 16). Opposition from the Church does not preclude hostile encounters between nuns and public entities. In the case of the Irish Sisters of Mercy in nineteenth-century Chicago, the nuns had to compromise how they used their silence in rhetorical space. Arriving in Chicago in 1843, the Sisters of Mercy hardly received a welcome from “an

increasingly anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant Chicago.” Most Chicagoans never expressed appreciation to these women for building schools, academies, and orphanages and for establishing “the city’s first permanent hospital,” or to the diocese for sending the sisters; they just expected it. They were “operating within a public space that required their presence and imposed their silence,” because they were women and Catholic. Still, the Sisters of Mercy maintained a “prominent presence” in spite of the anti-Catholic sentiments that slowly encroached upon Chicago (Brosnan 474). Through their care of the sick and their commitment to the education of American girls, the Sisters of Mercy were able to win over public opinion more effectively than the priests working behind pulpits (487–88). This course of action was not exclusive to this community of religious women; rather, it exemplifies the actions of dozens of orders of nuns “across the United States” (474).

Preceding the Sisters of Mercy and many orders of Catholic religious women in the United States were the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Bardstown, Kentucky, and the Society of the Sacred Heart in St. Louis, Missouri. Sister Spalding of Kentucky and Sister Duchesne of Missouri were remarkably successful on the American frontier. Both women are remembered today as pioneers of women’s education because they brought education to girls in remote areas at a time when girls were rarely educated and anti-Catholicism was rampantly trying to thwart Catholic administration of education. Like the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago, these nuns used rhetorical silence effectively. Then, each solidified power within her rhetorical sphere with charity to the sick and the uneducated, and on rare but pressing occasions, these sisters chose to punctuate silence with epistolary rhetoric.

### **Spalding’s Silence and Her Letter**

According to the biography written by Mary Ellen Doyle, Spalding was born on 23 December 1793 in Charles County, Maryland, a prominent Catholic colony for over a century until the sociopolitical culture was bombarded with “virulent British anti-Catholicism [that] accompanied the various Protestant sects immigrating to America” (Mattingly 168). Like many Catholics, the Spaldings found refuge in a cluster of counties in central Kentucky (McCann, *Know-Nothing Movement*; Owens v). In January 1813, Catherine entered Old St. Thomas to begin her life as a religious woman. She and two other women founded the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth religious community outside of Bardstown, Kentucky (McGill 19). Within two years, the three sisters had recruited other women to join the community and established a Catholic academy for girls, open to children of all faiths. A decade later, the establishment was considered by southern society to be the most prestigious academy for girls, with “such dignitaries as Zachary Taylor, Jefferson Davis, and Henry Clay” sending their “daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters” to Spalding’s academy (Sisters of Charity 36; Mattingly 168–69). The academy remained the best education available to southern girls, and arguably all American girls, for decades.

The unique challenge that accompanies the study of historical silence is its record—by its very nature, silent practice remains unrecorded or off the record. This is especially true for nuns. As we see reflecting back on the prefatory discussion of nuns’ silence, the sisters are uninterested in spurring negative encounters with priests, political figures, or anyone, really; they continued in this manner for centuries, and—despite the occasional and inevitable public confrontation—it

seems they will continue to find rhetorical fortification in their silence. Regardless, there is circumstantial evidence to prove that their silence was effective, if not explicitly named.

In the SCNs' archives, there is a collection of news clippings spanning the nineteenth century. The clippings file contains no explanatory notes, but a sizeable number of the clippings were preserved during Spalding's time. The archivists are unable to pinpoint the exact origin of the clippings, but it is clear that someone wanted to save every public mention of the academy and anti-Catholic sentiments in America. Articles on the latter are numerous and confirm that the Protestant Evangelical Crusade was infiltrating the American frontier with anti-Catholic sentiments in the late 1820s to the early 1830s (Gitlin; McCann, *Nativism* 3). In the 10 October 1834 issue of Cincinnati's the *Telegraph*, an article titled "Catholicism in Kentucky" claims that Kentucky has become "infested" with "Popes, Jesuits, and Nuns," and it asks its readership, "[W]hy do not the Lexingtonians burn them out, after the example of their northern brethren—one night would be sufficient for the business?" (Sisters of Charity 49). Undoubtedly, the unnamed author of this article proposes a hate crime against Kentucky Catholics. According to the Missouri State Historical Society's online periodical database, the situation was no better in Missouri, where the editors of the *Missouri Republican* likened Catholicism to "diabolical priestcraft," and asserted that "the Roman Catholic religion is a political engine, incompatible with a free government" (*Missouri Argus*). Another clipped article found in the SCN's archives is an encyclical letter sent out by Pope Pius VIII, stating: "We speak to you of those innumerable errors—of those false and perverse doctrines which are attacking the Catholic faith no longer secretly and in the dark, but openly and violently" (Sisters of Charity 14). Pope Pius's letter was published in a national newspaper, the *U.S. Catholic Miscellany*, and it reflects Protestant-Catholic tensions of the time.

Many other clippings saved by the SCNs were written by the diocese of Louisville or Martin John Spalding, bishop of Louisville. But nowhere in the SCNs' clipping collection is there an article written by a nun or evidence that a sister publicly articulated the religious community's stance on anti-Catholic sentiment. Because one or more sisters saved these articles, we can assume that some members of the community followed current events and public opinion closely. Yet a lack of response on behalf of the SCNs indicates their chosen silence. One could argue that the nuns were silenced, not freely choosing silence, but within the news clippings collection there are a few articles written by SCNs defending girls' education, just none that address anti-Catholic sentiments or the coming of the Protestant Evangelical Crusade (Sisters of Charity 49). Therefore, we can reasonably assume that the SCNs had the power to make arguments through the press, but on the subject of anti-Catholicism, they may have remained silent by choice.

In the wake of the Protestant Evangelical Crusade and a year or so before these anti-Catholic articles were written, Sister Spalding was faced with a crucial decision. She was asked to come to the aid of cholera victims in Louisville. By contemporary medical standards, cholera was a deadly pandemic, and Kentuckians on the frontier had for years heard gruesome accounts of the disease and how it took lives (Doyle 100). When the disease eventually reached Louisville in 1832, thousands fell ill; "the average number of deaths [reached] ten per day." Spalding accepted the Board of Health's request for service, bringing sisters with her as assistant nurses. In return, the board "agreed to pay traveling expenses, board, and lodging for any who came from Nazareth" (101). It is unclear whether Spalding requested reimbursement or whether the offer was extended to her. Either possibility seems feasible given the desperate nature of the epidemic

and the characteristically penurious pockets of the sisters. For over a year, Spalding and her sisters would work feverishly to save lives, losing a few of their own to the epidemic. Even so, the greater good was served and Louisville was freed of cholera.

The government recorded the reimbursement to the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth as a payment for their services, not their expenses. Although a trifling detail, the Honorable Benjamin J. Webb, nineteenth-century senator and Catholic historian, noted the publicity of this occurrence and how the inconsistency was discovered by a Protestant preacher. Accusations befell Spalding's community when "a group of bigots circulated reports" throughout the city and from Protestant pulpits. The charitable deeds of the sisters were labeled as "mercenary" and Spalding's critics cited the city books as their indisputable evidence (McGill 53). To a degree, Mother Catherine chose silence. She refused to answer Protestant accusers or even attempt to dispel rumors; what she did was much more powerful. She punctuated her silence with a simple yet dignified letter to the mayor of Louisville and the city council, in which she addresses the "mistake" made on the books:

To The Mayor and Council of the City of Louisville,

Feb. 10, 1834

Gentlemen:

At that gloomy period when cholera threatened to lay our city desolate, and nurses for the sick and poor could not be obtained on any terms, Rev. Mr. Abell in the name of the Society of which I have the honor to be a member, proffered the gratuitous services of as many of our Sisters as might be necessary in the then existing distress, requiring merely that their expenses should be paid. This offer was accepted—as the order from your honorable board inviting the Sisters will know who. But, when the money was ordered from your treasury to defray those expenses, I had the mortification of remarking that, instead of the term, "expenses" of the Sisters of Charity, the word "services" was substituted. I immediately remonstrated against it and even mentioned the circumstance to the Mayor and another gentleman of the Council, and upon being promised that the error should be corrected, I remained satisfied that it had been attended to until a late assertion from one of the pulpits of the city led me to believe that it stands yet uncorrected on your books, as these same books were referred to in proof of the assertion. If so, gentlemen, pardon the liberty I take in refunding to you the amount paid for the above named expenses, well convinced that our Community, for who I have acted in this case, would far prefer to incur the expense themselves than to submit to so unjust an odium.

Gentlemen, be pleased to understand that we are not hirelings; and if we are in practice the servants of the poor, the sick, and the orphans, we are voluntarily so. But we look for our reward in another and better world. With sincere respect, Gentlemen,

(\$75 enc.) Your obedient servant,

Catherine Spalding,

Sister of Charity. (Sisters of Charity)

One can only imagine how this letter would stir a city council member's conscience. More likely than not, they did not expect a nun to take issue with such a minor slighting. Knowing that

nuns have a tendency towards silence when faced with confrontation, the enactors and abettors of “so unjust an odium” had to be shocked. Particularly at the end of the last paragraph, Spalding blatantly and defiantly calls them out on their misdeed.

With her words, Spalding demonstrates that she is refined and accustomed to the formal decorum of political correspondences. Her language is carefully chosen and is in large part free of passion, excepting the first line and the last few. She opens the letter with an image of the cholera epidemic, which she refers to as “that gloomy period.” She also ends her letter with images of cholera victims, whom her community helped, and how the good nature of this help will be rewarded in “another and better world.” The last part reiterates her morality and charity, reminding her interlocutors that they are challenging a woman who works through God. Concurrently, she is aware of the power dynamics she must work within, so she gives her audience its due respect and then defies their written assertion with her own, and consequently, tears down any preexisting misconceptions as weak or passive.

Equally important is her use of silence in this letter. Through her letter, Spalding builds a silent innuendo that suggests this political institution was in the wrong. At no point does she blame the “gentlemen,” but instead she fights the good fight. Her lack of accusation in response to an accusation is noble, indeed. By leaving out her presumed frustration with these men, she avoids their trap and simultaneously makes an honorable point without faulting or censuring anyone. In addition to what she leaves out, she returns the money for her expenses. This action is coupled with Spalding’s dignified language and use of silent innuendo to create the perfect storm her challengers never saw coming. Her epistolary rhetoric is powerful, to say the least, and verifies her power as a rhetor. This nuanced response exposes her ability to consciously engage with rhetorical theory, despite her lack of formal preparation. This impressive aptitude is verified further by her challengers. Not only did they return her monetary enclosure, they also issued “a correction of the city’s books” (McGill 53).

Spalding’s letter did more than secure expense reimbursement for her community; according to historians McGill and Webb, the incident sent waves of gossip through Kentucky and established her as a powerful woman rhetor at a time when Catholic religious women were thought powerless (McGill 53). She was able to shelter, feed, and teach more orphans of the cholera epidemic and establish Catholic education as the finest available on the frontier. Her effectiveness as a rhetor was still felt after her death in 1858, when “the mission of education exploded,” opening more schools, hospitals, and orphanages throughout the frontier, and is still felt today on an international scale (Doyle 217). Considering that so many legacies are built on influential uses of language, Spalding’s two foundational rhetorical strategies, silence and epistolary rhetoric, were uncommonly successful.

### **Trouble across the River: Duchesne’s Letter**

Over two hundred miles west of Louisville, another sister was also using rhetorical silence, punctuated with epistolary rhetoric. Duchesne was one of the most influential proponents of women’s education on the frontier. Born in 1769 in Grenoble, France, Duchesne decided as a young girl that she would “give her life to God in the convent” (Phelan 240). In the same decade as her birth, the city of St. Louis was founded as a French fur-trading post. The French Catholic village quickly blossomed into a bustling city of commerce, and simultaneously, Duchesne grew into a deeply committed religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart, a French order of nuns. The

founder of the Society of the Sacred Heart, Mother Madeleine Sophie Barat, sent Duchesne from France to establish a convent and a convent academy to improve the religious and educational experiences of Catholic girls on the French frontier, the majority of whom did not know how to write their names (Corbett 24; Baumgarten 173). Even worse, by Duchesne's standards, some of the girls had never heard of God or Christ. It is very possible that Duchesne was momentarily disappointed in what she found in America. Accounts report that she was appalled at the licentiousness of St. Louis girls who fancied high society and parties more than schoolbooks and Bibles, and whose parents were equally unconcerned with their daughters' social refinement, religious studies, and schooling (Callan 374).

After President Jefferson purchased the Louisiana territory from France in 1803, Americans from the East Coast began flooding in to St. Louis and other, smaller frontier towns. With them they carried ample amounts of anti-Catholic sentiment brought forth by the Protestant Evangelical Crusade, a newer version of the same anti-Catholicism that initially drove Spalding's family from Maryland (Gitlin). Duchesne hardly acknowledged the hostility and verbal disparagement she received from St. Louis Protestants and Protestant educators. Instead, she responded with silence. To revisit an earlier point, historical silence is not easily captured, and in order to analyze Duchesne's silence, one must consider the prevalence of anti-Catholicism in St. Louis and the rare occasions in which Duchesne, like Spalding, experienced confrontation. As previously stated, St. Louis newspapers also featured articles and guest editorials on anti-Catholicism in St. Louis, in which "Native Americans" openly derogated Catholics, even in St. Louis, a predominantly Catholic city (*Missouri Argus*). Still, nuns were rarely forced into responding to anti-Catholicism because they chose to remain silent.

Many wealthy Catholic families eagerly enrolled their daughters in St. Louis's first Catholic academy for girls, but, perhaps surprisingly, almost as many upper-class Protestant families chose to enroll their daughters at one of Duchesne's academies. Given the semi-hostile religious climate of antebellum St. Louis, the Francophone Duchesne remained in the background. One notable difference between Duchesne and Spalding was Duchesne's struggle to learn English, which may have dampened her rhetorical pursuits in St. Louis, an increasingly English-speaking community. She let the other sisters interact more with parents because they were better at speaking English, whereas she never became fluent. Perhaps this could be labeled as a self-enforced silence, one that is privately confirmed, but not publicly stated, although one's public may already assume and understand its purpose. Self-enforced silence can be interpreted as a weak maneuver when it is unnamed or unannounced. On the other hand, lack of interaction or speech did not weaken the rhetorical campaign of Spalding, who also used self-enforced silence, which worked as an impressive and convincing stratagem when confrontation arose.

A striking similarity between these Catholic women is their deployment of epistolary rhetoric. Like Spalding, Duchesne could not remain silent forever because there were times when she was pushed to speak. It is believed that Duchesne received more than a few letters from disgruntled Protestant parents who accused the sisters of toying with their daughters' faith. These confrontations could have easily transpired in person, and in a few cases, they did. Duchesne writes in her journal about one incident in which an angry grandmother withdrew her granddaughter from the Sacred Heart's academy only after she caused a scene by interrupting the girls in the middle of a lesson and physically removing her granddaughter from the academy (Callan 360). But for the most part, these confrontations occurred at a distance and were commonly manifested

in the form of a letter. Likewise, it seems that Duchesne's preferred means of addressing confrontations was by letter because she could dictate her rhetoric in French to a sister, who could then write it in English much better than Duchesne could. Her confrontation with the mayor of St. Louis in 1828 is well documented and still well remembered by St. Louis historians.

One of the more well-known Protestant patrons of the Sacred Heart's academy was the former mayor of St. Louis, Dr. William Carr Lane (Callan 475). Like other wealthy Protestant patrons, Lane was uneasy about placing his daughters—and, correspondingly, their faith—in the hands of the religious of the Sacred Heart. One cannot be entirely sure of the reason Lane chose to question Mother Duchesne's academy due to the lack of cited motivation, but it is very likely that the anti-Catholic sentiment of the times may have fostered his suspicions. On 4 April 1828, he expressed his concern in a letter to Mother Duchesne. The archives of the Missouri Historical Society contain one of his rough drafts, in which he writes: "On the topic of religion . . . I had understood that your seminary was open alike to children of all faiths . . . and that I prefer that the faith of my children should not be interfered with" (Lane). What is interesting about this excerpt is that Lane passively accuses Duchesne's academy of proselytizing.

In order to respond in better English, Duchesne enlists the English-writing capabilities of Mother Francis Xavier. Consequently, it is possible that the letter that is transcribed below may have been altered by Xavier, but given the honest vocation of these religious women, it is unlikely that Xavier reinterpreted Duchesne's words in the process of translating them onto paper. When this is coupled with the fact that the letter sounds strikingly similar to the voice Duchesne uses in writing letters in French, it is reasonable to assume that Duchesne authored this letter. Duchesne's response on 10 April to Mayor Lane states:

You were perfectly right when you thought that children of all persuasions were admitted with us. So it is, and all share the same part of our attention and care. We have no reason to send home your young ladies, for they are so interesting that were we to part with them, even we would notion it a sacrifice. As to faith[,] in no way [do] we intend to influence it for their change; they are to submit to the outward discipline of the school, you are aware that this is the way of acting in all institutions where order should prevail.

Be pleased to believe me Sir, Most respectfully [P.D.] (Duchesne)

Like Spalding, Duchesne is cognizant of the power dynamics in play. Mayor Lane being an important political figure in St. Louis, Duchesne probably knew that this situation had to be handled delicately. The language she used in response had to be crafted in a respectful manner, lest she risk the reputation of her academy, which was much smaller than Spalding's and relied more on patrons in the city. If the mayor were to withdraw his daughters from Duchesne's academy, the academy's standing in the community would be detrimentally affected. So her language is humble and respectful and, more importantly, couched in a rhetoric of praise. Duchesne's letter is unabashedly filled with flattery. She opens by telling Mayor Lane that he was "perfectly right," and she further compliments him on his daughters, the removal of whom from the academy would be nothing less than a "sacrifice." Like Spalding, Duchesne proves that she is a skilled rhetor with a profound capacity for the art of persuasion. She wins over her challenger because she is able to punctuate rhetorical silence with rhetorical language. Unlike Spalding, she uses a rhetoric of praise in this letter and many others.

Her strongest point comes last; she goes on to *suggest* that the only influence exerted over

his daughters is a standard disciplinary one that is exhibited at all academies. In comparing her academy to others, she makes a bold argument that is shrouded in silent innuendo. Beyond this comparison, there is much that goes unsaid in this letter. For example, it seems that she is telling him to ignore anti-Catholic sentiments, but she never says that outright. Duchesne assures Lane that the religion of his daughters is not being tampered with by her or by any of the religious, but this is merely an assertion, not proof. What Duchesne is silent on, or what she leaves out, is deliberate. Silence surrounds this incident: leading up to the confrontation, in the letter, and afterward.

Lane's reception of this letter is known. On the back of Mother Duchesne's response, he withdraws his criticism and questions the motivations of other Protestants. Scribbled across the back of Duchesne's letter is the following thought: "No wonder people have gone [to] such lengths about Religion in all ages when I, who have so little, would quarrel with a lady about it & would make it a sine qua non in leaving my children at the school" (Duchesne). In this note, Lane reflects on his correspondence with Mother Duchesne. He acknowledges that his religious commitment is not the strongest, yet it still caused him to question the Catholic educators to whom he has entrusted his daughters. This note speaks to Duchesne's ability to silence Lane's fears. Despite rumors, Mayor Lane continued to enroll his daughters at the Sacred Heart Academy in spite of burgeoning anti-Catholic sentiments (Baumgarten 188).

Even though Duchesne was able to calm Lane's fears, this private confrontation somehow became a favorite gossip topic of the public. It came to be known as the Virginia Carr incident throughout St. Louis, Virginia Carr being the daughter of Mayor Lane (Sibley 78). For several years thereafter, rumors about Duchesne's influence over the daughter of an important Protestant infiltrated St. Louis and the surrounding areas. As unfortunate as the leak of this private confrontation was, it would actually work to Duchesne's benefit. In the years that followed, her academy saw enrollment rates soar (Baumgarten 175). More well-to-do Protestant parents registered their daughters at Duchesne's academy because the Sacred Heart was one of only a few academies in St. Louis at the time, and it was considered by most to offer the highest-quality education available to girls in the region (Baumgarten; Callan 435). In addition to rising enrollment rates, more local women, from various religious denominations, came to the convent expressing interest in taking their vows to become religious of the Sacred Heart (Callan 335). Though this punctuation of silence generated favorable publicity for Duchesne, she returned to silence thereafter, sealing her thoughts on the matter. This return to silence—evidenced in the lack of correspondence or comments made after she wrote to Mayor Lane—could also be dubbed strategic because winning over the mayor need not be followed up with public commentary.

### **The Continuing Legacy of Duchesne's Letters**

The first convent and academy the Sacred Heart ever founded in America still remains in St. Charles, Missouri, just off old Main Street. Since it first opened its doors in 1818, the academy has been educating school-age girls of all faiths, and still does to this day. Unlike many of the early St. Louis girls' academies, which were forced to shut down after only a few years of service, Duchesne's academy underwent difficult trials only to become a stronger, more viable institution. The success of this academy would not have been possible if it had not been for Duchesne, and while she may not be well known in America for her educational efforts, she has received the highest honors from the Vatican. Duchesne's commitment to the education of

American girls on the frontier and, arguably, her rhetoric, were ceremoniously commended by the Vatican. In 1940, she was beatified, and in 1988 she was officially canonized by Pope John Paul II. Undoubtedly, she was a fearless leader and an unexpected, but remarkable, rhetor who built a profound legacy on a rhetorical stratagem many still consider unrhetorical. Her silent response to anti-Catholic speech was unique in an epoch of verbal backlash, and as a result, her epistolary punctuations of silence were all the more powerful. Duchesne's letters not only saved the Sacred Heart's first North American academy from failing in its first years, they secured a legacy of equal access to education for St. Louis women that has continued for nearly two centuries.

### Conclusion

Silence becomes more than just a means of avoiding hostile encounters provoked by anti-Catholic sentiments. It is embedded in each of the letters, just as it is embedded in every speech and every conversation. In the same way, it is a positive facet to any communicative exchange. Silence adds a compelling weight to speech and epistolary rhetoric, without warranting a formal declaration or naming. This oft-disregarded tactic need only be identified by its audience. Upon doing so, audiences can begin to understand Catholic religious women, an unsuspected group of feminist rhetors with the ability to use silence as power. The silence of these women has long been dismissed as forced or passive, but scholarly efforts are mounting that confirm otherwise. In order to better understand this increasingly recognized feminist group, scholars must be able to appreciate the well-crafted rhetorical nuances of nuns' silence and their mastery of it.

Appreciation can only come from close study and understanding of these women, many of whom left behind a legacy of letters and diaries that offer a gold mine of opportunity for rhetoric scholars. The challenge, however, to this untapped resource is the lack of previous scholarship, which can be problematic when trying to support new claims. Because the history of these women has been selectively left out of American history, aspiring scholars will need to dig deeper. Many rhetorical artifacts are waiting to be picked up and brushed off by curious researchers, and I am certain that the study of Catholic religious women's rhetoric will increase in the future and offer new, valuable insights to scholars interested in the effectiveness of silence. Perhaps even antithetical research will emerge that clarifies when Catholic religious women are silenced and determines the particular limitations these women face when using silence as a rhetorical tool.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Most of society continues to discount or underestimate the persuasive capacity of Catholic religious women, usually because these women have been traditionally viewed by society as weak, passive, submissive, or overly obedient to the patriarchy of the Catholic Church, and therefore as incapable of using rhetoric skillfully, if at all. The silence of nuns in particular is considered to be a crutch rather than a purposeful, well-thought-out tactic that achieves a desired effect. Thus, "unrhetorical" refers to a common misconception of nuns as rhetorically inept.

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