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## Radcliffe Women at Play

Gloria Bruce

Radcliffe's development from an academic "Annex" to a full-fledged college took place between 1879 and 1910. It was in those early decades that Radcliffe women shaped their femininity and defined what it meant to be a Harvard-educated woman in almost complete isolation from Harvard men. Since Radcliffe academics were inherently male-oriented (planned for men, taught by men), the single-sex environment of extracurricular activities, known then simply as "college life," allowed this formation of female identity.

The first few classes of the 1880s were very small and academically oriented, and there was no college life to speak of. This was an era when some felt that letting women into Harvard was akin to "opening a Protestant Chapel in Vatican City," so female students had to prove themselves to a tradition-bound university by working hard and staying invisible.<sup>1</sup> However, it was by pursuing this very intellectualism and invisibility that students risked being labeled "bluestockings"--the derisive term for educated women who supposedly lost their looks, their charm, and all else womanly in the pursuit of higher knowledge. Once the hard work of establishing their intellectual credibility was done, students desired the world to know they could banish the Harvard *Lampoon's* dowdy "Miss Bluesock" and, as the 1898 class poet put it, "wear their learning as their gowns--becomingly."

In 1884 students at the Harvard Annex started a social group that would be the foundation of Radcliffe's extracurricular culture and would change the way students

thought about themselves.<sup>2</sup> The students gave their new organization the telling name “Idler,” declaring that they would perform “theatricals” at every meeting. The rousing success of the Idler, which endured into the 1950s and drew most of the student body to its twice-monthly dances and plays, spurred the blossoming of college life at Radcliffe. Before long the ideal Radcliffe student was what Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz calls the “all-round girl,” balancing academics with drama, athletics and cultural clubs on a campus which mirrored her development, adding a theater, gymnasium and dormitory by 1905. Though historians of the Seven Sisters often fail to mention the fact, Radcliffe soon boasted an extracurricular life rivaling that of Wellesley or Smith in scope if not in size. Its organizations suited the qualities of the “New Woman” rather than the bluestocking. Womanly philanthropy in the Progressive mode could be exercised in the Emmanuel Club or the YWCA, genteel leisure in the Tennis Club, musical accomplishment in the Mandolin Club, and light literary debate in the English Club.

Nearly all of Radcliffe’s organizations, including such unlikely candidates as the Athletic Association, put on plays from time to time, as fundraisers or as simple diversions. As is the case at Harvard today, it was a rare weekend that had no play or operetta scheduled. Combining fantasy, performance, and creative leadership, theater was understandably popular among young women trying to squeeze as much freedom as possible into their four years away from domestic life. But it also won administrative approval as an appropriate “womanly” activity, bolstering Radcliffe’s public image by emphasizing the artistic, literary, and graceful aspects of the female scholar. In the minds of college presidents and deans, acting was a safe arena in which to explore

identity, because at the time many critics and theatergoers viewed it as a particularly feminine art. As one author put it, women were naturally more attuned to superficiality, emotion, and “the histrionic tendency,” whereas men dealt with the “realities of life.”<sup>3</sup> Though hardly an example of progressive thinking, this logic did make theater an activity that could distinguish womanly Radcliffe from manly Harvard.

For students, however, theater was a ground to test new identities, not merely a place to help project a proper feminine tone. Actresses and directors in the Idler and Glee Clubs used an activity labeled “feminine” on the surface to subvert gender roles and to claim certain nontraditional behaviors as “womanly.” Behind every production were women in creative, leadership, and managerial roles generally held only by men outside the college setting. The students approached their work with a professionalism that eschewed feminine frivolity; Harvard graduate and *Boston Evening Transcript* drama critic H. K. Moderwell admitted in 1914 that “the Idlers took themselves seriously enough to belie their name,” producing “amateur work so well done [that it] tempts one to praise it in a serious tone of voice.”<sup>4</sup> Students built sets, directed rehearsals, managed publicity, and even wrote scripts and scores. Student-written shows, such as the operettas written by Josephine Sherwood of the class of 1899, were performed for the public, favorably reviewed in area newspapers, and even published and put on in outside venues. Alumnae Beulah Dix, Mabel Daniels, and Josephine Preston Peabody went on to distinguish themselves in the fields of playwriting and composing. Josephine Sherwood, considered without peer as an actress in her Radcliffe days, pursued a successful career on stage and screen, winning an Oscar for her supporting performance in the 1944 film

*Harvey*. The majority of Radcliffe students never took their skills beyond the stage of the Agassiz Theater, but they still recognized their rare opportunity to be seen and heard in the public space, to step forth as individuals, to try on different roles--in other words, to be the opposite of the ideal nineteenth-century woman.

While the very nature of theatre was liberating for students, one characteristic of Radcliffe drama stands out as the most transgressive, or at least the most likely to make administrators shudder. By curious consensus of a tradition-bound faculty and an independent-minded student body, men were absolutely forbidden to perform in Radcliffe shows in the period before the First World War (in fact, they were often barred from attending performances). This restriction did not stop Radcliffe women from taking on heroic, dramatic, and romantic male roles on stage. Building on the long tradition of professional actresses playing “breeches parts” (often young, pretty-boy roles such as Romeo), Radcliffe students created their own gender structure in which certain women usually played men and won great praise for doing so, and others, like Sherwood, always played more “traditional” women. Yearbooks and photographs from 1890 to 1910 make it clear that cross-dressing on stage was widespread and often carried off with uncanny accuracy; this was no female version of Hasty Pudding drag.

It was here that the idea of theater as “feminine” broke down, and here that Radcliffe administrators decided the attempt to be well rounded had endangered the still-present need for a low profile of respectable scholarly womanhood. In 1894 a committee of Radcliffe officials including Elizabeth Cary Agassiz laid down costuming rules that would dominate gender roles on stage for years. As elaborated in 1897 by Dean Agnes

Irwin, Radcliffe students were “forbidden to wear men’s costumes at their theatricals or other entertainments, with the exception of such costumes as consist of long flowing garments. The students may wear gymnasium suits, or may wear full knickerbockers. . . . These should be taken off immediately after the play. The students are recommended to ask no visitors.”<sup>5</sup> Students generally greeted the “bloomer rule” as the amusing preference of an older, stiffer generation and delighted in finding loopholes, but the restriction served as a reminder that they were, in fact, only playing at being men.

Gymnasium bloomers--heavy, dark, and almost universally unflattering garments consisting of voluminous below-the-knee knickers--are a convenient symbol of Radcliffe’s struggle to define its young women as attractive yet intelligent, active yet controllable, well rounded but well aware of the boundaries between the sexes. Somewhere between a skirt and trousers, bloomers served as a link between the “feminine” pursuit of drama and the more “masculine” realm of Radcliffe’s other most popular activity--sports. This popularity was to some degree forced; starting in the 1890s, every student had to engage in some form of organized physical activity. This was to counteract assertions by medical professionals that the scholarly woman, in addition to being unattractive and awkward as social critics believed, was also at risk of illness and reproductive disorders. The infamous 1873 book *Sex and Education* contained the dubious research of a Harvard Overseer who believed that “physiology protest[ed] against” female higher education and that a student at a women’s college was likely to end up “an invalid” if not dead, like the “Miss A” and “Miss B” he studied.<sup>6</sup> Officials at the women’s colleges saw no truth to the charge that studying sapped a

woman's vital force, but they nevertheless immediately instituted physical education programs to ensure the health of their students. Radcliffe was no exception, requiring freshmen to don bloomers for calisthenics and encouraging the growth of basketball, field hockey, and tennis teams on the intramural and varsity levels.

A photograph of a class basketball game at Radcliffe in 1897 shows several women in a blur of dark serge, getting their bloomers dirty as they wrestle for the ball on the basketball "field" that preceded the Radcliffe gymnasium. While athletics flourished at Radcliffe (the construction of Hemenway Gymnasium in 1898 gave sports legitimacy and eliminated the need to play basketball in the chemistry lab), administrators never seemed quite as comfortable as students did with the ambitious, unpredictable, even violent elements of the sporting life. Team games had undeniable benefits. They gave the wan bluestocking vigor, grace, and bloom while promoting the class spirit and "democracy" that were a point of pride for women's colleges. But unlike the gymnastics, dance, and Indian club exercises that performed the essential job of maintaining good health, competitive sports included yelling, running, and "the exultation of brute force and skill."<sup>7</sup>

[See Image 4: Radcliffe women playing basketball]

According to Professor Charles Eliot Norton, supported in his views by Harvard president Charles Eliot, such qualities were "barbarian" and increasingly embarrassing for Harvard men, let alone their supposedly gentler counterparts up Garden Street.

Radcliffe president Le Baron Russell Briggs warned that “few things are more pitiable than a woman’s deliberate imitation of the sporting man.”<sup>8</sup> Competitiveness, individual drive, and sheer physical strength were, in the minds of administrators, traits that the New Woman would do best not to develop.

Accordingly, Presidents Agassiz and Briggs and their deans devised controls for sports, stricter than the rules applied to theater in proportion to the increased danger of “unwomanliness.” Administrators were still conscious of the power of appearances. The construction of the gymnasium kept bloomer-clad freshwomen, shrieking cheerleaders, and sweating point guards out of the view of passers-by. One student pointed out the irony that gym bloomers “were taken to indicate moral stability or moral laxity, according to the occasion in which they figured.”<sup>9</sup> Bloomers were the dress of choice for Idler performances, yet students risked a lecture from the formidable Dean Irwin if they were caught wearing them outside the gymnasium. An 1899 photograph of a class basketball team shows players sitting demurely in standard uniform of blouse and bloomers, covered from neck to ankles. Though Dean Irwin knew students played in this garb, she was shocked that the team captain allowed it to be captured on film. The captain was “called on the carpet . . . and took the whole blame.” The rest of the team, however, “refused to be humiliated or apologetic,” and quite a few pictures of teams in the offending bisected garments made it into student-produced yearbooks.<sup>10</sup> Students rarely flouted administrators directly, sharing as they did a vision of Radcliffe women as well bred and only mildly assertive, but they loved to think their way around the rules. Student actresses who wanted to dress like men wore ankle-length overcoats instead of

bloomers. At a 1907 basketball game, student athletes who wanted to shout and cheer like men “while obeying the college rule that there shall be no applause . . . sang songs . . . thereby, in their enthusiasm keeping only the letter of the law.”<sup>11</sup>

Such good-natured protest notwithstanding, students counteracted the “manly” nature of athletics by keeping their activities within certain unspoken boundaries. The Radcliffe Rugby Football Club was far in the future; early students pursued only those few sports such as tennis and field hockey that had been generally deemed acceptable for women. Athletic competitions included events unlikely to have taken place at Harvard, such as “fancy marching” and “a cereal-feeding contest.” And there were limits on rewards for individual achievement, as if students sensed that an athletic star was perhaps a bit too mannish for comfort. Whereas individual actresses such as Josephine Sherwood and Mabel Daniels are praised and immortalized in *Radcliffe Magazine* articles and yearbook portraits, it is difficult to find a photograph or detailed description of an individual athlete in the archives. In 1897 the freshman class managed the coup of winning the Athletic Association banner for the year, but no individual women are named in the description of the feat as the young women cry “We got it, we did!”<sup>12</sup> It was this “we” mentality, along with the salutary effects of sport on health and image, that kept team sports within the realm of respectability.

With individual achievement and even intercollegiate competition de-emphasized (Radcliffe teams did play Smith, Wellesley, and local high schools, but the great majority of games were intramural), students and administrators were able to find common cause in support of class teams. These class organizations allowed women to take leadership

roles and enjoy competition, but they also served the administrative goal of encouraging “democratic” class and college spirit. For students, the opportunity to jump, yell, run, sweat, and compete was a cherished part of the college experience, vastly removed from the indoor, sedentary lives they might have led before. For administrators, athletics and their accompanying ambition were dangerous but ultimately allowable because they served a purpose and were temporary. Unlike theater, which a young woman could hope to pursue in some fashion after graduation, sports were closed to women outside of college, except for some light tennis or golf. For better or for worse, the sporting life was viewed as a passing fever, as President Briggs summed it up: “A slight athletic swagger in a young woman with a basketball halo does not mean that she will be mannish for life. It subsides, like the puffed cheeks of mumps . . . rather grotesque while it lasts, but not at all prophetic.”<sup>13</sup>

Image aside, however, athletics and theater had the simple and crucial function of allowing women to enjoy and express themselves. They could take on behaviors coded “male”--wearing trousers, directing a play, building up muscle, *really* wanting to win the basketball championship--and make them their own. At the same time, students fostered the solidarity and college spirit that made early Radcliffe a cherished place for so many and eased some of the administrators’ discomfort.

Students and college officials could disagree on what it meant to be a feminine athlete, or whether it was proper to play a man on stage, but they were united in the belief that these activities enhanced college pride. Sports and theater served the common goals of encouraging democracy and banishing the bluestocking stigma, portraying Radcliffe

women as well rounded, socially attractive, and healthy females ready to become the wives, mothers, educators, and career women of the twentieth century. They helped transform Radcliffe from a hidden academic annex of Harvard into a vibrant place where students fostered character, career, and cultural knowledge. A student said it best, speaking of drama but reflecting the impact of all extracurricular activities: “Out of each production everyone comes out just a little more thoroughly a part of Radcliffe.”<sup>14</sup>

Notes

1. Elaine Kendall, "*Peculiar Institutions*": *An Informal History of the Seven Sister Colleges* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), 62.
2. Margaret Leonard, "Class Poem," *Radcliffe College Yearbook* (1898), 43.
2. Idler Club, records of secretary, 1884/1885-1890/1891, p.19, in box 7, folder 1, Student Activities Collection, RG XXX, series 1, Radcliffe College Archives, Cambridge, Mass.
3. W. L. George, *Woman and Tomorrow* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1913), 111.
4. H. K. Moderwell, revision of "The Chinese Lantern," *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 11, 1914, Pt. II, p. 6.
5. Idler records, note on costumes between pp. 22-23 (c. 1907), Radcliffe Archives.
6. Edward H. Clarke, *Sex in Education: Or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873; rpt., New York: Arno Books, 1972), 127, 68.
7. Charles Eliot Norton, "Commencement Address," *Radcliffe College Yearbook* (1901), 53-54.
8. Le Baron Russell Briggs, *Girls and Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 110.
9. Grace Hollingsworth Tucker, "The Gods Serve Hebe," *Radcliffe Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Oct. 1933): 192.
10. Cornelia James Cannon, "Class Notes--Reminiscences," *Radcliffe Quarterly* (Feb. 1955), 30.
11. "My first championship game," undated clipping, Scrapbook, p. 46, Eva Alberta Mooar Papers, SC-44, Radcliffe College Archives.
12. Agnes B. Morgan, "Class History," *Radcliffe College Yearbook* (1901), 15.
13. Briggs, *Girls and Education*, 113.

14. Quoted in Dorothy Elia Howells, *A Century to Celebrate: Radcliffe College, 1879-1979* (Cambridge, Mass.: Radcliffe College, 1978), 71.

