

# **THE VISIBLE RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION OF INVISIBLE ANTEBELLUM FEMALE SEMINARY STUDENTS: CLAY SEMINARY, LIBERTY, MISSOURI, 1855-1865**

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“There is only one boon that we ask, and that is not to be forgotten.”

—Henrietta Clay George, 1862

Scholars tracing the history of women’s rhetoric and composition in the United States focus on the decades following the Civil War into the first years of the twentieth century (Tibbetts 236), and most hold up elite eastern institutions and educators as the measure of women’s education (Farnham 1). Jane Hunter characterizes postbellum high schools as gateways for girls and young women to participate in formerly prohibited public activities (194), and Carol Mattingly establishes the late 1870s and 1880s as the period in which female students were first permitted to address a mixed audience, read their own compositions in public, or even look directly at the audience (59).

Other scholars look further into the past for women’s engagement with public oratory, locating this during the colonial and early national periods. “Conventional wisdom” holds that in these early years “women received no formal elocutionary training because of their exclusion from higher education and the public sphere” (Buchanan 7). In *Imagining Rhetoric: Composing Women of the Early United States*, Janet Eldred and Peter Mortensen investigate the texts read by women and conclude they offered schoolgirls rhetorical education, even if access to the public platform was restricted. Lindal Buchanan’s recent work, *Regendering Delivery: The Fifth Canon and Antebellum Women Rhetors*, presents further evidence that reading classes and textbooks of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries introduced schoolgirls to “basic principles of elocution as well as models of civic discourse” (11). Although her study focuses on northern schoolgirls, Buchanan’s work is important for scholars studying female rhetoric because it establishes the antebellum period as a time when girls gained the right to read compositions in public (47). Reading on the academic platform did not extend to all students, and often male professors read essays for them, but by the mid-nineteenth century, reading in public was an accepted pedagogical practice (47). However, other forms of oratory, including debate and declamation, were coded as masculine and therefore prohibited to girls (14). Only a few northern schools, such as Mount

Holyoke, modeled after Harvard, included some form of debate and oratory in their practices.

In contrast, antebellum southern educators not only required female students to read their own compositions, they also encouraged debate and other forms of oration on the public platform. Buchanan characterizes the southern tendency toward public display as a marker of elite status rather than evidence of progressive pedagogical practices. She proposes that southerners “may have been more accepting of schoolgirls’ elocutionary display than northerners, in part, because southern women had few opportunities for later adapting their abilities to the professional or public sphere” (51). However, to claim that southern schoolgirls were allowed to debate in public simply because they lacked options and therefore posed no threat to the social fabric fails to explain the level of visibility experienced by female students of Clay Seminary in Liberty, Missouri.

Examining the public and private records of Clay Seminary from 1855 to 1865 and the records of other Missouri female students and teachers, as well as published testimonials and critiques in local newspapers, I argue that Clay Seminary students inhabited a sphere that conflated the private and public realms. Although “invisible” as females, students were compelled to exhibit themselves in the visible settings of the academic platform and newspapers: schoolgirls faced hundreds of spectators during examinations and continued to undergo public scrutiny for days after examinations ended. Within the secluded environment of the boarding school, students were scrutinized and censored by teachers, and some students censored themselves. Others found creative means of expression in spite of the intense oversight and declared independence in essays or put down their study books and danced when the principal went out for the evening mail. Clay Seminary students also earned money through literary exhibitions, served as teachers to younger students, published speeches and rebuttals to critics in local newspapers, and participated in various local aid societies. Within the sheltered boarding school, in the midst of sectional conflict, they declaimed, debated, and danced their way from girlhood to womanhood—and much of their activity took place in the public realm.

### **Female Education in Clay County, Missouri**

The term *boarding school* calls to mind images of nineteenth-century schoolgirls sequestered within protective walls, far from the corrupting influences of society. Southern female colleges and boarding schools have been characterized as mere “finishing schools” for the wealthy (McCandless 14), where girls acquired virtue, self-control, modesty, and the ability to play the piano or embroider. In an age when women were increasingly identified with the private sphere, teachers and principals created environments analogous to the home circle, and as surrogate parents they enforced strict guidelines. Students followed a dress code, adhered to rigid schedules, and communicated only with individuals approved by parents and faculty. Some schools restricted boarders from exchanging packages or letters with

day pupils, and virtually every letter was intercepted, monitored, or censored.

The town of Liberty in Clay County, Missouri was founded in 1822, and by the 1830s had established female schools the community considered to be on an equal footing with eastern institutions. Although Clay County existed on the frontier, the citizens of Liberty considered themselves progressive with regard to female education, especially the education of elite daughters. As early as 1846, local newspapers commended women whose minds are “quite as susceptible of higher intellectual cultivation as that of the male, and are quite as capable of accomplishing great things in literature and science” (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, May 9). During the 1840s and 1850s schools in Clay and surrounding counties underscored the value of female education and uplifted woman’s role in the new Republic. She was encouraged to develop virtue and intelligence, to embrace her sacred duty and raise patriot children. Previously considered “merely an appendage to man,” woman now inhabited a higher sphere, making education a necessity (Yantis 6). As an intelligent wife and friend to man, woman must be educated. According to Amy McCandless, “elite Southern fathers were much more willing than their counterparts in the North to expose women to the classical curriculum” (14).

Clay Seminary was established in 1855, and continued throughout the Civil War until 1865. Founders James and Lucy Love enforced seminary rules aimed at preserving decorum and preparing women for their societal roles, but also included typically “male” subjects, such as mathematics, science, and public oration. Clay Seminary students were prohibited from attending “balls, parties or other places of mere amusement” (Christian College, 1860). School guidelines aimed at preserving decorum were strictly enforced, and yet students also participated in highly public events that complicate traditional notions of private and public. The tendency of southern fathers to expose daughters to a classical curriculum played a major role. One might also consider the seminary and its public exhibitions as an enlarged home circle that included seminary students, teachers, and the community. In addition, the long-standing tradition of debate among the county’s male citizens and the educational backgrounds of Clay Seminary’s founders may have provided a further foundation.

James Love attended schools in Kentucky, graduated from the University of Missouri, Columbia, in 1853, and served as chair of mathematics and natural science at Liberty’s William Jewell College from 1853 to 1855. By the time Love and his wife founded Clay Seminary in 1855, he was well established in the classical curriculum taught to men. James Love was by no means a progressive educator or herald of women’s education—he spoke many years later of the crowning jewels of his career, the happy wives in many of Missouri’s households (Clark 33). His primary purpose in establishing the seminary was financial; however, his journals and school records indicate a dedication to debate that undoubtedly influenced his decision to include debate in the curriculum at Clay Seminary. Lucy Ward Love attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1839-40, where young women engaged in a

“demanding curriculum conspicuously free of instruction of domestic pursuits,” and which included debate and current events (Mount Holyoke). She administered the two literary societies at Clay Seminary, where students accessed debate and other forms of public oration.

Another factor in the inclusion of public speaking in the curriculum, besides the influence, direct or indirect, of James and Lucy Love, was that debating already constituted a tradition in Liberty and surrounding counties. Clay County was considered frontier territory in the 1840s when citizens of nearby townships, some of them fathers of future students at Clay Seminary, formed the Franklin Debate Society. According to historian Louis Potts, “the oration, whether delivered orally or in printed form, became the American art form,” and even on the frontier, Missourians engaged in “speechifying and disputation” (3). The minute book of the society indicates that “women were invited to attend the society as early as December 20, 1842, and members renewed the invitation a year later. However, records do not indicate female participation in the sessions”; instead, “females became passive members of the audience” (Potts 7). Although women did not participate directly, the invitation suggests a degree of community approval regarding women’s access to public oratory. Decades later some of these men attended Clay Seminary exhibitions along with hundreds of others, where they watched, listened to, and occasionally stamped their feet in approval of young women debating and declaiming on the academic platform. Many of the topics were the same or similar to those debated by the Franklin Debate Society.

Waltus Watkins, a prominent man of the community and active member of the debate society, sent four daughters to Clay Seminary. Kate Watkins was a small child when her father attended weekly society meetings at the log schoolhouse on the Watkins property. The society’s library remained in the schoolhouse after the society ceased to exist in early 1846; the library included Richard Whatley’s texts on rhetoric and oration, which were also used by students at Clay Seminary as they prepared for public exhibitions.

### **Orations at Clay Seminary**

Tracing rhetorical training of women in the nineteenth century, Carol Mattingly found that educational institutions “allowed women to attend classes in rhetoric and elocution, but denied participation in public speaking” (59). With women denied public space, their compositions were read by male professors, or not at all. The experience of girls and young women at Clay Seminary challenges the notion that females were denied speaking experiences during the antebellum and Civil War years. Extant copies of school exhibitions and examination announcements provide evidence not only that schoolgirls received training in rhetoric and elocution, but that they also ascended the academic platform to read original compositions and participate in debate.

Lucy Love’s earlier experience at Mount Holyoke, where she learned to compose and deliver essays and may have participated in debate, shaped her teaching methods.

Enunciation, voice projection, and delivery were crucial elocutionary components at Mount Holyoke, and remained important elements of public speaking throughout Love's career. In 1882, nearly two decades after retiring from teaching, she wrote to her husband as he sojourned in the Holy Land. From her cousin's Massachusetts boardinghouse Love anticipated listening to a woman speaking in public: "Tonight we are to have a temperance lecture from a lady — Mrs Knox — her subject — 'A week in Washington.' I can tell you more about what I think of women as a speaker after I have heard her." A few lines later she continued that she had heard "the little woman" and that it was an interesting account of the Christian Women's Temperance Convention. Love wrote that the woman, a Methodist minister's wife, "put on no airs, — any school girl would have read her composition in about the same way. She had a soft low voice, "so low I could not quite catch the import. She did not move her hands except to wipe her face" (Love).

Based upon volume and gesture Love differentiates between a "school girl reading a composition" and a "woman as a speaker." Although some considered speaking softly "an excellent thing in woman" (Love), Love disagreed. Clearly, she does not approve of appropriating typically feminine gestures when ascending the public platform. Simply reading a composition in public does not make a woman a public speaker, but Love's reference to schoolgirls, even those of Clay Seminary, suggests that reading in public was an accepted practice. Mount Holyoke's founder, Mary Lyon, insisted on speaking voices that reached to every corner of the room. Love was educated under Lyon's direction; her earliest training imparted public speaking skills considered progressive, even if that training emphasized delivery more than content. Her letters remain silent as to whether she taught her own students to stand straight, speak loudly, and look the audience in the eye; however, evidence exists suggesting Clay Seminary students acquired public speaking skills under her guidance.

Students taught under the direction of James and Lucy Love utilized principles of elocution, and engaged in public rhetoric models similar to those embraced in the 1840s by the Franklin Debate Society. Members of the society discussed contemporary issues, and later debates shifted toward the affirmative/negative model as issues tended to be charged with ideology. One of the latter topics debated was the question: Which is the greater stimulus to the actions of men—the hope of reward or the fear of punishment? (Potts 17). A decade later, in 1856, members of the Mary Lyon Literary Society at Clay Seminary took sides and debated the same question (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*). The youngest students at Clay Seminary participated in dialogue and debate typically reserved for adult males, but these schoolgirls debated during public exhibitions before hundreds of spectators. Students in Clay Seminary's Eunomian Society, comprised of advanced "collegiate"-level students, debated topics of common interest that avoided incendiary issues: Should there be a different mode of educating the sexes? (June 15, 1858); Are public examinations beneficial to the pupil? (June 21, 1860); Which enjoys life most, the man of business or the man of leisure? (June 21, 1860);

Is one out of the world when out of the fashion? (June 10, 1862); Which has achieved the greater, genius or industry? (June 18, 1863); Is truth most effective with mankind? (June 23, 1864) (Clay Seminary Papers). Eunomian announcements indicate that, as in debates conducted by men, at least two girls argued for each side, affirmative or negative. The winning side was announced according to the society president's decision, and a "Critic's Report" was presented by another member. Students also participated in soliloquies, and presented original compositions and speeches.

### **Invisible Young Ladies in Visible School Exhibitions**

The *Liberty Weekly Tribune* routinely published articles of examinations and literary exhibitions held by local female schools, including students' names and the titles of their compositions and debate topics. Reviews underscore the value of Liberty's female institutions, and most reviews were positive. Commencement and examination exercises at Clay Seminary drew overflowing crowds eager to hear students answer questions, read essays, perform music, and give speeches. The Mary Lyon Literary Society conducted a debate and presented a "Port Folio" consisting of a "manuscript paper, issued monthly, filled with original contributions" (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, June 27, 1856). The writer praised Clay Seminary students as "young ladies who could write as well as study and speak." The Board of Visitors printed testimonials of "the searching and thorough character" of examination to which the young ladies were subjected "before crowded audience, and praised their success" (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, August 1, 1856). Another article recognized that examination exercises induced "thought, reflection, reason, discrimination, methodical preparation, logical disquisition and analysis, and mental activity and acquisitiveness" (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, June 29, 1860). One writer also spoke of the "absence of all those clap-trap deceptions and parrot-like performances, which are too often attendant on occasions of this kind. The shadow was absent—the substance was present" (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, June 26, 1860).

On July 25, 1862 the *Liberty Weekly Tribune* printed the only existing valedictory speech of a student at Clay Seminary. The speech was submitted and published at the request of six community members, and both the original request and the student's written response appeared before the text of the speech. Henrietta Clay George received a brief note stating that the venue at which she had spoken had been too full for all to hear her speak, and the members of the community, "having heard it highly spoken of, and being very desirous to see it in print, would respectfully solicit a copy for publication" (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, July 25, 1862). She disclaimed "just title to the distinction" conferred upon her, but exhibited no surprise at being asked, and submitted the manuscript to be disposed of at their discretion. George, often referred to as Henri or Clay, had presented a speech infused with war rhetoric, an oration that exhibits knowledge of the sectional struggle as well as its effects beyond national borders.

George's valedictory speech, written within the school walls and presented on the academic platform before teachers, parents, family, and neighbors, is hardly representative of a secluded schoolgirl unaccustomed to public speaking, and refers to subjects supposedly not mentioned in school or within the home circle at Clay Seminary. She speaks of herself and other students as those who have "peacefully and without interruption gathered around the shrine of wisdom," yet acknowledges a connection with the masses "who are now enacting their part in the fearful drama, which the world's grand stage is now exhibiting to wondering and tearful eyes." School walls could not exclude "the dread tocsin of war [that] pealed aloud its thunder tones, to arouse from the lethargy of peace and security, and call to arms our once united and happy country. Its wild and thrilling notes were heard from ocean to ocean, and were reverberated from the snow clad forests of Maine, to the gulf-bound shores of the sunny South" (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, July 25, 1862).

George speaks not as an invisible, sheltered schoolgirl or southern belle, but as female orator well aware of the present political and social struggle reaching beyond national borders:

like a vivid flash through the gathering storm, it darted its forked tongues on the sky of astounded Europe, and excited an interest among foreign powers, most absorbing and intense, and these now gaze with eagle eye, upon the rising storm, which heaves to the very centre, the grand "Old Ship of State," which has safely braved the storms and tempests of external opposition, but to be buffeted by the waves of internal dissensions.

Turning to the graduation at hand, she speaks of drawing back the "curtain of oblivion over so soul-sickening a picture, and with tearful eye, turn to scan for a moment, that more pleasing subject, the human mind, in its relations to our future destinies, to the cultivation and improvement of which, all our powers have been directed for some years past." She directs her attention to the students remaining in school: "you will soon take your stand by our sides, recognized as sisters leagued together for the accomplishment of the same great purpose." She urges them not to shrink back from the call of duty, but to "go boldly forth clad in the armor of truth, thoroughly prepared for the struggles of life; and to give battle to the opposers of right." In conclusion she states, "There is only one boon that we ask, and that is not to be forgotten" (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, July 25, 1862). George's speech must have made a deep impression upon those present, deep enough to ensure publication for posterity. It represents the only remaining speech written by a student at Clay Seminary, a faithful witness of their ability to write and speak, and a public testimony that girls occupied a place in the public sphere. George and the other graduates continued to find a place in Liberty's history, as the members of the graduating class of 1862 were referred to in local newspapers after the turn of the century. And for some girls, the experience at Clay prepared them for a life in public speaking.

In her autobiography Carrie Nation suggests that debating at Clay Seminary was instrumental in laying a foundation for her future, and letters written from Kansas jail cells indicate she never forgot James and Lucy Love for the part they played. Nation is well known for her participation in the temperance movement. Scholars believe public speaking training served as the basis from which she drew authority for her public stance (Nation). In between throwing billiard balls and stones through saloon windows or wielding her infamous ax, she addressed the mothers of America on the evils of liquor (Nation). The only remaining account of a student's participation in a public discussion or debate is found in Nation's autobiography. Although written decades after the experience and crafted in hindsight, the account merits attention as evidence that southern schoolgirls participated in debate and public speaking.

As a girl of eighteen, Carrie Nation, then Carrie Moore, attended Clay Seminary for one year. Here she encountered public speaking for the first time. An argument in the classroom turned into a topic for debate to be used at the upcoming exhibition for the Eunomian Society. When Nation was called up to argue her side of the question, she was unprepared and later wrote that she "was taken by surprise and was in confusion, when I saw the room crowded." She wrote that when called to enter the debate, she looked ridiculously blank. "The president tried to keep her face straight," and Nation "got no further than 'Miss President.' All burst out in uncontrollable laughter. I went to my seat put my face in my arms and turned my back to the audience." She was humiliated and disgraced and thought of the shame she was bringing to her parents, and "how ever after this I must be considered a 'Silly' by my schoolmates. These things nerved me. I dried my tears, turned around in my seat, looked up, and the moral force it required to do this was almost equal to that which smashed a saloon" (Nation).

Nation continued with simple reasoning, discussing and debating why "animals have reason" in "homely style and spoke with a vehemence which said: 'I will make my point.' Which I did amidst the cheers of the school" (Nation). Her candid account not only represents the only written record of a student's experience at Clay Seminary, it also describes one of the last debates during its final session in 1865. Under the direction of other professors, the school continued to follow a similar curriculum, but by the late 1870s public examinations involved performances in elocution, essay reading, and spelling bees, and apparently did not require the same level of skill witnessed under James and Lucy Love. Although relatively uneducated compared with her peers and somewhat rough around the edges, as a girl Carrie Moore took part in the shared experiences of female seminary students. Their rhetoric was not as sophisticated as that of adult male members of the Franklin Debate Society or of adult women in the temperance movement, yet they debated with their peers in front of large audiences and then endured the continued public scrutiny carried out in local newspaper articles.



## Conclusion

Southern girls and young ladies participated in rhetoric and composition in ways that differed from their northern “sisters.” Their experiences as female students did not always follow the march of footsteps traveling from invisibility to the rhetorical visibility of reform and temperance movements. Instead, they trod a little softer and more often traced a path toward hearth and home. Some grew up to join the ranks of the suffrage and temperance movements, but more did not. Missouri’s female seminaries prepared women for marriage, but during the 1830s and into the 1860s this meant they learned solid subjects alongside the ornamental. Clay Seminary students participated in oration, debate, and composition at a crucial juncture at the nineteenth century when the term *rhetoric* continued to be defined as persuasive public discourse (Mastrangelo 3), and teachers were trained in classical curriculum, including rhetorical principles.

Participating in debates probably prepared sixteen-year-old Minnie Withers, a Clay Seminary graduate, to deliver a public speech to the Confederate “Mounted Rangers” the day troops rode out in the spring of 1861 to report for duty at Jefferson City (*Liberty Weekly Tribune*, May 24). Cordelia Green gained skills that prepared her to teach in Liberty public schools and administer Kansas City’s Drumm Institute for orphaned boys with her husband. Administering literary societies and participating in school-sponsored fund-raisers gave Kate Watkins and Mattie Denny skills needed to raise funds for the Southern Aid Society after the Civil War. And Carrie Nation built upon the rhetorical foundation laid at Clay Seminary, while other, less famous students also joined the Women’s Christian Temperance Union or fought for women’s suffrage.

Clay Seminary students came from Missouri, Pennsylvania, the Nebraska and New Mexico territories, Kentucky, and one student was English by birth. Their fathers were lawyers, merchants, doctors, county clerks, and judges, but many lived in farming households where they helped widowed fathers raise large families, or, like Kate Watkins, participated in household chores and family businesses. Most households owned or hired slaves, but Clay Seminary students did not live on stereotypical plantations. Their lives as “southern belles” and farmers’ daughters were decidedly and permanently interrupted by a war that changed their roles as daughters and women. As residents of a border state during a time of intense sectional conflict, Clay Seminary students navigated their way through lessons and public exhibitions under the intense scrutiny of teachers and parents, while Confederate troops marched through the town of Liberty one day and Federal troops the next. And as southern females they participated in public oratory and debate more often attributed to progressive northern seminaries. Clay Seminary was an oasis in the sectional storm bearing down around them, where girls and young women negotiated a space that traversed the private and the public. Yet, Clay Seminary represents only one of Missouri’s female schools, and seminary students comprise only a fraction of girls living in Missouri during the ante-

bellum and Civil War years. Their voices, Missouri voices, have yet to be heard, and they too might ask with Henri Clay George, "There is only one boon that we ask, and that is not to be forgotten."

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