

**A World of Their Own Making:
Student Life at Southern Women's Colleges, 1800-1865**

by

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, the majority of historical scholarship on southern women's education has concentrated on seeking answers to the question "to what extent was antebellum southern women's education an oppressive or liberating force?" While keenly noting that the emergence of women's higher education in the early nineteenth-century South did not *necessarily* entail advancement for women,¹ much of this existing scholarship, because it is focused on analysing institutional records, looks primarily at college curricula and practices to answer questions regarding the value of education; accordingly, this scholarship concludes that, while women's higher education was new to the early nineteenth-century South, it did not offer southern women anything "new" in terms of social position and therefore was not ultimately a liberating force. While the existing scholarship is useful because it points out the engendered nature of southern women's education, an exploration of students' recollections of their college experiences challenges the conclusion that women's colleges offered women nothing new and were ultimately oppressive forces. For while women's college education was engendered in such a way that it aimed to reinforce pre-existing ideas concerning southern womanhood this does not necessarily mean that the ideals of women's education matched its actual out-workings. Indeed, assuming that the "ideal" matched the "real" ignores female students' responses to their engendered educations. Paying attention to students' recollections of their college experiences reveals that the college experience actually granted young women the opportunity to shape their own female-controlled world in the midst of living in an intensely patriarchal society. Perhaps surprisingly, though, the world that these students shaped through their cultivation of academic, social, and religious cultures was one in which they not only challenged the gender ideals of

¹ Sally Schwager, "Educating Women in America," *Signs* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 365.

southern society and thereby formed new identities as women, but one in which they also (somewhat paradoxically) upheld a hierarchical structure that undermined any type of sisterhood or collective redefinition of southern womanhood and, at times, even reinforced more traditional gender conventions. Thus, a study of southern women's colleges that privileges the agency of female students not only provides a more complete picture of women's education, but highlights the complexity of southern women's identities and thereby contributes to wider discussions within southern and women's history.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, much scholarly work has demonstrated that southern women's higher education emerged in the early nineteenth century in order to reinforce existing gender constructs and, in doing so, to promote the ideals of southern society.² Less explored by scholars are the ways in which southern women responded to the ideals presented in their engendered educations.³ While analyses of college curricula, advertisements, and catalogues present a rather bleak picture of women's education by highlighting the ways in which southern women's education worked to shape southern women into ladies,⁴ an investigation of females' experiences

² While the majority of scholarship tends to highlight the ways in which southern women's education was engendered, there are some who challenge the idea that it was so. Catherine Clinton, "Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 2 (1982): 49-62, Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1994), Sally McMillen, "Education and Religion" in *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 2nd ed. (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davison, 2002) and Steven Stowe, "The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy: Elite Women's Education and Family Feeling in the Old South," in *The Web of Southern Social Relations*, ed. Walter J. Fraser et al. (Atlanta, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985) each highlight the ways in which college authorities worked to remind southern women of gender ideals through formal curriculum and school practices. By contrast, Margaret Nash challenges historians' conclusions that women's educations were engendered in her "'Cultivating the Powers of Human Beings': Gendered Perspectives on Curricula and Pedagogy in Academies of the New Republic," *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 239-50. Similar to Farnham, Nash notes the similarities between men's and women's education in the antebellum period; however, in contrast to Farnham, she argues that historians exaggerate the different purposes for which men and women were educated (241). The collection of evidence put forward in this thesis, being particular to the South, disagrees with Nash's conclusion that the purposes, curricula, and practices of women's colleges were not engendered. While disagreeing with Nash on this point, however, this thesis is similar to Nash's argument in challenging historians' emphasis on the frivolous and oppressive nature of women's education, but it takes a different route (an examination of women's experiences and agency rather than college curricula) to do so.

³ There have emerged a few studies on students' responses to their engendered education, including Mary Kelley's *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Joan Marie Johnson's *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges: Feminist Values and Social Activism, 1875-1915* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2010), which focuses on southern women, but only those who obtained an education in the North, but these analyses are not focused specifically on southern women's responses to their education. Two studies that do analyse the responses of women to their education include Farnham's *The Southern Belle* and Anya Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), both of which will be discussed in this thesis.

⁴ McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 94; Patricia Palmieri, "From Republican Motherhood to Race Suicide: Arguments on the Higher Education of Women in the United States, 1820-1920," in *Educating Men and Women Together: Coeducation in a Changing World*, ed. Carol Lasser (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press/Oberlin College, 1987), 49-64. Kathryn Walbert agrees with the contention that southern women's higher education is often portrayed as frivolous, useless, and thereby oppressive in her "'Endeavor to Improve

while at college, including a study of the female collegiate culture mentioned in women's letters and diaries, presents a more complicated, and therefore complete, picture. For, while female students may have in some sense lived under the patriarchal authority of college founders, student life provided a space for women to hold some control over their lives while at college. What they did with this power proves revealing for female-controlled, collegiate culture was a space in which women could express their views and either accept or reject the ideals of southern society. An analysis of this collegiate culture--including an examination of academic, social, religious, and post-graduate life--reveals that women used the freedom granted them at college to create communities in which they not only challenged the gender ideals of southern society and thereby formed new identities as women, but also upheld a hierarchal structure that not only undermined any type of sisterhood or collective redefinition of southern womanhood but, at times, even reinforced some of the more traditional gender conventions that their more deviant actions challenged.

As a review of its historiography reveals, the study of southern women's higher education is a relatively new field of historical inquiry. The reason for the historical gap in scholarship on southern women's education is twofold. First, the lack of scholarly attention given to southern women's higher education stems from neglect in the study of southern history generally. While scholars who study the South tend to agree that the region inhabited a distinct culture, they have had to prove to other scholars of American history that this regional distinctiveness is worth serious historical study. Historians of the South tend to observe and challenge two interconnected tendencies in American historiography: first, the tendency of some

historians to portray the Northeast as representative of all American history,⁵ and second, when actually analyzing the South on its own, the tendency to do so in a way that caricatures the South as either a mythic place of “moonlight, magnolias, and mansions,” or as a mysteriously blood-thirsty, slave-whipping society.⁶ Both tendencies ignore the South as a serious topic of study--either by ignoring the South as a distinct region and subsuming southern history under northern history, or by creating a fictional image of the South that is totally “other” to the rest of American history.⁷ This tendency to ignore the South reveals itself in the study of southern intellectual history. Scholarly works that call themselves compendiums of American intellectual history and education typically discuss northeastern intellectual history, and, accordingly, the history of northeastern higher education has often been portrayed as representative of the history of all American higher education.⁸ As Catherine Kerrison helpfully notes, “for generations, American intellectual history has been heavily weighted toward New England; it is a comparatively recent idea that the South even possessed an intellectual life worth studying.”⁹

⁵ In their desire to write positive portrayals of American history, historians have often neglected the “problematic” region of the South. See Laura F. Edwards, “Southern History as U.S. History,” *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (August 2009): 563.

⁶ David Jansson, “The Haunting of the South: American Geopolitical Identity and the Burden of Southern History” *Geopolitics* 12, no.3 (2007): 400-425.

⁷ Jansson defines the way in which American historiography neglects the South through its mythologizing as a form of orientalism in his “The Haunting of the South: American Geopolitical Identity and the Burden of Southern History”, 400-25. Laura Edwards similarly critiques interpretations that picture the South’s violent and oppressive history as exceptional and “other” from the rest of American history in her “Southern History as U.S. History,” 535.

⁸ The tendency in scholarship to privilege northeastern intellectual history is evident when examining the scholarly works that are deemed “classics” in American intellectual history. See, for example, Perry Miller, *New England Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939) and *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), works which earned Miller the title “master of American intellectual history” even though they focus only on the northeast, and Henry Farnham May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), which focuses on the northeast and devotes only one chapter to southern intellectual history (133-150).

⁹ Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3.

Because of the tendency in American historiography to ignore the South, it is only within the past few decades that the South has been recognized as a region with its own intellectual life. Richard Beale Davis's *Literature and Society in Early Virginia 1608-1840* and *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South 1585-1763* were two early works to challenge the idea that the South lacked an intellectual culture and support for higher education.¹⁰

In addition to the tendency in American historiography to ignore southern history, a lack of attention given to women's history has caused the study of southern women's higher education to suffer neglect. In the same way that northeastern history has often been presented as representative of all American history, so too has men's history stood as representative of all American experience. In 1991 Anne Firor Scott noted that historical literature up until the 1960s made little to no mention of women's experiences.¹¹ In the newly emerging field of southern history, attention to women was limited to two sentences in Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick's extensive volume *Writing Southern History*, and merited even less attention in other works.¹² If women were neglected in the general historiography on the South, however, they remained even more invisible in scholarship on southern intellectual history. While Davis's works prompted a move towards accepting the distinct intellectual life of the South, his scholarship focused exclusively on the intellectual lives of men.

¹⁰ Richard Beale Davis, *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South 1585-1763* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1978); *Literature and Society in Early Virginia, 1608-1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973).

¹¹ Anne Firor Scott, "Preface," in *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830 – 1900*, ed. Carol Blesser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xvi. For further discussion on why southern women have been neglected by historical scholarship see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's "Partial Truths," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 902-11.

¹² Anne Firor Scott, "Historians Construct the Southern Woman," in *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 248. For an extended analysis on the reasons for why southern women's history has been neglected see Jacquelyn Hall Dowd, "Partial Truths," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 902-11.

When historical studies on women's education eventually did emerge in the 1980s they were centered on northeastern women. That this is so is demonstrated in both the titles of those works that are considered "classics" in the history of American women's higher education and in the little attention paid to southern women's education in compiled works (such as dictionaries and encyclopaedias) that claim to summarize the whole of American women's and educational history. The titles cited as classics on nineteenth-century American women's education include Barbara Miller Solomon's *In the Company of Educated Women*, Louise Schutz Boas' *Women's Education Begins: The Rise of the Women's Colleges*, Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, and Thomas Woody's *A History of Women's Education in the United States*, all of which focus primarily on the origins of women's education in the North.¹³ Furthermore, some of the most cited works on American women's education are studies that examine the treatises of famous reformers like Catherine Beecher, Mary Lyon, and Emma Willard--all northern proponents of women's education.¹⁴ Similarly, influential institutional studies such as David Almendinger's study of Mount Holyoke students, Anne Firor Scott's study of Troy Female Seminary, and Lynn Templeton Brickley's analysis of Sarah's Pierces Litchfield Academy all portray the educational experiences of those studying in northern institutions.¹⁵ Even works written with the intent of providing a comprehensive background on

¹³ Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Louise Schutz Boas, *Women's Education Begins: The Rise of the Women's Colleges* (Norton, MA: Wheaton College Press, 1935); Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States* (New York: the Science Press, 1929).

¹⁴ These works include, but are certainly not limited to: Willystine Goodsell, ed., *Pioneers of Women's Education in the United States: Emma Willard, Catherine Beecher, Mary Lyon* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1931); Alma Lutz, *Emma Willard: Pioneer Educator of American Women* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1964); Eleanor Ward McCain, *Catherine Beecher: her Educational Views and Activities* (Akron: Ohio State University, 1925); Catherine Uroff, *Emma Willard: a Study of Female Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Gambier, OH: Kenyon College, 1987).

American women's education, such as Linda Eisenmann's *Historical Dictionary of Women's Education in the United States* and Aleman and Renn's *Women in Higher Education: An Encyclopedia*, privilege the history of northern women's higher education, making only sparse references to southern women's education.¹⁶ Thus, while perhaps garnering mention, southern women's education is not typically the focus of works concentrated on the history of American women's education.

While the history of southern women's education has been, and often continues to be, understudied because of biases embedded in American historiography more generally, a number of scholars have recently begun to note the significance of women's education in the antebellum South. Convinced that the rapid emergence of southern women's colleges at the beginning of the nineteenth century merits attention, scholars of southern women's history have challenged the idea that northeastern women's education stands as representative of all American women's education. Some of the most prominent ground-breaking works on southern women's education include Catherine Clinton's "Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic," Steven Stowe's "The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy: Elite Women's Education and Family Feeling in the Old South," Christie Anne Farnham's *The Education of the Southern Belle*, Sally McMillen's "Women's Education and Religion," Kathryn Walbert's "Endeavor to Improve Yourself": The Education of White Women in the Antebellum South,"

¹⁵ Numerous studies on individual northern institutions exist, of which these are a few: David Almendinger, "Mount Holyoke Students Encounter the Need for Life Planning, 1837-1850," *History of Education Quarterly* 19:1 (Spring 1979): 27-43; Anne Firor Scott, "The Ever Widening Circle: The Diffusion of Feminist Values from the Troy Female Seminary 1822-1872," *History of Education Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (Spring, 1979): 3-25; Lynn Templeton Brickley, *Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy: 1792-1833* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1985).

¹⁶ Linda Eisenmann, ed., *Historical Dictionary of Women's Education in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998); Ana M. Martinez Aleman and Kristen A. Renn, *Women in Higher Education: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2002).

and Anya Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South*. These studies have significantly advanced knowledge on southern women's colleges, especially in regards to the reason for the sudden expansion of women's education in the antebellum period.¹⁷ Collectively, these works demonstrate that, contrary to many historians' assumptions, women's education was extremely widespread in the South, as is evident in the sheer number of colleges and academies opening their doors throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ While disagreement exists among scholars over the exact number of women's colleges emerging in this period, the fact that southern women's colleges outnumbered those in the North remains uncontested.¹⁹ Limiting enrolment to elite white women, southern women's colleges were intended to provide these women with an education that prepared them to take up their elite position as "ladies" within a hierarchical society.²⁰ Because it prepared young women for their prescribed roles, southern women's education was not viewed by southern society as a threat (as it was perceived

¹⁷ Clinton, "Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic"; Stowe, "The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy: Elite Women's Education and Family Feeling in the Old South"; Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*; McMillen, "Education and Religion"; Walbert, "'Endeavor to Improve Yourself': The Education of White Women in the Antebellum South," in *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States*, ed. Nancy Beadie and Kimberley Tolley (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002); Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*.

¹⁸ The first chartered female college in the South was Wesleyan Female College, a school located in Macon, Georgia that opened in 1836. Mary Sharp College in Tennessee was chartered soon after in 1839. In addition to these two colleges, some of the most popular and widely acclaimed institutions for female education in the South (as well as those that left records behind) included: Athens Female Academy (Alabama, 1842), Greensboro Female College (North Carolina, 1838), Hollins College (Virginia, 1842), Judson College (Alabama, 1838), La Grange College (Georgia, 1847), Louisburg Female Academy (North Carolina, 1815), Mansfield Female College (Mississippi, 1855), Mary Baldwin College (Virginia, 1842), Oxford Female College (North Carolina, 1851), and Warrenton Female Academy (North Carolina, 1841).

¹⁹ The reason for the discrepancies between scholars' estimations of how many women's colleges existed in the South in the antebellum period stems from the problem of deciding exactly which colleges/academies/seminaries to include in an official count. Farnham notes that because colleges were emerging so rapidly in the South, so too were educational standards changing dramatically, which makes it difficult to assess exactly which schools acted as places of higher learning. Because the "demarcations [between colleges, seminaries, and academies] tend to blur into one another," the terms 'college,' 'seminary,' and 'academy' are used interchangeably in this introduction and the following chapters. See Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 65.

²⁰ Because women's higher education was reserved for elite white females in the antebellum South, the general use of the terms "women" and "college women" in this thesis are short forms for "elite white women" unless otherwise noted; these terms are certainly not meant to represent all southern women.

in the North where it was paired with feminist ambitions), but rather was advanced as a way of upholding societal gender constructs and, in doing so, upholding the hierarchal structure of southern slave society.²¹

While certainly helpful in creating a foundation upon which to understand southern women's education, much of the research conducted by the earliest studies of southern women's education is limited by its reliance on institutional records. Gathering evidence from sources such as college catalogues, curricula and advertisements, studies that concentrate on the engendered nature of southern education often imply that southern women's education, while certainly a new project, was an oppressive force, not offering southern women anything "new" in terms of female identity, but rather simply reinforcing their subordinate status.²² After summarizing Clinton's study on antebellum southern college students, Lynn Gordon concludes that southern women were, despite their exposure to new forms of knowledge, "nevertheless confined to the same domestic duties as their uneducated mothers and grandmothers."²³ Similarly, Sally McMillen writes that while schooling could "open women's eyes and encourage unconscious challenges that could lead women to question, explore, and see beyond the limits of their circumscribed world, only a few southern women embraced such challenges enough to alter their behaviour or expectations."²⁴ According to McMillen, "the musings of young women who questioned the system must not have been too prolonged or deep, for southern girls were well

²¹ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 3.

²² Seminal works by Jabour, Stowe, and Walbert that do not rely solely upon institutional records do not necessarily imply this; in contrast, Clinton, Gordon, and McMillen suggest that education did little to change women's lives.

²³ Lynn Gordon, "From Seminary to University: An Overview of Women's Higher Education, 1870-1920," in *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990): 473-495.

²⁴ McMillen, "Education and Religion," 100.

trained to obey and anticipate a life similar to that of their mothers.’’²⁵ By suggesting that college women simply followed in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers, interpretations such as these undermine the value of southern women’s education because they assume that women did not assert agency in making their educations transformative forces in their lives.

Although it may be true that southern education was advanced in order to reinforce women’s subordinate status within patriarchal southern society, interpretations that look primarily at institutional records in order to assess the value of women’s education assume that prescription was reality, and thereby miss the often-existent gap between the ideal and the “real.” To gather a more comprehensive analysis of southern women’s education, an examination of women’s own descriptions of their educational experiences is necessary, for, if it is true that “higher education is more than books and courses” and includes “the interaction of a person with a place,”²⁶ then women’s own recollections of their college experiences are pivotal in understanding the true value of southern women’s education.

While the majority of scholarship focuses on analyzing institutional records and therefore comes to conclusions accordingly, a few prominent scholars have pioneered work in analyzing women’s own recollections of their college experiences; however, the conclusions these scholars reach appear contradictory. Following a similar line of thought as scholars such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese,²⁷ Farnham argues that women’s diary entries and letters of correspondence demonstrate that college women, as elite members of society, did not scorn their prescribed roles but rather embraced them because they helped maintain these women’s elite status; accordingly,

²⁵ McMillen, “Education and Religion,” 100.

²⁶ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in Women’s Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xvi.

²⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 47.

female students' words and behaviour did not articulate an alternative view of southern womanhood, but rather reinforced the one presented to them in their educations.²⁸ Conversely, Anya Jabour, joining a school of interpretation that views southern women as oppressed by patriarchal southern society and as aware of their oppression, suggests that college women consciously challenged the gender ideals presented in their educations, actively redefining womanhood by engaging in academic competition, participating in rebellious activities, and forming relationships with teachers and fellow students that replaced those of patriarchal males.²⁹

The seemingly contradictory conclusions reached by Farnham and Jabour demonstrate that further research on women's experiences of college needs to be undertaken if southern women's opinions are to be considered pivotal in assessing the value of antebellum southern women's education. As this thesis will demonstrate, a study of southern collegiate culture sheds light on this debate because, as analyses of northern collegiate cultures reveal,³⁰ investigations of collegiate cultures directly address the question of how women responded to their educations, highlighting what women accepted and rejected regarding them. In the southern context, an examination of female collegiate cultures--including an analysis of academic life, social life, religious activities, and post-graduate life--reveals that women both challenged southern gender conventions by constructing new identities for themselves (as students, friends, and spiritual

²⁸ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 120.

²⁹ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 55; Anya Jabour, "'College Girls': The Female Academy and Female Identity in the Old South" in *"Lives Full of Struggle and Triumph": Southern Women, Their Institutions, and Their Communities*, ed. Bruce L. Clayton and John A. Salmond (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 74-92.

³⁰ These include: Horowitz's, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s*, Horowitz's *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1987) and Nancy Beadie's "Internal Improvement: The Structure and Culture of Academy Expansion in New York State in the Antebellum Era, 1820-1860," in *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States* ed. Nancy Beadie and Kimberley Tolley (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002): 89-115.

leaders) as Jabour suggests *and*, at times, reflected southern gender ideals in their upholding of hierarchal structures as Farnham argues.

Chapter One of this thesis reinforces Anya Jabour's conclusion that women formed new identities as students at college by offering further examination of the academic life that developed at female colleges.³¹ While those who held authority over women's colleges, including founders, principals, teachers, and parents, worked simply to shape young women into southern ladies by developing curricula and practices that intended to refine girls in such a way that they could fulfill their roles as passive and agreeable persons, the academic culture cultivated at women's colleges enabled women to extend the definition of womanhood and to find personal fulfillment as scholars. Furthermore, students not only found personal fulfillment in academic study, but developed a culture of academic competition that challenged the notion that women's primary concerns were pleasing others. Rather than being concerned with presenting themselves as refined, modest, and agreeable, female students aggressively pursued academic excellence, partaking in academic competition and rivalry. Though repeatedly warned that "the ostentatious display of intellect in a young lady [was] revolting,"³² female students developed a peer culture wherein proving one's academic prowess was a rewarding experience. At the same time that students collectively challenged the ideal of refinement espoused by their education and thereby questioned societal conventions, however, they used academic standing to uphold hierarchal structures like those in broader southern society; having discovered identities as scholars, college women did not simply use academics to advance one sisterhood, but instead drew lines of inclusion and exclusion through their formation of literary societies and, in the

³¹ Jabour, "'College Girls': The Female Academy and Female Identity in the Old South," 74-92.

³² Marcus Cicero Stephens to Mary Ann Primrose, November 7, 1841, in the Marcus Cicero Stephens Letters. # 3402-z, SHC, the Wilson Library, UNC.

midst of doing so, somewhat ironically reinforced the ideal that the southern lady distance herself from those deemed inferior. This highlights that, while forming new identities, college women were not making a conscious effort to redefine southern womanhood in any type of collectivist fashion.

An analysis of the academic culture that developed at women's colleges is not the only kind of examination that reveals that women simultaneously explored new identities as females and yet resisted sisterhood while at college. Chapter Two argues that an examination of the social culture that evolved at women's colleges illustrates how female students shaped new identities as friends while attending school. While those in authority at women's colleges intended to reinforce female students' identities as intricately tied to family, the formation of female friendships at college challenged the notion that women were defined primarily by their links to family. An analysis of the peer culture at women's colleges suggests that young women, despite college authorities' and parents' insistences, replaced their close connections to family with female friendships while at school. In doing so, students challenged the assumption that they were defined according to their gendered roles within the family. In the midst of challenging gender conventions, however, students formed relationships that were exclusive and oppressed some of their "sisters." Through their cultivation of intimate friendships and college sororities, female students modeled the hierarchal nature of southern society, relying on physical attraction, academic prowess, and family position to dictate an individual's social standing within the college. In doing so, students drew lines of inclusion and exclusion within the female world of the college and ultimately subverted any collective redefinition of womanhood.

Chapter Three looks to the religious activities that took place at women's colleges to reveal that women were agents in not only shaping new identities, but also in exercising an

exclusiveness that both undermined any type of sisterhood and reinforced more traditional gender ideals. While those in charge of women's colleges established colleges as part of an effort to evangelize young women and desired that religion play a substantial role in southern girls' lives while at college, they did not intend for evangelicalism to provide women with the type of independence that it did. While colleges worked to reinforce the evangelical idea that women were pious and submissive creatures, female students' religious activities, and in particular their preoccupation with Christian "conversion" and the experiences surrounding it, enabled students to use religion as a means to redefine female identity. Instead of behaving in a manner that was befitting for pious ladies, female students used the authority granted to them by religion to challenge the notion that they were gentle, passive creatures who were dependent on male authority, doing so by using religion to create their own rules and schedules instead of simply following those outlined by college authorities. While female students gained authority by redefining their identities through religion, however, the power found in religious activities was not equally liberating for all female students. Rather, because students often judged how womanly, and thus elite, a student was based on her religious character, students' religious activities could be oppressive for those deemed the least "pious" among them.

Finally, Chapter Four tracks educated women's lives after college and suggests, contrary to some scholars' assumptions,³³ that women used their educations to transform their lives when re-entering southern society. While college curriculum and practices intended to prepare women solely for their lives as refined and submissive daughters, wives, and mothers, women continued to challenge the identities prescribed to them by southern society by continuing to engage in intellectual pursuits, maintaining female friendships, and participating in religious activities after

³³ Gordon, "From Seminary to University: An Overview of Women's Higher Education, 1870-1920," 474; McMillen, "Education and Religion," 100.

leaving college. Even in the midst of using their education to broaden definitions of southern womanhood, however, this redefinition was limited. Most college women did not seek to establish a sisterhood based on the premise that all women were bound together simply based on their gendered status. Rather, many educated women distanced themselves from both northeastern women and women of colour, openly admitting that they were not “women’s rights women.”³⁴ Instead of engaging in the type of reform that was taking place amongst other women in the nation, southern college women often worked to reinforce class and race hierarchies and they used their college educations to do so. This behaviour reveals that these women were not only agents in redefining their own identities, but that they were agents in upholding often oppressive gender constructs of black and lower class women.

Rather than deconstructing itself, the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that college women both challenged and reflected southern ideals simply underscores the complex nature of southern women’s identities. While female students challenged definitions of southern womanhood, they did so selectively and only to the extent that they could still maintain their status as individuals. Thus, rather than envisioning a common sisterhood--as is tempting for modern-day feminist scholars to read into southern educated women’s actions--students sought female independence in a hierarchal fashion: that is, an independence that was not egalitarian in nature, but rather ensconced in social, religious, racial, and class particularities.³⁵

A study of collegiate culture presents a slightly different story of southern women’s education than the one typically told. Analyzing women’s own recollections of their college

³⁴ Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 160.

³⁵ In this way, southern college women demonstrate the very constructed nature of ‘feminism’ itself. For further discussion on how feminism is constructed to suit the interests of particular groups and individuals, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 17-42.

experiences highlights the agency of women in shaping their own educations. How these women used college space to create their own worlds reveals the complicated nature of their identities; southern college women were not defined simply by one category of identity, but by overlapping identities. Recognizing this complex nature of female college students' identities helps make southern women visible, redeeming them from their long-held status as "victims of myth or exaggeration."³⁶

³⁶ McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 1.

CHAPTER ONE

“To be Awarded Second Honor is More Mortifying than Receiving No Honor at All”: Academic Life at Southern Women’s Colleges

Historians often look to the formal curricula of women’s colleges to assess whether southern women’s higher education was a transforming force in southern women’s lives.¹ While looking to college curricula is certainly helpful in addressing the question of southern education’s value, studies that concentrate solely on curricula prove limiting in their interpretations of women’s education because they examine only the ideals, and often overlook the reality, of women’s education. Because of their limited scope, these analyses typically present, in the words of scholar Steven Stowe, “a bleak study of intellectual bondage, emphasizing the values that segregated women and held them down rather than the social conditions women shaped to their advantage.”² As an examination of collegiate culture makes clear, taking into account women’s recollections of their learning experiences while at college reveals a slightly more complicated picture than the one often presented by those studies that examine only curricula. For, while examinations of college curricula reveal authorities’ intentions for women’s learning, analyses of the academic life that was cultivated through collegiate culture reveal how women responded to these ideals. Rather than suggesting that women’s learning was limited by college authorities and their ideals, young ladies’ recollections of their college experiences reveal that women exercised control over their learning and the academic culture that it inspired. The goal of women’s education may have been to reinforce

¹ For example, Farnham examines college curricula to argue that southern women’s education was as equally rigorous as men’s education during the period, but that it was, nonetheless, engendered so as to shape young women into southern belles. See Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*. Margaret Nash also studies college curricula to examine the value of women’s education and concludes that, contrary to Farnham’s suggestion, women’s education was not engendered, but rather simply paralleled that of men in every important respect. See Nash, “‘Cultivating the Powers of Human Beings’: Gendered Perspectives on Curricula and Pedagogy in Academies of the New Republic”: 239-50.

² Stowe, “The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy,” 90.

their identities as refined southern ladies, but when they were at college women formed new identities as students--identities that did not match up with the southern gender ideals espoused through their education. At the same time that college women collectively challenged gender ideals by forming new identities as students, however, their cultivation of an academic culture fostered a type of exclusion that reflected the hierarchal nature of southern society, worked to reinforce the convention that a southern "lady" distance herself from those deemed inferior, and, therefore, ultimately subverted notions of a common sisterhood based on gender status alone.

In order to understand how female college students challenged the gender ideals espoused through their educations by fostering an academic culture, it is first important to establish how southern society defined female identity and, in particular, white, upper class female identity. While the prescriptive literature of the era outlined many specific qualities to which white, upper class women should aspire, ultimately all of these qualities served the purpose of marking a woman as a "lady." Thus, one of the defining features of elite southern womanhood was refinement. As antebellum descriptions of the ideal southern "lady" make clear, being refined entailed displaying gentleness, patience, poise and charm. Highlighting the ideal for the southern lady, Sidney Lewis of Sparta, Georgia, wrote in his editorial for the *Ishmaelite* that the ideal woman "spoke softly and sweetly with a warm cordiality of manner. From birth she was taught not to say any unkind things. She was taught to select soft feminine clothes, to learn more about men than Shakespeare . . . and to be a comforting nurse."³ Similarly noting the refined characteristics of the southern lady, Letitia Burwell described her as "a woman of rare attraction, possessing all the gentleness of her sex . . . Tall and handsome, look[ing] a queen . . . receiving her guests, and, by the first words of greeting, from her warm, true heart, charm[ing] even

³ Sidney Lewis as quoted by Thomas D. Clark in *The Southern Country Editor* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 96.

strangers.”⁴ In an address delivered to young ladies, George Howe argued that the “principal virtues which should adorn” southern ladies included “outward delicacy and grace in every action.”⁵ Being nervous, delicate, and dependent, a woman’s “weakness” was viewed as her “strength” and her “true art [was] to cultivate and improve that weakness . . . shrinking from public gaze and from the competition of life.”⁶ Rather than seeking to engage in competition, a young woman was meant to “cultivate those amiable traits [*sic*] of character” and, in doing so, “secure [her] own happiness, as well as that of others.”⁷ The model woman was a person “never thinking of herself,” but one with a “heart overflowing with sympathy and interest for others.”⁸

Southern society defined the ideal upper class woman as a refined and modest “lady” because doing so served an important social purpose. Taking on the qualities of a “lady,” the elite southern woman was placed on a pedestal--she was an entity so perfect she was considered near to God.⁹ Furthermore, not only was she a near-perfect creature, the southern lady was the producer of white offspring and consequently served as the very repository of “civilization.”¹⁰ While symbolically a very powerful figure, however, the southern lady was, in her refined delicacy, in actuality, physically and mentally weak and, according to southern ideology, therefore in need of protection from white males. In white southerners’ minds, protecting the

⁴ Letitia M. Burwell, *A Girl’s Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1895), 70, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/burwell/burwell.html#ill5>.

⁵ George Howe, *The Endowments, Position, and Education of Woman: an Address Delivered before the Hermans and Sigourney Societies of the Female High School at Limestone Springs, July 23, 1850* (Columbia, SC: C. Morgan, 1850), 18.

⁶ George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South* (Richmond, VA: A. Morris Publisher, 1854), 214.

⁷ Janet Henderson, “A Perfect Woman,” as quoted in Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 44.

⁸ Burwell, *A Girl’s Life in Virginia Before the War*, 84-85.

⁹ Irving H. Bartlett and C. Glenn Cambor, “The History and Psychodynamics of Southern Womanhood” *Women’s Studies* 2 (January 1974): 9.

¹⁰ Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 147.

very valuable sweet, refined, producer of white racial purity was especially important considering the threat posed by blacks. Characterized as highly sexual beings, blacks' supposed sexual impulses threatened racial purity and ultimately threatened white hegemony because, as Martha Hodes points out, sex between black men and white women complicated the "black equals slave, white equals free" dichotomy that the South operated within. Producing children of mixed ancestry eroded the dividing line between white and black that was crucial to sustaining white supremacy.¹¹ Ultimately, then, southerners' linking white women's identity with refinement and modesty not only served to maintain racial "purity" and, consequently, civilization, but thereby served as justification for slavery--the very foundation of southern society.

Because women's refinement was considered such an integral part of southern women's identities and ultimately served as a way to uphold slavery, it is not surprising that southerners sought to inculcate ladylike behaviour in whatever ways they could, and that one of these ways included establishing women's colleges. That colleges were established in the antebellum period in order to refine women is demonstrated in a number of ways. First, and perhaps most obviously, the promises of proponents of female education during the period reveal that colleges were intended to advance refinement. Addressing the Society for the Advancement of Learning in South Carolina, Chancellor Harper promoted female education by claiming that there was a need in the South "to elevate the female character" and to preserve the "utmost purity of manners and the greater severity of decorum than required elsewhere," and, according to Harper, this need

¹¹ On the supposed sexual threat of the African male, see Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages* (New York: Routledge, 1999). For further discussion on the threat posed by interracial sex between black men and white women to the institution of slavery see Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*, 4-5.

could be fulfilled through the establishment of female colleges.¹² Also highlighting that female education was intended to refine women, Daniel Chandler claimed that a woman's education would "fit her to perform, with dignity and effect these elevated duties": to exert "a most serious influence over outward fashions, habits, manners, and existing institutions . . . to awaken, in the breasts of men, a suitable taste for decorous and elevating amusements . . . and with secrecy and the potent spell of an enchantress, to introduce and spread far and wide, throughout the various departments of society, the elegancies of life and the arts of humanity."¹³ Ultimately, female education was justified based on the belief that "the continuation of the mind to a high degree refined and elevated [woman's] character and tastes and softened and beautified her disposition."¹⁴

That education was intended to refine southern women is not only evident in the claims put forward by proponents of women's education, but also in the promises made by individual learning institutions. In an effort to attract female students to its institution, an advertisement for Augusta Female Seminary in Staunton, Virginia promised that the school would "humbly attempt ever to provide that none of the branches of female education which are calculated to add worth or loveliness to female character shall ever be wanting."¹⁵ Similarly, a circular for Harmony Female College of Sumter Mineral Springs, South Carolina assured parents that the

¹² Chancellor Harper as quoted by Anna Marie Korfker, "Behind Closed Doors: Southern Upper-Class Notions of Womanhood in the Plantation Mistress's Intimate Sphere" (master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2011), 24, <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/student-theses/2011-0616-200725/Behind%20Closed%20Doors.pdf>.

¹³ Daniel Chandler, "An Address on Female Education" (Washington, GA: William A. Mercer, 1835) as printed in *The Southern Literary Journal and Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1, ed. Daniel Whitaker (Charleston: J.S. Burges, 1835), 279.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Roberts Baer, Introduction to *Shadows of My Heart: the Civil War Diaries of Lucy Rebecca Buck* (Atlanta, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xxvi.

¹⁵ B.M. Smith, "Address on the Laying of the Corner Stone of the Augusta Female Seminary," published in his *The Exclusive Claims of Prelacy, Stated and Refuted* (Staunton, VA, 1844), 31.

education offered at Harmony would shape southern daughters into refined young women, boasting that “the experience and observation have led many impartial judges to express their conviction, that in no Seminary in the State are music, drawing, painting, finer taste, more graceful manners, and freedom in conversation, and all that makes an accomplished woman, more successfully attained.”¹⁶ An annual catalogue published for Athens Female College in Tennessee too promised that “especial attention [would] be paid to Drawing and Painting, Embroidery, and Vocal and Instrumental Music” in order to cultivate refined southern women.¹⁷ When colleges failed to live up to parents’ and society’s expectations in producing cultivated females, they risked closure. This is highlighted in the 1840 board minutes of Greenville Female Academy, wherein it is implied that the school itself declined because of its inability to produce southern “ladies.” As Judith Bainbridge notes in her study of the academy, minutes proceeding the 1840 public exams mention that while the “female department appeared to be well conducted so far as the recitation of lessons were concerned, there might be some improvement in the arrangement, orderly deportment, and personal neatness of the pupils.” The school’s enrollment consequently declined.¹⁸

In addition to the claims put forward by both proponents of women’s education generally and individual institutions, a look at the very students who were enrolled in institutions of higher education testifies to the college’s purpose of refining young women. According to Mary Kelley, only 0.59 per cent of white women between the ages of fifteen and twenty were likely to have

¹⁶ Harmony Female College, *Circular of Harmony Female College, Sumter Mineral Springs, South Carolina, for 1859*, (Sumter Mineral Springs, SC: Harmony, 1859), 6, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/stream/circularofharmon00pres/page/n17/mode/2up>.

¹⁷ Athens Female College, *Second Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of Athens Female College at Athens, Tennessee (July 5, 1860)*, 14, Internet Archive, accessed November 19, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/details/secondannual.cata1860.atthe>.

¹⁸ Judith Bainbridge, “‘A Nursery of Knowledge’: The Greenville female Academy, 1819-1854” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 99, no. 1 (January 1998): 23.

been enrolled in college between the revolutionary period and the Civil War.¹⁹ The very expense of college reserved enrolment for the most elite members of society. Sending a daughter to college in the antebellum period could cost a southern family anywhere between 150 and 400 dollars a year.²⁰ Considering that the average plantation owner made a profit of just 900 dollars a year, the expense a family paid to have a female member attend college was very high.²¹ The high cost of college meant that, in the words of one female student, “only a limited number of girls were fortunate in securing college education” for “there was not a free school for the masses throughout the confines of the Empire State of the South.”²² Serving the most elite of society, schools were “more about gentility” than preparing women for careers.²³ After all, “no southern woman of means ever proposed to work at anything outside of the home”²⁴ because “working publicly would have been considered an eternal disgrace.”²⁵ Rather than education preparing a

¹⁹ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic*, 81.

²⁰ The price of sending a young woman to college depended not only on the prestige of the attended institution, but also on the students' desire and/or need for private lessons in music, drawing, painting, or language learning. For sketches of tuition and other fees see: Farmville Female College, *The Next Term of this Institution Will Commence Thursday, October 1st, 1863*, Internet Archive, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/ims/Farmville.html>; Greenville Baptist Female College, *Catalogue of the Trustees, Faculty, and Students of the Greenville Baptist Female College, Greenville, SC*, 12, Internet Archive, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/details/catalogueoftrust00gree>; Harmony Female College, *Circular of Harmony Female College, Sumter Mineral Springs, South Carolina, for 1859*, 10; Richard S. Gladney, *Essays on Female Education* (Columbia, SC: Times and Gazette Office, 1832), 10.

²¹ Harold D. Woodman, *Slavery and the Southern Economy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966), 46-47.

²² Rebecca Latimer Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth* (Atlanta: Index Printing Company, 1911), 71.

²³ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 69.

²⁴ Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth*, 62-62.

²⁵ Belle Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter* (New York: Abbey Press, 1900), 41, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/Kearney/menu.html>.

young woman for the workforce, therefore, it was intended to refine a woman and thereby bolster her and her family's social status.²⁶

As an examination of college catalogues reveals, southern colleges worked to refine young women primarily through their curricula. Most obviously, courses in ornamental training linked white women's identity to refinement and worked to perfect this feminine virtue. Typically, female students took courses in Music, Drawing, Painting, and French because they added to her list of accomplishments. That ornamental courses were meant to enhance students' refinement is evident in colleges' descriptions of these courses. According to an advertisement for Farmville Female College located in Virginia, female students' instruction in music would not only be "very thorough," but would "combine theory with practice, so as to enable the students to read Music with *ease* and correctness, and to perform with understanding and *taste*."²⁷ Similarly, a college catalogue issued by Hamner Hall in Montgomery, Alabama assured parents that its courses in music would be administered by a "gentleman of distinguished ability, who is noted for . . . his eminent success in rendering his pupils skillful performers."²⁸

Furthermore, in addition to aiding women's accomplishments through instruction in Music, Art, and French, classes in penmanship, elocution and deportment taught women how to present themselves with an "elegant style."²⁹ One student by the name of Anne Nash recalled

²⁶ Herein lies a difference between higher education for women in the South and in the North. Whereas in the North, young women from mainly the middle class were being trained for the "useful" profession of teaching, this was not the case in the South, where education was reserved for the most elite. See Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 3.

²⁷ Farmville Female College, *The Next Term of this Institution Will Commence Thursday, October 1st, 1863*. Emphasis mine.

²⁸ *Catalogue of Pupils at Hamner Hall, a Seminary for Young Ladies, Montgomery, Ala.*, 3.

²⁹ *Catalogue of Pupils at Hamner Hall*, 4. See also Eliza Moore Chinn McHatten Ripley, *Social Life in New Orleans: Being Recollections of my Girlhood* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 10-14.

that students “were taught to modulate [their] voices, to walk erectly, to sit well back in [their] straight chairs and never to cross [their] limbs”³⁰ so as to appear ladylike at all times. Similarly, Kathleen Boone Samuels noted that college women were “taught to speak very low and be delicate in [their] ways.”³¹ According to Samuels, female students were not only instructed in ladylike behavior through formal curriculum, but also through informal practices. Describing her experiences at Front Royal Academy in Virginia, Samuels recorded how, after regular school hours, the students were instructed in manners and calisthenics-- they “were taught how to greet guests in the parlor, how to draw up chairs for them and how to introduce them.”³² That learning social graces was a central aim of women’s education is clear in one mother’s warning to her daughter Bessie that she would “never be satisfied with a daughter like some girls [she] occasionally s[aw]--*badly educated*--awkward, and unladylike.”³³

More surprising than using ornamental courses to refine female students’ behaviour and appearance, women’s colleges also created rigorous academic courses to cultivate female refinement. As many course advertisements and catalogues highlight, it was typical for women’s colleges to offer “solid” courses including Astronomy, Botany, Composition, English Literature, Evidences of Christianity, Geography, Geology, Grammar, History, Mathematics (including Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, and Trigonometry), Moral and Intellectual Philosophy, and Physics in their curricula.³⁴ Female students were expected to read and engage with classical

³⁰ Anne Strudwick Nash, *Ladies in the Making at the Select Boarding Day School of the Misses Nash and Miss Kollock: 1859-1890* (Hillsborough, NC: Durham, 1964), 91.

³¹ Kathleen Boone Samuels as quoted by Elizabeth Roberts Baer in *Shadows of My Heart*, xvii.

³² Samuels as quoted by Baer in *Shadows of My Heart*, xvii.

³³ Williana Wilkinson Lacy to Bessie Lacy, Aug. 23, 1845, Nov. 28 [1845], Drury Lacy Papers, SHC, Wilson Library, UNC, as quoted in Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 110. Emphasis mine.

³⁴ Alabama Female Institute, *1835 College Catalogue*, as quoted by Isabella Blandin in *The History of Higher Education for Women in the South Prior to 1860* (New York: Zenger Pub. Co, 1975), 82; Athens Female

literature, including the works of Virgil, Cicero, and Livy,³⁵ and participated in conducting science experiments.³⁶ While women's education included significant attention to rigorous academic study, however, the goal in teaching such courses was not simply to help students discover personal fulfillment.³⁷ On the contrary, academic courses were meant to refine young women in such a way that they could "render [themselves] interesting and agreeable to *others*" so that they might please them.³⁸ Writing to his granddaughter Mary Ann Primrose while she was attending Burwell School in North Carolina, Marcus Cicero Stevens instructed Primrose to carefully study academic subjects because this would "greatly add to [her] stock of ideas, and enable [her], when occasion serves to take part in a rational conversation." According to Stevens, "nothing [was] so insipid as some young ladies who [after singing or exhibiting their drawings] sit mumchanced" until someone engages them in "frivolities."³⁹ Instead, young women should know enough about a subject to accommodate another's interest. According to a catalogue issued by Alabama Female Institute in 1835, "the object of the institution [wa]s, to aid young ladies to educate themselves to answer the great end of their being--to enjoy and impart happiness."⁴⁰

College, *Second Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of Athens Female College at Athens, Tennessee (July 5, 1860)*, 11-12; Elias Marks, *Hints Upon Female Education*, 33-34, Internet Archive, accessed November 10, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/detail/shintonfemaleedu00mark>; Greenville Baptist Female College, *Catalogue of the Trustees, Faculty, and Students of the Greenville Baptist Female College, Greenville, SC*, 10-11; Harmony Female College, *Circular of Harmony Female College, Sumter Mineral Springs, South Carolina, for 1859*, 3-5.

³⁵ Farmville Female College, *The Next Term of this Institution Will Commence Thursday, October 1st, 1863*.

³⁶ *Catalogue of Pupils at Hamner Hall, a Seminary for Young Ladies, Montgomery, Ala.*, 3-4.

³⁷ McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 94. Kathryn Walbert argues that current scholarship misinterprets southern education's goals and argues that parents and authorities actually promoted self-fulfillment as primary. See Walbert, "Endeavor to Improve Yourself: The Education of White Women in the Antebellum South," 116.

³⁸ Stephens, Letter to Mary Ann Promise, November 7, 1841, SHC.

³⁹ Stephens, Letter to Mary Ann Primrose, November 7, 1841, SHC.

Women, according to Thomas Dew, could best do this not by using their education to speak in academic abstractions like men, but by using the style and manner they learned in college to “fascinate the[ir] hearers” and “delight and charm all those who breathe[d] the atmosphere in which [they] move[d].”⁴¹

The fact that women’s education was intended to refine woman’s character so that she could best please others is evident in parents’ and college authorities’ warnings to female students not to use their educations for individual benefit--in particular to gain public admiration. Writing to his daughters, William Wirt, an advocate of women’s higher education in Virginia, warned them that “the ostentacious display of intellect in a young lady is revolting.”⁴² Similarly, Marcus Cicero Stevens appealed to his granddaughter Primrose, asking her to administer “prudence and discretion” in revealing her intellect, explaining that “a man may possess great bodily strength but it would be folly in him to rush into the streets and throw down everyone he might meet to show his strength . . . [therefore] exercise a due discretion, and depend on it.”⁴³ In a letter to his two college-age daughters, Rufus Bailey warned that “awakened attention to study is apt to degenerate into unholy ambition.”⁴⁴ According to Bailey, “a simple desire for applause is a very foolish and a very dangerous one . . . It is the fruitful source of envy towards other, vain pride in one’s own attainments, a foolish egotism, and many other hurtful and disgraceful

⁴⁰ Alabama Female Institute, *1835 College Catalogue*, as quoted by Blandin in *The History of Higher Education for Women in the South Prior to 1860*, 81.

⁴¹ Thomas Dew, “Dissertation on the Characteristic Differences of the Sexes, No. 3,” *Southern Literary Messenger* (August 1835), 165, accessed February 1, 2012, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajml/acf2679.00012/695:14?page=root:rgn=full+text:size=100;view=image>.

⁴² William Wirt as quoted by Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 55.

⁴³ Stephens, Letter to Mary Ann Promise, November 7, 1841, SHC.

⁴⁴ Rufus W. Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1857), 176-77.

feelings.”⁴⁵ Students were warned that desires for public admiration and self-display were ultimately unsexing, not matching up with the feminine ideal: being charming, polite, graceful, modest, and pleasing in all circumstances. In an address delivered to students at Greensboro Female College, lecturer George Davis informed students that “whatever degree of mental superiority you may attain, it will be but harsh and repulsive, unless softened and refined by a corresponding accomplishment in womanly graces.”⁴⁶ Primary among these womanly graces was “true womanly modesty.”⁴⁷ Also delivering an address to Greensboro’s female students, Samuel Talmage exclaimed his disgust with schoolgirls who “parade[d] their accomplishments.”⁴⁸ According to Talmage, the “exhibition of a young female . . . tends to foster vanity . . . and an inordinate love of display; it weakens that delicate sensibility which God has impressed on woman’s heart.”⁴⁹ Ultimately, the public display of woman was said to unsex a woman by “disqualify[ing] her to blush” and thereby “robbed society of its brightest charms.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Martha Prescott, a student at Mary Sharp College, expressed the southern ideal for women’s education well when she wrote “I would be a learned woman. I would have treasure in

⁴⁵ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 180.

⁴⁶ George Davis, “Address Delivered before the Young Ladies of Greensboro Female College, 14 May 1856,” 12, Internet Archive, accessed November 9, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/details/addressdelivere00davi> goog.

⁴⁷ Davis, “Address Delivered before the Young Ladies of Greensboro Female College,” 12.

⁴⁸ Samuel Talmage, “A Proper Early Training and its Priceless Value: a Discourse Delivered in the Chapel of the Greensboro Female College, June 23, 1853,” 22, Internet Archive, accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/details/properearlytrain00talm>.

⁴⁹ Talmage, “A Proper Early Training and its Priceless Value,” 21.

⁵⁰ Talmage, “A Proper Early Training and its Priceless Value,” 22-23.

my own mind, but I would be humble and unassuming.”⁵¹ While women’s education could be rigorous, it was intended to make them “cultivated, not intellectual.”⁵²

At the same time that female students were warned not to show off their intellect, they were encouraged to do well in school because it advanced family status. Repeatedly, students were reminded by their families that they had the duty to do well in school because, by fulfilling the societal ideal of being a refined lady, they brought honour to their families. Noting the pressure families placed on young women to perform well in college, Mary Kelley records the letters of numerous parents who wrote to remind their daughters of their duty to enhance their families’ happiness. Howell Hobbs instructed his daughter, a student at Salem Female Academy, to conduct herself in such a way at school that when she returned home he could “have the very exquisite pleasure of having an accomplished and intelligent daughter to introduce into society.”⁵³ One mother encouraged her daughter Julia to “remember that college is necessary and will ultimately add to our happiness as well as your own, if you do your duty and improve your opportunities as we trust you will.” Julia was to “make herself an accomplished woman” because “[her family’s] happiness depend[ed] a great deal upon [her].”⁵⁴ Noting that “the expenses of youth in a course of education are necessarily great, and, in most cases, impose a material burthen upon parents,” R.W. Bailey wrote to his children that “a dutiful and thoughtful child will not be inconsiderate on this subject” and accordingly will perform well in school.⁵⁵ That female students understood their families’ expectations of them is clear in Rebecca Felton’s

⁵¹ Diary of Martha Prescott, 1836, as quoted by Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 66.

⁵² Herschel V. Johnson, *Address*, 12-13. As quoted by Fox-Genovese in *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, 257.

⁵³ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 25.

⁵⁴ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 26.

⁵⁵ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 169.

proclamation that her greatest achievement in school was “mak[ing] [her] parents very happy [by] not fail[ing] to look good.”⁵⁶

Making parents “look good” not only entailed performing well in courses that developed ladylike behaviour, but keeping the company of students who too displayed refined behaviour and thereby proved worthy of friendship. In letters to their daughters, parents warned daughters not to associate with those deemed inferior in this regard because it would not bolster one’s reputation. In fact, according to parents, being a “lady” entailed distancing oneself from those deemed less superior--those who were, in one mother’s words, “badly educated.”⁵⁷ For instance, when writing to his daughters, Bailey cautioned them to use discretion when selecting whom to associate with because, even though boarding school was in some sense selective, not all young women exhibited refined habits and would operate in a sphere of influence and respectability in the future. Bailey thus advised his daughters that it was their duty to discriminate when forming friendships and to associate only with those who displayed proficiency in deportment and conversation.⁵⁸

Inadvertently, colleges offering female students academic courses and asking them not to find personal fulfillment in them, and parents encouraging students to excel in their studies, but not to display their intellect, caused a tension within higher education that enabled college women to push the boundaries of prescribed womanhood and construct new identities as students. Instead of being concerned primarily with refinement and using it to please others,

⁵⁶ Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth*, 71.

⁵⁷ Lacy to Bessie Lacy, Aug. 23, 1845, Nov. 28 [1845] as quoted in Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 110.

⁵⁸ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 161-166.

college women were consumed by an academic culture that afforded them the opportunity to become learners--and not only learners, but competitive ones.

Encouraged by their parents and teachers to perform well in school, young women not only worked hard, but became consumed by their studies. Margaret Graham, a student at Georgia Female College in the 1840s, felt that she had “to sit up and study every night until nine o’clock, and rise before day in the morning, and study hard all day”⁵⁹ in order to receive a good academic standing. Naomi Elisabeth Layman, a student at Mary Baldwin College in 1860, recorded that “hav[ing] an examination every month and concert every Friday evening” kept her so busy studying that she had no time to respond to a friend’s letter.⁶⁰ A Miss McAhley of Brahamville College also noted that she “had little free time, but that she really enjoyed what she was doing.”⁶¹

While parents encouraged their daughters to study hard and perfect their accomplishments simply in order to enhance their current social status, college students discovered more in their studies than mere refinement; in the midst of obeying parents’ instructions to devote themselves to their studies, young women found personal satisfaction and independence. Noting the satisfaction she received from her college training, Rebecca Felton noted that her college experience “was a great and appreciated opportunity” in which she had a “Royal time” because “she had shared the first honor with a classmate, read a valedictory essay,

⁵⁹ Margaret Graham to Frances Graham, Nov. 5, 1842, William P. Graham Papers, SHC, Wilson Library, UNC, as quoted by Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 55.

⁶⁰ As quoted by Mary Watters, “The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942,” (PhD diss., Mary Baldwin College, 1942), 60, Internet Archive, http://www.archive.org/stream/historyofmarybal00watt/historyofmarybal00watt_djvu.txt.

⁶¹ Jane H. Pease and William Henry Pease, *Ladies, Women and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 83.

and played time and again during the commencement exercises on piano and guitar.”⁶² While attending Edgeworth Female Seminary, Bessie Lacy wrote to her father that she “love[d] to have a heap to do” because “it ma[de] [her] feel so busy, and so consequential.”⁶³ Similarly, Sarah Lois Wadley noted that she had “been studying steadily” ever since school commenced and felt that being in school “seem[ed] natural” and “ma[de] [her] feel happier.”⁶⁴ Mary Norcott Bryan recalled that “the most delightful experience, (which had made up for anything bad that had gone before [in her life],)” took place during her school days, wherein she could gain an education by listening to “great speeches” and visiting art galleries.⁶⁵

In the midst of finding personal satisfaction in their studies, female students cultivated a culture of academic rivalry and formed new identities not only as learned ladies, but as competitive persons. Instead of fulfilling the ladylike ideal of placing others ahead of themselves, and believing that “college honors [were] but worth little in themselves,” students continuously aimed to gain public recognition for their personal academic standing.⁶⁶ Highlighting the competitive nature of southern students, Anya Jabour notes how Emma Shannon, a student from Vicksburg, Mississippi wrote that “only one girl ‘got all nines,’” the best mark in her class and she had wished it was hers.⁶⁷ Similarly, Wesleyan college student Olin Davis wrote to her brother announcing the news that “[this] past week I have seven [a very high mark] on all my studies and I hope that I will do the same through the next seven weeks.”

⁶² Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth*, 71.

⁶³ Bessie Lacy to her father, as quoted by Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 94.

⁶⁴ Sarah Lois Wadley, Diary, January 25, 1862, SHC, accessed January 1, 2012, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/Imls/wadley/wadley.html>.

⁶⁵ Mary Norcott Bryan, *A Grandmother's Recollections of Dixie* (New Bern, NC: Owen G. Dunn Printer, 1912), 43.

⁶⁶ Davis, “Address Delivered before the Young Ladies of Greensboro Female College, 14th May 1856,” 15.

⁶⁷ Emma Shannon as quoted by Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 56.

However, she added that “her report was not perfect when compared with one of the other girls in her class who ‘got 93. . . the highest numbers which any got.’”⁶⁸ Elizabeth Allston Pringle noted her rivalry with classmate Sara White, writing that White “kept [her] always at the greatest strain in arithmetic, history, and diction classes,”⁶⁹ and that she therefore “had to work hard if [she] wanted to keep up”⁷⁰ with this girl who “had been taught by her father like a boy” and was, in Pringle’s estimation, “the best girl in the class.”⁷¹ Highlighting the satisfaction college students gained from academic competition, one student admitted that one of the reasons she loved to study was because she could use it to show off.⁷²

Classmate rivalry over grades climaxed in the contention over class ranks. A student at Greensboro Female College, Mary Beall, wrote to her brother that “there seems to be a universal ambition existing among the girls in College to receive first honors at the commencement . . . I am going to try mighty hard to get the first honor.”⁷³ Louisiana Burge noted that to be awarded second honour (below her fellow classmate Flossie Stevens) was “more mortifying than receiving no honour at all” and declined being recognized for the title.⁷⁴ One student was so

⁶⁸ Olin Davis as quoted by Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 56.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Allston Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 127.

⁷⁰ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 126.

⁷¹ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 127.

⁷² Eliza to Laura Nelson Covert, Apr. 1, 4, 1836, South Carolina Female Collegiate Institute Collection, South Carolinian Library, USC, as quoted by Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 102.

⁷³ Mary Beall as quoted by Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 98.

⁷⁴ Louisiana Burge, “Diary of Louisiana Burge, 1861-1862,” microfilm, May 30, 1861, June 30, 1861, July 10, 1861, Burge family papers, 1832-1952, Atlanta, as quoted by Pearl J. Young in “‘Genius uncultivated is like a meteor of the night’: Motives and Experiences of Methodist Female College Life in the Confederate States of America” *Methodist History* 47, no.3 (April 2009): 186.

consumed with placing first that she needed to be reminded “not [to] allow [her]self to be [as] excited at this examination as [she] w[as] at the last.”⁷⁵

The satisfaction and independence students discovered in academics and scholarly competition culminated in their establishing clubs wherein they could both exploit learning opportunities and resources, and display their own intelligence. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, female students established literary societies, clubs focused on the intellectual improvement of their members and the making of learned women. Meeting weekly or bi-weekly, society members not only collected and catalogued books and magazines into society libraries, but organized student presentations and debates. Typically, meetings would begin with an essay presentation given by a member and this presentation was then followed by other members’ critiques of the essay. As Mary Kelley notes in her work on these societies, members debated popular social issues, ranging from topics on the best economic systems to women’s rights.⁷⁶ These societies provided students with both the opportunity to expand their learning by conversing openly with one another and offered a space for women to display their academic prowess and compete in heated scholarly discussion. In many ways, then, literary societies encouraged students to further develop their newfound identities as learned women.⁷⁷

While forming new identities as competitive learners while at college, female students embraced a culture of exclusion similar to the one parents assured women was appropriate for “ladies” and thereby reinforced a traditional gender ideal at the same time that they challenged others. Rather than viewing all female students as scholarly sisters, female students drew lines

⁷⁵ Louisiana Burge, “Diary of Louisiana Burge, 1861-1862,” as quoted by Young, ““Genius uncultivated is like a meteor of the night’,” 186.

⁷⁶ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 128.

⁷⁷ Mary Kelley, “Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 403.

between those deemed the most intelligent and those deemed less so. That students exercised exclusion based on academic standing is especially obvious in the way that literary societies included and excluded individuals based on their academic standing. Two of the most documented college literary societies, the Sigourney Club at Limestone Springs High school in South Carolina, and the Sigourney Club at Greensboro Female College in North Carolina, admitted members and selected presidents and secretaries based on academic ranking.⁷⁸ Rather than being open to anyone who wished to read and debate, membership into these literary societies came by invitation only. One bright student mentioned that she learned of her being invited to join a club when “one of the scholars handed [her] a note,” a method of invitation that highlights its formality.⁷⁹ Another student expressed hurt and feelings of ostracism when she was not asked to join.⁸⁰ Thus, while the literary societies college women founded supposedly were focused chiefly on advancing intellectual development, the exclusive manner in which they admitted members demonstrates that not all young women benefitted equally from the academic life fostered within collegiate culture. In a sense, then, female students bought into the idea that one of the imperatives of the southern “lady” was to distance oneself from inferiors, only they did so using academics, rather than refinement, as a measure to do so.

That college women created a hierarchy based on academic ability while at college is not surprising given that they were encouraged to do so not only by their parents, but by the very structure of broader southern society.⁸¹ While hierarchy itself was not only a southern

⁷⁸ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 128; Kelley, “Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America,” 401-407.

⁷⁹ Mary Kelley, “‘A More Glorious Revolution’: Women’s Antebellum Reading Circles and the Pursuit of Influence” *The New England Quarterly* 76, no.2 (June 2003): 171.

⁸⁰ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 84.

⁸¹ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 154.

convention, it played an especially important social function in the South because it was a society built upon the institution of slavery. As Edward Pessen notes, one of the distinguishing features of the South was its propensity to stratify society so that each person knew that his or her “proper” place was not only based on class, but also race and gender.⁸² Ensuring that each individual maintained his or her race, class, and gender-based position within society was important in the South because having one individual step out of his or her place could usurp slavery, and thus the very foundation of southern society. Because a hierarchical structure was so important to maintaining slavery, southerners did not scorn aristocracy in the same way as northerners did, but rather maintained and justified a society built upon stratification. That this is so is evident even in the different goals and curricula offered at northern and southern women’s colleges. While southern colleges worked to refine young women into ladies, northern colleges scorned shaping women into “useless” aristocrats and worked only to make women “useful.”⁸³ In a society, then, that imbedded such meaning in social positions, proving one’s superiority over others was imperative to maintaining and/or advancing one’s societal standing.

By modeling southern society in their cultivating a culture of academic hierarchy, students paradoxically subverted their power at the same time that they established it. While seeking identities as competitive, learned students challenged southern gender ideals, forming academic societies that were exclusive reflected the convention that the southern lady distance herself from those she deemed inferior and unable to advance her position. Thus, the stratification that accompanied the academic life of the college ultimately subverted any notions

⁸² Edward Pessen, “How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?” *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 5 (1980): 1136.

⁸³ See Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts upon Female Education* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1787) and Emma Willard, *Mrs. Willard’s Plan for Improving Female Education* (Middlebury, VT: S.W. Copeland, 1819).

of total and egalitarian female empowerment and reinforced a defining feature of the southern lady.

As an analysis of student's recollections of their learning experiences makes clear, the value of the academic life cultivated at southern women's colleges cannot be assessed based solely on the ambitions and purposes of college authorities. For while those in authority may have intended for women's education to simply shape young women into refined ladies, exposure to academic study enabled college women to challenge the limited identities prescribed to them through their education. Thus, the role of academics in college women's lives should not be underestimated.⁸⁴ At the same time, however, the role of academics in southern women's lives should not be assumed to have benefitted all women equally, for while academics played a powerful role in enabling some students to garner independence and personal satisfaction, this empowerment also fostered exclusion, and was used to stratify the world of the college. Through the cultivation of an academic culture, therefore, female students exerted their own agency in shaping their educations. This academic culture, with all its complexities and ironies, reminds contemporary readers that, while southern women lived in a patriarchal society, they exerted agency, and not only in challenging southern power structures, but also in endorsing them.

⁸⁴ In her assertion that college women cared more for gossip, fashion, and social events than their studies, Farnham implies that southern women cared little about academic achievement. See Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 120.

CHAPTER TWO

“We Live for Each Other”: Female Friendship at Women’s Colleges

In the same way that the collegiate culture cultivated at women’s colleges enabled students to both challenge and uphold the gender ideals espoused through their education by allowing them to take on identities as learned and competitive students, it played a similarly empowering role in women’s social lives while at college. For while those in authority at women’s colleges worked to reinforce women’s identities as daughters, wives, and mothers, the peer culture that developed at colleges, and in particular the friendships that were formed, challenged the notion that women were defined primarily by their connection to family. At the same time that the friendships women formed at college challenged the societal convention that women’s identities were intimately connected to family, however, these friendships nonetheless also reflected the hierarchical nature of southern society. Thus, while the peer culture that developed at women’s colleges challenged southern gender ideals and inspired a form of female empowerment, this power was not devoid of southern hierarchy nor equally distributed to all female students.

As early nineteenth-century sources reveal, southern society defined the ideal woman not only as one who was refined and cultivated, but also as one intimately connected to her family.¹ According to popular southern advice literature, such as *The Lady’s Magazine* and *Godey’s Lady’s Magazine*, women’s roles included that of nurturer, caretaker, and being the moral center of the family.² In order to fulfill her role within the family, the southern woman was expected to

¹ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South*, 61.

² Angela Boswell, “Constructing an Ideal Southern Lady,” in *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives: Women in American History*, ed. Kriste Lindenmeyer (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2000), 121.

be “pious, pure, domestic, and submissive.”³ Defined by their gendered status, southern females were raised according to the expressed belief that their identities were linked with their status as daughters, wives, and mothers; since the family served as the “fulcrum of social order. . . a young woman was not merely a future lady and wife but a daughter who must continually share in her family’s reciprocal duties.”⁴ That women’s identities were defined by their connections to family is not surprising given the distinct clan-based nature of the South. As a society built on an agrarian economy, in which most people lived in rural areas and participated in household production, the South was a region where family, clan, and community were viewed as the “main source of the individual’s standing and sense of self.”⁵

Because southern ideology stipulated that women’s identities were connected to the southern household, it is not surprising that, as transmitters of southern values, women’s colleges were established not only to shape young women into refined persons, but to do so for a more ultimate purpose: to prepare them to fulfill their prescribed destinies within the domestic realm as daughters, wives, and mothers. Within the southern context, women’s colleges acted as places that socialized women so that they would take their place within, and connect their identities to, the household and thus uphold the established societal structure.

That women’s colleges were established in order to reinforce women’s primary identities as female members of families is most evident in authorities’ justifications and stated aims for women’s education. While the formal curricula offered at women’s colleges was rigorous in such

³ Boswell, “Constructing an Ideal Southern Lady,” 121. Additionally, Barbara Welter cites these four qualities (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity) as the “four cardinal virtues of True Womanhood” in her “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 152.

⁴ Stowe, “The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy,” 92.

⁵ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South*, 3.

a way that it was comparable to men's education during the period,⁶ women were reminded that their educations served a drastically different purpose than their male counterparts. Looking to advance women's higher education in the antebellum period, Daniel Chandler noted that "there seems to be no reason why the education of women should be less perfect than that of the other sex," but qualified his promotion of women's education by "admit[ting] that the spheres in which they [men and women] respectively move, and the duties which it is the peculiar province of each to perform, are essentially different."⁷ Similarly justifying the education of women, George Howe argued that women's education, "except that some greater portion of it may well be devoted to those accomplishments which give a finish and perfection to a well educated woman," should "substantially be the same as that of men." However, Howe underlined that "[women] will of course pursue it with a view to the station [they] [are] to occupy, and give precedence to those parts which will most avail [them] there."⁸ Thus, a woman was to be educated, but only "with reference to her sphere of action and her mission."⁹

In contrast to men, the "sphere of action" for which women were educated was not a public one. In his *Daughters in School*, R.W. Bailey reminded his daughters of the sphere for which women's education prepared them, writing "I would not have you become politicians nor affect to volunteer grave opinions on political subjects . . . A lady may appear amicable and modest in manifesting an interest in everything which affects the public weal, but always

⁶ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 67.

⁷ Daniel Chandler, "An Address on Female Education" (Washington, GA: William A. Mercer, 1835), as printed in *The Southern Literary Journal and Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1, ed. by Daniel Whitaker (Charleston: J.S. Burges, 1835), 279.

⁸ George Howe, *The Endowments, Position, and Education of Woman: an Address Delivered before the Hermans and Sigourney Societies of the Female High School at Limestone Springs, July 23, 1850*, 15.

⁹ Herschel V. Johnson as quoted by Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South*, 258.

awkward and beyond her sex when debating the principles of politics or mingling in party feuds.”¹⁰ Samuel Talmage thought it so important to remind women of the gendered purpose of their education that he “deeply regret[ed] that the term *college* had been transferred to female institutions, as it almost necessarily tend[ed] to serious practical errors.”¹¹ According to Talmage, “in carrying out the idea of a college . . . [southerners] were in danger of forgetting that females are not to be educated to become men; that domestic, and not public life, is their destined theatre of action.” Indeed, George Howe summarized the goal of women’s education well in his statement that “it is that she may better succeed . . . in those situations in which Providence shall place her, that we would have her cultivate her mind: that she may be a better daughter, sister, mother, wife, and that in all duties which these relations call on her to perform.”¹²

Women’s colleges worked to prepare women for the domestic sphere by reminding them that their education equipped them to be good wives, mothers, and daughters. Since a southern lady’s identity was tied to her family, one of the most important lessons college could teach her was how to attract and satisfy an ideal husband. The primary persons whom women were meant to bring happiness to through a rigorous education were husbands.¹³ A woman took courses in English literature, History, Geography, and other fields so that she was “capable of so entering

¹⁰ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 235.

¹¹ Talmage, “A Proper Early Training and its Priceless Value: a Discourse Delivered in the Chapel of the Greensboro Female College, June 23d, 1853”, 6.

¹² Howe, *The Endowments, Position, and Education of Woman*, 15. Similar claims are made by Elias Marks, *Hints upon Female Education* (Columbia, SC: Isaac C. Morgan, 1837), 37, Internet Archive, accessed November 24, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/details/hintsonfemaleedu00mark>.

¹³ See Chapter One: “Receiving Second Honor is More Mortifying than Receiving No Honor at All’: Academic Life at Women’s Colleges,” 10.

into her companion's views as to harmonize with him in feeling and interest."¹⁴ Encouraging female students attending Greensboro Female College to use their educations to "cheer, adorn, and make happy the homes of good men,"¹⁵ lecturer George Davis employed an historical illustration to argue that women's education suited women to be more companionable wives:

An intelligent chief of the Cherokees some time since remarked, that when they first settled in their western home, in their efforts for improvement they pursued a mistaken policy--they educated their boys, and neglected their girls. And when the boys grew to be men, and could find none but stupid, ignorant, and slatternly women to associate with, and to marry, their education did not prevent them from becoming lazy, dissipated, and worthless. But now they have discovered their error--had learned that the only safeguard against these vices was to give them intelligent, virtuous, and happy homes,--and by educating their girls, were making them both a reward and a spur to the boys. This is true wisdom. For it is founded in a knowledge of our nature.¹⁶

Davis went on to remind Greensboro students that,

It is not demanded, nor even desired of you that you should become luminaries of learning in abstract science, whether of nature or mind . . . I hardly know which is less desirable for a life-companion. She who dwells perpetually in commonplace, never rising above the household drudgery, never aspiring to a generous sentiment, and always entertaining her husband or her guests with the price of butter, or with wonderful stories of the children, the pantry, or the poultry yard--or she who lives continually among the stars, looking down with lofty disdain upon the essentials of every day comfort and happiness, scorning all useful things as too mean for her dainty touch, and never descending lower than Humboldt's *Cosmos* or Newton's *Principia*. I would have you shun the one as the plague, and the other as leprosy;--I would have you neither breathing machines, nor erudite professors, neither stupid blunderers, nor learned pundits; but intelligent, thinking, useful women . . . ready, as occasion may demand, with equal excellence to make a salad, or criticise a book--ministering with like benefit to the bodily comforts, and the intellectual pleasures of those about you--yet never evincing a consciousness of superiority, never playing Sir Oracle, never showing that you supposed yourselves born for any other destiny than to be "a help meet for man."¹⁷

Furthermore, in addition to shaping young women into highly desirable marriage partners, women's education could prepare women for their predestined roles as mothers. While

¹⁴ Gladney, *Essays on Female Education*, 10.

¹⁵ Davis, "Address Delivered before the Young Ladies of Greensboro Female College," 13.

¹⁶ Davis, "Address Delivered before the Young Ladies of Greensboro Female College," 18-19.

¹⁷ Davis, "An Address Delivered before the Young Ladies of Greensboro Female College," 10-11.

the ideology of republican motherhood--the idea that women needed to be educated because they raised the sons and daughters of the next generation--did not have as powerful a role in the South as it did in the North, it did play a part in the advancement of southern women's education.

Though noting that "woman is not like man to be trained for public life," Samuel Talmage justified the advancement of women's education by claiming that woman has "the responsible work of giving the first impulse to the human character, of touching the springs of life, and communicating impressions that will never cease to act."¹⁸ Similarly, an address presented to the citizens of Augusta County, Georgia claimed that woman "should possess a cultivated intellect" because it is her "who unfolds and cultivates the first buds of intelligence in man."¹⁹ In order to "discharge the arduous and responsible duties" of her station, it was believed that women "must know and intimately the physical, intellectual, and moral nature of the being she educates."²⁰ Courses in psychology could help women to manage their children,²¹ courses in literature could enable mothers to "give a correct and elevated literary taste to her children,"²² and courses in religion could enable women to train their children in "the principles of the true philosophy."²³ Not only was higher education meant to prepare women to serve as "the presiding genius of love in the home" by teaching her to "assume that influential station that she ought to possess as the companion of an educated man,"²⁴ but it was also intended to train her so that she could "form

¹⁸ Talmage, "A Proper Early Training and its Priceless Value," 20.

¹⁹ As quoted by Mary Watters, "The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942," 18.

²⁰ Bailey as quoted by Watters, "The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942," 17.

²¹ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 220.

²² *The Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of the Young Ladies' Seminary and Collegiate Institute* (Monroe City, MO: 1855), 18-19, as quoted by Barbara Welter in "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," 168.

²³ Watters, "The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942," 17.

the national taste, opinions, principles and morals” of the next generation.²⁵ That female students understood these intended goals of their education is clear in reminiscences like New Orleans citizen Eliza Moore Chinn McHatten Ripley’s. Describing women’s college experiences in the antebellum period, Ripley noted “the miscellaneous education we girls of seventy years ago in New Orleans had access to, culminated by fitting us for housewives and mothers, instead of writers and platform speakers, doctors and lawyers—suffragettes.”²⁶

In addition to reminding women that their educations were intended to prepare them for their roles within the domestic realm as wives and mothers, those in authority at women’s colleges worked to reinforce women’s identities as linked to family by using school practices to strengthen already-existent family ties. In his essay, “The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy: Elite Women’s Education and Family Feeling in the Old South,” Steven Stowe notes how practices in college life were intended to foster familial ties between female students and their families. Among these practices were stern parenting tactics and close control of students’ behaviour.²⁷ When teaching and disciplining students, instructors used what Stowe calls “family rhetoric,” employing titles such as “my child” when referring to students.²⁸ That family rhetoric was adopted by college authorities is evidenced in the way female colleges advertised themselves. In a number of school advertisements, the teachers and principals of colleges were described as surrogate parents. An Athens Female College catalogue noted that “the discipline of

²⁴ *The Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of the Young Ladies’ Seminary and Collegiate Institute*, 168.

²⁵ Marli Frances Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-1880* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 62.

²⁶ Eliza Moore Chinn McHatten Ripley, *Social Life in New Orleans: Being Recollections of my Girlhood* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 10.

²⁷ Stowe, “The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy,” 94.

²⁸ Stowe, “The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy,” 92.

the School will be mild and parental,”²⁹ and others promised that the number of students taken in would be limited so that each student could be looked after in a parental fashion.³⁰ A Montgomery seminary assured that its “pupils will always be under the immediate supervision of the Principal or his Lady and will be regarded as members of the family.”³¹ A circular issued by Harmony Female College insisted that “pupils live not as boarders, but as daughters” as in “a private family.”³² These promises made by individual colleges assured parents like R.W. Bailey, who demanded that the government of the colleges his daughters attended be “parental,”³³ that female students would not forget their connections to family and learn lessons in insubordination while at college.³⁴

Serving as surrogate parents, college authorities outlined strict codes of conduct and daily schedules for students to adhere to. For example, one school outlined its rules stating that “no boarding pupil is permitted [to] spend a night away from Madame Tongo’s house, nor will any young lady be permitted to go out in the evening or attend places of public amusement with friends or visitors, unless she holds a written request to do so, signed by a Parent or Guardian.”³⁵ Such rules guarding against young women leaving college premises were not uncommon.

²⁹ Athens Female College, *Second Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of Athens Female College at Athens, Tennessee (July 5, 1860)*, 14.

³⁰ “Advertisement for Mme. Demings’ Boarding School,” *Charleston City Gazette* 12687 (January 12, 1820), 4, as quoted in Erin Ludwick, “Charleston Girl’s Boarding Schools in the Nineteenth Century” (Honors Thesis, University of North Carolina, 2007), 7.

³¹ *Catalogue of Pupils at Hamner Hall, a Seminary for Young Ladies, Montgomery, Ala.*, 5.

³² Harmony Female College, *Circular of Harmony Female College, Sumter Mineral Springs, South Carolina, for 1859*, 8-9.

³³ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 156.

³⁴ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 157.

³⁵ “Advertisement for Mme. Rosalie Acelie Guillou Tongo’s Boarding School 1855” South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, as quoted in Ludwick, “Charleston Girl’s Boarding Schools in the Nineteenth Century,” 7.

Catalogues issued by Athens Female College, Greenville Women's College, and Mary Baldwin College all outlined strict stipulations regarding women's comings and goings from campus.³⁶

Expressing frustration with all of the rules she endured while at college, Naomi Elisabeth Layman, a student at Mary Baldwin College in the late antebellum period, wrote to a friend, "Mr. Tinsley is very strict with us indeed. I declare they have so many rules that I am almost afraid to turn around for fear of breaking some of them . . . I would just like to see some girl here go outside without Miss Miller with her."³⁷

In addition to stern parenting tactics, college authorities reinforced young women's identities as tied to family by "formally structuring a woman's obligation to her parents" by forcing her to write letters home.³⁸ Living at a time when letter-writing served as a primary form of communication and means of showing affection, female students' written correspondence with parents was viewed as affirming their filial duty. As Stowe helpfully notes, "the overriding theme in parents' letters was the bond of family love and its proof in writing, which tied generations of daughters ever more firmly to family and home. There is comparatively little in parents' letters to suggest that daughters would ever love or owe more to anyone else."³⁹ Confirming this, one father wrote to his daughter saying that he had received her "sweet affectionate letter" and that he valued and looked forward to her "ever welcome letters as proof of affection."⁴⁰ Similarly, Stevens wrote to his granddaughter Primrose that "I shall always be

³⁶ Athens Female College, *Second Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of Athens Female College at Athens, Tennessee (July 5, 1860)*, 15; Greenville Woman's College, *Catalogue of the Trustees, Faculty, and Students of the Greenville Baptist Female College* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Baptist Female College, 1857), 13, accessed November 10, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/details/catalogueoftrust00gree>; Watters, "The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942," 34.

³⁷ Naomi Elisabeth Layman as quoted by Watters, "The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1962," 61.

³⁸ Stowe, "The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy," 94.

³⁹ Stowe, "The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy," 96.

happy in receiving a letter from you and of course will rejoice at hearing of your welfare and improvement.”⁴¹

While the administrators of women’s colleges intended to reinforce female students’ identities as tied to family, the student culture cultivated at female colleges, and in particular the culture of friendship that developed at colleges, challenged the idea that women were defined primarily by their link to family. Not only did female students rarely refer to their teachers and principals as “father” or “mother,” they acknowledged that the primary relationships in their lives while at college were those with their peers. By immersing students in young, female communities wherein students were directed to spend quality time with desk mates, meal mates, roommates, and walking partners, southern colleges inadvertently provided a space and time in which young women could replace family connections with peer relationships and, in doing so, redefine their identities. In the words of Barbara Solomon, “being young together created bonds that removed college girls from adults” and inspired them to “care more for the approval of classmates” than anything else.⁴² As Stowe’s study of southern college students makes clear, female students’ letters of correspondence and diary entries “revealed that the most important things they [female students] were learning concerned life within the sisterhood apart from both childhood and future home.”⁴³ Rather than expressing their filial duty to their parents in their letters, female students filled their letters with news on their newfound female friendships.

⁴⁰ Stowe, “The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy,” 96.

⁴¹ Stephens, Letter to Mary Ann Primrose, November 7, 1841, SHC.

⁴² Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 98. In addition to Barbara Solomon’s *In the Company of Educated Women* and Steven Stowe’s “The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy,” Anya Jabour argues that young college women prized relationships with both friends and teachers over connections to family in her “‘College Girls’: The Female Academy and Female Identity in the Old South” in *“Lives Full of Struggle and Triumph”: Southern Women, Their Institutions, and Their Communities*, ed. Bruce L. Clayton and John A. Salmond (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 74-92.

⁴³ Stowe, “The Not-So-Cloistered Female Academy,” 96.

Students' concern with friendship was so intense that some family members wrote to their daughters, sisters, and nieces pleading with them to concentrate less on friendship and more on preparing themselves for their future roles as wives and mothers. Writing to his daughter Mary who was attending Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia, Dr. Sanders warned "you must not let your love for your friend induce you to talk too much and neglect your studies."⁴⁴

Despite the fact that female friendships were of utmost importance to young women while attending college, an analysis of the "sisterhoods" formed at college reveals that female bonding was not altogether inclusive; no one sisterhood emerged based on the reality that women shared something in common simply because of their gendered status. Rather, female students formed exclusive relationships and defined their status within student life according to these relationships. That students revelled in exclusive relationships is illustrated by the number, and seriousness attributed to, the "intimate" and "romantic" friendships that developed at college. Immersed in the early nineteenth-century's "female world of love and ritual,"⁴⁵ while at college young women sought the affections of those of their own sex.⁴⁶ According to Anya Jabour, "romantic friendships were an important aspect of school life in the Old South."⁴⁷ Jabour notes how Lucy Catherine Moore Capehard, a student of North Carolina's St. Mary's School in the 1850s, viewed it as custom "for schoolgirls to have sweethearts among their own sex." "[Her] sweetheart was Ellen Brent Pearson," whom she was "supremely happy" just to "get a smile or

⁴⁴ Dr. Sanders to Mary Sanders, March 22, 1862. As recorded by Young in "'Genius uncultivated is like a meteor of the night,'" 186.

⁴⁵ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1-30.

⁴⁶ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 72.

⁴⁷ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 71.

glance from.”⁴⁸ Like Capehard, other students also noted their affections for their “sweethearts,” documenting their interactions with their “darlings,” “loves,” and “adored,”⁴⁹ and recording the notes and gifts of candy, flowers, and jewellery they received from their partners.⁵⁰ Through students’ recollections like these, it becomes clear that in the midst of being separated from their families and plantations, young women sought intimate friendships with their peers, in particular their roommates. Living as a student at Greensboro Female College in the 1850s, Mary Beall expressed her love and devotion towards her roommates by describing them as “three of the most amiable and good girls [she] kn[e]w.”⁵¹ Similarly, Ella Gertrude Thomas noted her attachment to her roommates Susie Snider and Huss Hill, writing, “Oh, I love the girls!”⁵² and Priscilla Larkin exclaimed her deep love for her friend Ella whose leaving “left a vacancy in [Larkin’s] social circle that could not be replaced” and made Larkin “feel lost--specially at night when [she] had no one to clasp [her] arms around.”⁵³

While many female students found love and support in intimate and romantic friendships at college, the exclusive nature of these friendships meant that not every student shared equally in the joys of such sisterhood. Not only did students reveal the exclusivity of their friendships in their communicating in secret languages⁵⁴ and participating in rivalries over sweethearts,⁵⁵ they

⁴⁸ Lucy Catherine Moore Capehard as quoted in Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 71.

⁴⁹ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 155-56; Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 74.

⁵⁰ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 71; Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 85.

⁵¹ Mary Beall to Brother, 29 November 1849, Harper-Beall Family Papers, 1830-1914, microfilm, SHC, Wilson Library, UNC.

⁵² Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 83.

⁵³ Miss Priscilla Larkin, *The Civil War Diary of a Southern Belle*, 13, Internet Archive, accessed January 2, 2012, <http://www.archive.org/details/PriscillaLarkinTheCivilWarDiaryOfASouthernBelle>.

⁵⁴ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 74.

made clear that they were selective in choosing friends. Underlining the selective manner in which she chose friends, Elizabeth Allston Pringle, a student at Madame Tongo's academy in South Carolina, noted that she was "greatly surprised when [she] found [her]self devoted to her [classmate Ruth Nesbitt] because she "cared for so few" despite the fact that she "constantly had girls devoted to [her] whose advances [she] barely endured."⁵⁶ Sarah Lois Wadley likewise made note of the fact that "there [were] few whom [she] love[d]."⁵⁷

The exclusive manner in which young women formed intimate friendships meant that not all college students found it easy to make friends. Documenting her college experience throughout the 1850s, Susan McDowall frequently noted her feelings of loneliness in the absence of finding intimate friendships and, consequently, peer acceptance. Noting that "the girls here seem to think, that if you love more than one girl, you are fickle or you do not love anyone," McDowall eagerly sought intimate friendships with fellow college students.⁵⁸ However, while McDowall worked diligently to find "some fond friend to whom [she] could confide [her] sorrows and troubles,"⁵⁹ her unpopularity made this journey a very difficult one. When held up in her room for days because of illness, not even McDowall's roommates attended to her.⁶⁰ As Jabour notes, McDowall was obviously insecure about her social status, as is evident in her wish that she "could for one moment take a peep into the hearts of many, and see how [she] [was]

⁵⁵ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 73.

⁵⁶ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 183.

⁵⁷ Wadley, *Diary*, 31 August 1862.

⁵⁸ Susan McDowall as quoted by Jabour in *Scarlett's Sisters*, 72.

⁵⁹ McDowall as quoted by Jabour in *Scarlett's Sisters*, 72.

⁶⁰ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 147.

liked.”⁶¹ Indeed, the types of friendships that some female students benefitted so deeply from proved, because of their exclusive nature, to be quite oppressive for others. Young women being “quite particular in their selection of their closest friends, distinguishing between mere classmates and ‘intimate friends’”⁶² created a culture wherein it was “through practices of inclusion and exclusion [that] young women constructed their position in the social world of the school.”⁶³

A number of factors helped to construct a student’s social position within the world of the college and aided her in establishing intimate friends, but most prominently an individual’s physical appearance and academic prowess contributed to her social standing. A survey of students’ diaries makes clear that physical appearance was highly valued among female students and certainly played a role in determining a young woman’s popularity. In describing fellow classmate Bell Fernandez, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas noted that she “c[ould] not refrain from expressing [her]self with reference to [Fernandez’s] wonderful beauty” and that she had correspondingly “taken quite a fancy to her [Fernandez].”⁶⁴ Similarly implying that physical appearance played a role in her highly selective choosing of friends, Elizabeth Allston Pringle described her new friend Sara White as a “lovely curly-haired, blue-eyed child that looked like an angel and a kitten combined . . . the prettiest and the tiniest” girl in the class.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Pringle noted that she and her fellow classmates ranked who was the most beautiful among

⁶¹ Susan McDowall quoted by Jabour in *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 72.

⁶² Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 72.

⁶³ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 148.

⁶⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 85.

⁶⁵ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 127.

them.⁶⁶ At times working in combination with physical appearance, academic ability also played a role in the selection of friends and the construction of social hierarchies. In addition to noting that her “dear friend” Sara White was pretty, Pringle describes White as “the best girl in the class.”⁶⁷ Likewise, she mentions how her fellow classmates at Madame Tongo’s Academy called her sister “not only the most beautiful but the best girl in school.”⁶⁸

In addition to building intimate, selective friendships with their peers, female students constructed their social standing by creating and participating in what served as the epitome of exclusive sisterhood--college sororities. Founded in the 1850s, the first college sororities grew out of literary and debate clubs and served as what Christie Anne Farnham terms “quasi-student governments.”⁶⁹ College sororities, even though initially advertising themselves as chiefly philanthropic societies, chose members based on individuals’ social standing within the college. The first sorority to have come into existence in the United States--Wesleyan Female College’s Adelphean Society (Alpha Delta Pi) in 1851--promoted itself as a society that “shall have as its object the mental, moral, social, and domestic improvement of its members.”⁷⁰ With its motto being “we live for each other,”⁷¹ the society gives off the impression that it was devoted primarily to friendship and sisterhood; however, the Adelphean society was certainly not inclusive in its selection of members. The founders of the Adelphean society, including Eugenia Tucker Fitzgerald, Ella Pierce Turner, Bettie Williams, Mary Evans, and Octavia Andrew, were

⁶⁶ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 129.

⁶⁷ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 127.

⁶⁸ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 135.

⁶⁹ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 148-149.

⁷⁰ Eugenia Tucker Fitzgerald, Diary Entry May 15, 1851, accessed August 1, 2011, <http://www.alpha.delta-pi.org>.

⁷¹ Fitzgerald, Diary Entry, May 15, 1851.

all women who came from families intimately connected to the college. For example, Pierce Turner's father, Dr. George Foster Pierce, served as the first president of Wesleyan Female College, Evans' father served on the Wesleyan Female College Board of Trustees for forty years, and Andrew's father, Bishop James Andrew, was the ranking member on the original Board of Trustees that started Wesleyan.⁷² Furthermore, that sororities like the Adelphean Society were groups that were selective in choosing their members is evident in the writings of students who were excluded from taking part in them. Writing shortly after the Adelphean Society was created at Wesleyan, Ella Gertrude Thomas initially noted her disappointment and frustration with not being invited to join.⁷³ When later slipped "a unanimous note," which "solicit[ed] that [Thomas] join them," however, Thomas "returned a note respectfully declining" because "to have joined them [she] should have been thrown into too close communion with the girl [she] most dislike[d] in college Leab Goodall."⁷⁴ Goodall was a girl for whom Thomas "felt all those feelings of hatred dislike and contempt" and "struggle[d] to speak to."⁷⁵ Not to be left out or outdone, however, Thomas decided to use her own elite status within the college to create her own sorority. Deciding it was too much effort, however, Thomas quickly abandoned the idea a few days later.

Further confirming the reality that the female friendships formed at college were built upon a hierarchal structure is the fact that sororities rivalled one another to vie for top position in collegiate culture. When the Philomathean Society (Phi Mu), the second sorority to develop at Wesleyan Female College in the 1850s, emerged, it came in direct competition with the

⁷² "Alpha, Delta, Pi Founders," accessed August 15, 2011, <http://www.alphadeltapi.org>.

⁷³ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 84.

⁷⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 85.

⁷⁵ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 86.

Adelphean Society. Students of both sororities worked to have the girls in their own respective societies earn top honours and the privileges of being chosen to make presentations at special events, including at final examinations and graduation ceremonies. Writing from Wesleyan in 1861, Lou Burge, while disappointed to have not received the honour herself, celebrated a Miss Cater's receiving the honour of being the class salutatorian because "she was also a Philomathean."⁷⁶ Additionally highlighting the fact that sororities viewed themselves as in competition with one another is Lou's description of Philomathean contentedness over Adelphean distress: "I must not forget to put down that the Adelphean candles burnt the windows and greatly injured their new carpet; whereas the P's were glad and the A's very angry."⁷⁷ Thus, in addition to female students rivalling for the attention of particular individual females in order to confirm their social standing within student life, sororities also rivalled one another for top position in the college.

Female students' cultivation of a culture of social rivalry and hierarchy at college is understandable given the hierarchal nature of southern society. Commenting on the origins of sororities and hierarchal friendship in the South, Farnham writes: "it is not surprising that the first sorority would begin in the slave South, where hierarchy was an integral part of the social fabric and distancing oneself from social inferiors was an imperative of the lady of chivalry."⁷⁸ As a slave society, the South depended upon a hierarchal structure that sought to maintain elite white male power. Of course, at the same time that this hierarchal structure empowered this demographic, it oppressed others to varying degrees.

⁷⁶ Lou Burge as quoted by Young, "'Genius Uncultivated is like a Meteor in the Night'," 188.

⁷⁷ Burge as quoted by Young in "'Genius uncultivated is like a meteor of the night'," 188.

⁷⁸ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 154.

Analyzing the social life that was cultivated at southern women's colleges, and in particular the types of friendships that developed there, reveals not only the ways in which female friendships proved empowering for elite southern women, but also the ways in which they were oppressive. Even though student life was an arena wherein females themselves dictated their own rules and social codes, and thus served as a space wherein young women could challenge the identities prescribed to them by southern society, at times students still chose to reflect the same values as southern society--in this instance, social hierarchy. In a sense, the activity surrounding female friendship at women's colleges was ironic, for at the same time that college students privileged female friends over their family members and thus challenged southern society's definition of womanhood, they upheld a hierarchal structure like the one that worked to reinforce their subordinate status as women in the first place. Thus, even though women's colleges provided southern women a means of control, women used this control to form a social world that, even without patriarchal males, proved itself to be a microcosm of southern society.

That women created their own social worlds wherein they both challenged and upheld southern social conventions challenges interpretations of women's education that portray women's colleges as simply oppressive places that worked to reinforce gender ideals and thus provided women little opportunity for transformation.⁷⁹ When taking into account women's social life while at college, it becomes clear that women exerted agency throughout their college experience. That this agency took at least two forms reveals the complex nature of southern women's identities. The agency that women exerted through collegiate social life reveals two characteristics about these southern women. First, college women's privileging of female

⁷⁹ Lynn Gordon, "From Seminary to University: An Overview of Women's Higher Education, 1870-1920," 474; McMillen, "Education and Religion," 100.

friendship over familial bonds suggests that women, whether consciously or not, in some way must have felt oppressed by southern social conventions and worked in subtle ways to transform them. Even though strict gender ideals like the ones espoused through women's education were meant to reinforce white women's elite status, women's behaviour (acting contrary to ideals) suggests that, while strict gender ideals separated them from "uncivilized" black slaves, these ideals, in practice, were unfulfilling.⁸⁰ Second, at the same time that women may have collectively experienced a form of gender-based oppression, their forming of female friendships in a way that modeled southern society's hierarchism suggests that southern women, while perhaps at times feeling oppressed by their gendered status, did not reject southern social systems altogether. In fact, the exclusive ways in which female students formed friendships suggests that, at least at times, they privileged a certain type of class superiority over gender bonds.⁸¹ This has consequences for interpretations of southern women's history, for it forces interpretations which view southern women as participating in "common bonds of womanhood" --bonds that were based on gender identities alone--to be reassessed. Rather than affirming that southern women acknowledged themselves as victims of a common plight,⁸² an analysis of collegiate social life reveals that, even in a place where women held so much in common,

⁸⁰ See Jacqueline Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) for a description of how white women's privilege was secured through strict constructions of white womanhood and how blacks were denied these strict gender ideals and even gender distinctions because whites used de-gendering as a way to dehumanize.

⁸¹ While all southern women who attended college in the antebellum period were considered of elite status, college women made further distinctions between social classes in their cultivation of collegiate culture. Thus, while perhaps not different in economic and social class more broadly, there remained social distinctions that were defined by collegiate culture.

⁸² A school of interpretation tends to view all southern women as victims of oppression. See, in particular, Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 50-51; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 116; Patricia A. Stringer and Irene Thompson, *Stepping off the Pedestal: Academic Women in the South* (New York: the Modern Language Association of America, 1982), 2.

including being of a similar race, class, and age, one common sisterhood did not exist. Rather, young women formed intimate relationships and groups that “confirmed their superiority as it drew a boundary between itself and those below.”⁸³ Even in a setting where women gained enough independence and power to redefine their identities, this same power prevented them from forming one sisterhood. Thus, college proved itself to be what Helen Horowitz calls a “real society of women”: a place where there was still a “pecking order, exclusion as well as inclusion,” and power and passion.⁸⁴

⁸³ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 154.

⁸⁴ Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s*, xviii.

CHAPTER THREE:
“College Has Been the Means of My Conversion”:
Religious Culture at Women’s Colleges

In the midst of scholarly debates over the value of southern women’s education, religion is often overlooked as a shaping force. The few scholarly analyses that do include the role of religion in women’s higher education assume, like wider interpretations of the history of southern women and religion, that religion was simply an oppressive force in college women’s lives.¹ This interpretation may be substantiated by examinations of institutional records, which highlight the role of evangelicalism in shaping educational ideals, but, as is the case when studying the academic and social cultures that evolved at women’s colleges, an examination of women’s recollections of the religious life on campus presents a more complex story. For while evangelical ideals were often propagated by college authorities to remind women of their roles as pious and submissive persons, this very same evangelicalism that granted young women authority as pious individuals enabled them to challenge the notion that they were passive creatures who were dependent on male authority and allowed them to explore new identities as independent women. At the same time that women’s religious behaviour collectively enabled young women to develop new identities as independent women and challenge southern gender ideals, it also engendered a tension among students that resulted in their upholding of a hierarchal structure like that existent in wider southern society. Thus, rather than simply redefining southern womanhood according to a collective female consciousness, young women’s religious behaviour while at college demonstrates how female students exercised selective identity in a way that reinforced southern gender constructs at the same time that it challenged them.

¹ Few scholars say this directly, but their analyses imply it. See, for example, McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 94; Palmieri, “From Republican Motherhood to Race Suicide: Arguments on the Higher Education of Women in the United States, 1820-1920,” 49-64.

As one of “the cultural engines of the South,”² evangelicalism played a major role in shaping southern gender ideals. Described “as one of the movements that most dramatically affected southern religion,”³ the Second Great Awakening, a spiritual revival which took place approximately between 1790 and 1835, played an influential role in the shaping of antebellum women’s identities, giving rise to what Barbara Welter has termed the “Cult of True Womanhood.”⁴ The evangelical fervour that accompanied the Second Great Awakening shaped woman’s identity in at least two ways. First, women’s active participation in evangelical revivalism spurred the idea that women were by nature a pious sex. Women were heavily involved in revivalism, going out to hear preachers, and then returning home to convert husbands and children.⁵ Furthermore, the Second Great Awakening “attracted far more women than men” and women began to dominate elements of Church life.⁶ Women “constituted the largest increase in church membership” during this period, outnumbering men sixty to forty.⁷ Women’s involvement in the Second Great Awakening, then, reaffirmed the idea that, as guardians of the pure and moral home, women were more naturally disposed towards religion. In her poem “Women’s Progress,” Louisa McCord described southerners’ belief in the “superior devotional

² Donald G. Matthews, “Introduction” in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3.

³ Edward L. Queen, Stephen R Prothero and Gardiner H Shattuck, *Encyclopedia of American Religious History* 3rd ed. (New York: Proseworks, 2009), 941.

⁴ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860”: 151-74.

⁵ Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon, “Protestant Women’s Colleges in the United States” in *The Encyclopaedia of Women and Religion in North America*, vol. 1 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), xxxiv.

⁶ Tina Stewart Brakebill and Celestia Rice Colby, *“Circumstances are Destiny”: an Antebellum Woman’s Struggle to Define Sphere* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 10.

⁷ Victoria Boynton and Jo Malin, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women’s Autobiography: K-Z* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 8.

feeling” of women,⁸ writing, “God hath made A woman-nature holier than the man’s/Purer of impulse, and of gentler mould.”⁹ Similarly, in a sermon delivered to his Greenwood, South Carolina congregation, Brother Lewis M. Ayer proclaimed that women had “keener instincts,” than men and held “intuitive perceptions of moral truth.” According to Ayer, this meant that women would thus “yield the wand of [moral] power” over their more degenerate male counterparts.¹⁰ Embracing a similar line of thought, a writer for the *Southern Quarterly Review* described woman as an “angel of earth” whose moral virtue “exerted such a forcible influence over men” that she was marked with the mission of morally regenerating the world.¹¹

Marked with the mission of regenerating the world because of their superior moral qualities, women bore a heavy responsibility, especially when considering the influence of the Second Great Awakening in cultivating new ideas concerning Christian spirituality. As Curtis Johnson outlines, “the importance of the Second Great Awakening went beyond rising church membership. Old ideas fell into disfavour, and new ones took their place.”¹² Most importantly, Americans became “enthralled by the notion of choice.”¹³ Johnson notes that it is not surprising that “[during the Awakening] predestination (salvation dependent on God’s predetermined decision to send a person to heaven or hell) lost ground, even among Calvinists, as the Methodist

⁸ Dew, “Dissertation on the Characteristic Differences between the Sexes, and on the Position and Influence of Woman in Society, No. 3,” 672.

⁹ Louisa Cheves McCord, “Women’s Progress” *Southern Literary Magazine*, as quoted in John Hollitz, *Thinking through the Past*, vol. I (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2009), 263.

¹⁰ Lewis M. Ayer as quoted by Candace Bailey, *Music and the Southern Belle: from Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2010), 14.

¹¹ As quoted by Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton, *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 169.

¹² Curtis D. Johnson, “‘Sectarian Nation’: Religious Diversity in Antebellum America,” *OAH Magazine of History* 22, no. 1 (January 2008), 15.

¹³ Johnson, “‘Sectarian Nation’: Religious Diversity in Antebellum America,” 15.

and Arminian doctrine of free will (salvation dependent on one's *choice* to accept Jesus as Saviour) carried the day."¹⁴ With the Awakening's new emphasis on personal choice came the notion that salvation was insecure and therefore "an urgency existed among the stalwart to 'get religion.'"¹⁵ Women, with their "superior devotional feelings," bore this responsibility of leading individuals to salvation.¹⁶

Second, in addition to reinforcing the idea that women were naturally pious individuals who bore the responsibility of morally regenerating society, the evangelicalism which accompanied the Second Great Awakening suggested that women were dependent creatures. At the same time that southern evangelicalism granted women power by labelling them moral superiors, then, it also, somewhat paradoxically, reinforced the notion that women were by nature meant to be subordinate to men. In fact, it was women's very moral superiority and proclivity towards spiritual devotion that explained her secondary position. According to nineteenth-century writers, the same quality that enabled woman to be dependent on God made her dependent on man as well. In his famous "Dissertation on the Characteristic Differences between the Sexes," Thomas Dew linked woman's dependence on God with her natural weakness and passivity, writing that, unlike man, who is an active creature, woman "throws her arms into the arms of the divinity and awaits the result . . . she is carried forward by powers that are not hers, by energies that she is unable to control."¹⁷ Similarly, in her 1828 *Letters on Female*

¹⁴ Johnson, "'Sectarian Nation': Religious Diversity in Antebellum America," 15.

¹⁵ Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 35.

¹⁶ Scott Stephan further outlines woman's role as redeemer of the southern family in his work *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Dew, "Dissertation on the Characteristic Differences between the Sexes, and on the Position and Influence of Woman in Society, no. 3," 690.

Character, Virginia Cary wrote that it is “*because of their very physical inferiority and vulnerability that women are superior to men in religiosity.*”¹⁸ Because the same weakness that reminded women of their need for God’s protection placed them in need of man’s protection as well, their position in relation to men was a subordinate one.

Women’s divinely-ordained subordination took on special meaning in the South because of its nature as a slave society. As Marli Frances Weiner notes, the presence of slaves gave “a uniquely southern twist” to the argument for women’s subordination.¹⁹ Constructing woman’s identity as weak and dependent supported the idea of master and servant, an idea upon which southern society rested. According to the existing ideology, all women were like black slaves in that they were inherently weak and in need of protection from white men. In his *Sociology for the South or the Failure of Free Society*, George Fitzhugh argued that women--like children and slaves--had one right, that of protection.²⁰ This protection came at a cost, however: “the obligation to obey.”²¹ This mandatory obedience affirmed that woman’s position was viewed as parallel with that of a slave’s, with “man” being equivalent to both “lord and master.”²² Being in a similar position to slaves, women’s challenge of male authority was akin to challenging the authority of masters, who “were often the same people.”²³ Because of the constructed connection

¹⁸ Virginia Cary as quoted by Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women & Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 14. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-1880*, 71.

²⁰ George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South or the Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1854), 213.

²¹ Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South*, 214.

²² Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South*, 214.

²³ Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 16.

between women and slaves, therefore, it was imperative for white women to accept their “God-given” position in southern society, for upon it rested the very foundation of slavery.²⁴

Because it was imperative for women to fulfill their prescribed roles as pious and dependent individuals, it is not surprising that society sought ways to reinforce these ideals and that the woman’s college emerged as one of the ways to do so. That women’s colleges worked to reinforce women’s identities as pious individuals is evident in a number of ways. First, the stated aims of institutions reveal that one of the main purposes of women’s education was to cultivate women’s piety. The Board of Trustees at Mary Baldwin College announced in their annual address that the college’s “aim [was] first to prepare each child to live in time with a wise reference to eternity.”²⁵ A circular released for Harmony Female College similarly declared that “the religion of Jesus Christ is the best part of all education, the ornament of all ornaments” and therefore would be at the forefront of women’s education,²⁶ and the Board of Elizabeth Academy in Washington, Mississippi justified raising support for its college by arguing that women’s virtue was best guaranteed by education.²⁷ Second, working to fulfill these stated aims, the curriculum and practices followed at women’s colleges reveals that these institutions intended to remind women of their identities as purveyors of piety. The Bible was to be “the first text-book” of the woman’s college,²⁸ the “exercises of each day [were] commenced by reading the Bible and prayer,”²⁹ and students were “required to attend Divine Services on the Sabbath.”³⁰ Not only

²⁴ Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-1880*, 71.

²⁵ As quoted by Watters, “The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942,” 23.

²⁶ Harmony Female College, *Circular of Harmony Female College, Sumter Mineral Springs, South Carolina, for 1859*, 6.

²⁷ Clinton, “Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic,” 48.

²⁸ As quoted by Watters, “The History of Mary Baldwin college, 1842-1942” 22.

were students required to take part in explicitly religious coursework and practices, but they were reminded that every aspect of their education was grounded in religion. As Mary Watters points out in her examination of Mary Baldwin College, women's study of various subjects was justified on religious grounds: geology "because it reveals the glories of God's creation," etymology because it "form[s] the soul for its immortal destiny,"³¹ and astronomy because it cultivated admiration for God's works and gave "rise to a new field of devotion," that was "above the reach of vulgar minds."³² Finally, that college was meant to cultivate piety in female students is clear in parents' letters to their college-attending daughters. Writing to his daughter Lou who was a student at Wesleyan college in the 1850s, Dr. Sanders reminded her that "religion is the most essential, all-important quality of education" and thus that she needed "above all" to "know the Lord Jesus Christ as [her] Saviour," for "this is the highest knowledge, far more precious than rubies or gold."³³ Similarly, R.W. Bailey reminded his daughters that they were "being educated for eternity," and thus, that while in college, they needed to continually ask themselves "What bearing and influence is this to have on my eternal interests?"³⁴ Emerging as a means to prepare young women for their prescribed roles as the redeemers of southern society, therefore, college, with its structured prayer meetings, mandatory Sabbath-observance, and religion-infused classes, offered encouragement in this endeavour.

²⁹ Athens Female College, *Second Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of Athens Female College at Athens, Tennessee (July 5, 1860)*, 14-15.

³⁰ Athens Female College, *Second Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Pupils of Athens Female College at Athens, Tennessee (July 5, 1860)*, 14-15; Greenville Woman's College, *Catalogue of the Trustees, Faculty, and Students of the Greenville Baptist Female College*, 13; Watters, "The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942," 22.

³¹ Watters, "The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942," 22.

³² Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 224.

³³ Sanders, July 15, 1862, as quoted by Young in "'Genius uncultivated is like a meteor of the night': Motives and Experiences of Methodist Female College Life in the Confederate States of America," 11.

Proponents of women's education made clear that the cultivation of women's piety through education was not only meant to ensure the salvation of individual women, but rather to redeem the entire society. While education was intended to prepare women strictly for the home, southern proponents of female education argued that educated women's influence could extend beyond the domestic sphere and into society through women's influence on men. One popular proponent of women's education, R.W. Bailey, suggested that one of the "true reasons" women were to be educated was because they exercised the power to convert family members into Christian believers and thereby transform society. To illustrate his point, Bailey quoted John Randolph, who famously asserted "I should have been an infidel had it not been for the influence exerted on men by my mother, as she taught me to kneel at her side, and fold my little hands and say, 'Our Father who art in heaven,'"³⁵ According to Bailey, it was through witnessing women's piety that husbands were led to "regard [women's] heart[s] as the hallowed depositor[ies] of all that is pure" and, consequently, to look to women's "sense of propriety" to decide what was right for society.³⁶ Furthermore, proponents of female education argued that educated women in particular were in a special position to transform society because of their ability to converse with men on an intellectual level. As Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton point out in their analysis of the *Southern Ladies' Book*, a magazine established in conjunction with the founding of Georgia Female College in the 1830s, proponents of women's education such as George Foster Pierce and Philip Coleman Pendleton believed that women could fulfill their duty of morally regenerating society by leading men up from "gross sensuality" to "the world of the

³⁴ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 11.

³⁵ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 207.

³⁶ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 207.

mind.”³⁷ They could do this, the editors of the *Southern Ladies’ Book* suggested, by getting an education and “bring[ing] [their] ‘magic power to the aid of Literature.’”³⁸ By focusing men’s minds on virtue, women would inadvertently impel men to “produce an authentic southern literature” that would transform society.³⁹

In addition to working to shape young women into pious individuals who were prepared to transform society morally through converting husbands, women’s colleges aimed to reinforce women’s assumedly ordained identities as dependent beings. As mentioned in Chapter Two, women’s colleges employed strict codes of conduct, outlining when and with whom students could leave campus, what they were allowed to buy, and with whom they were able to visit in campus parlours.⁴⁰ What is significant is that it was considered essential for female students to obey the rules set by college authorities not only because this kept order, but because doing so reinforced women’s subordinate position within society. In his *Letters to Daughters at School*, Bailey wrote to his daughters saying that he “require[d] in [their] teachers not only the ability to teach, but [the] authority to govern,”⁴¹ because “the youth who does not regard [her] teacher . . . with the subjection rendered a protector, is not prepared to profit suitably by his instructions” and will “receive lessons of insubordination”⁴² that will cause the pupil to disregard other authority after leaving college--namely, male patriarchs.⁴³

³⁷ Lora and Longton, *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century America*, 169.

³⁸ Lora and Longton, *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century America*, 169.

³⁹ Lora and Longton, *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century America*, 169.

⁴⁰ “Chapter Two: ‘We Live for Each Other’: Female Friendship at Women’s Colleges,” 9.

⁴¹ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 155.

⁴² Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 156.

⁴³ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 157.

Like their counterparts in wider southern society, college women often lived up to their prescribed roles as spiritual beings. Taught that their identities were linked to regenerating the world morally, female students' behaviour suggests that they believed that it was not only their duty to prepare for taking on their roles as redeemers of the home, but also to offer spiritual guidance to one another while at college. That this was the case is most obvious in students' obsession with spiritual revivals and preoccupation with ensuring their classmates' personal salvation. The diary of Ella Gertrude Thomas, a student at Wesleyan Female College in the late 1840s and early 1850s, does a particularly thorough job of describing the culture of piety young women cultivated while at college. Having herself experienced a spiritual conversion during her first few weeks at college,⁴⁴ Thomas demonstrates the general interest college women had in evangelicalism in her chronicling of the "glorious revivals" that took place weekly at Wesleyan, revivals that took place both through formal prayer meetings and more informal student gatherings.⁴⁵

In formal prayer meetings, students expressed their concern that their peers grow spiritually and/or "obtain religion." Thomas notes the frequency and intensity of formal meetings in her journal, recording the number of those converted at each. On 2 February 1849, Thomas writes, "today we had a glorious revival. Sallie Tucker, Victoria Holt, Amy Sparks, Joe Freeman, Lou Warrington, [and] Lou Warner have been converted."⁴⁶ Just four days later, Thomas records another prayer meeting, this time noting that two more of her peers "became converted."⁴⁷ Again, on another occasion, Thomas chronicles a "blessed conversion of souls to God," an event

⁴⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 82.

⁴⁵ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 83-92.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 83-92.

⁴⁷ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 83.

wherein “some [students] found a Saviour for the first time [and] others were reclaimed sheep which had strayed from the fold of the ‘Good Shepperd.’”⁴⁸ This event was followed by another “glorious meeting,” wherein eleven more “obtained religion.”⁴⁹ In all, Thomas notes that more than twenty-two female students were converted through prayer meetings during her short time at Wesleyan.⁵⁰

In addition to expressing concern for peers’ spiritual lives through formal prayer meetings, students worked to inspire religious zeal in their fellow classmates by holding informal gatherings in their rooms and engaging one another in religious conversations. At times, the revivalism that was sparked at formal prayer meetings concluded in students gathering in dorm rooms to continue experiencing “manifestation[s] of God” late into the night.⁵¹ After a Sunday night prayer meeting wherein two girls “became converted,” Thomas “set up with Puss Tinsley all night.”⁵² On other occasions students met in one another’s rooms to witness conversions. Thomas records how she was called to Ria Easterling’s room to witness Easterling being “happy”; Thomas “went in to see and remained hearing the girls sing until eleven.”⁵³ The next day, Thomas spent the afternoon in Bettie William’s room with “a great many girls” who “were seeking religion.”⁵⁴ A few hours later, she “went down to Daughter Solomon’s room to see Bell Fernandez, [who] was perfectly happy lying on the bed and shouting the praises of God.”⁵⁵ That

⁴⁸ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 86.

⁴⁹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 82, 83, 86, 87, 88, 92.

⁵¹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 83.

⁵² Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 83.

⁵³ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87.

⁵⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87.

evening, Thomas joined other students in celebrating classmate Sue Evan's "obtain[ing] religion."⁵⁶

That many students grasped onto their prescribed identities as pious regenerators is especially evident in their concern for their peers who did not show signs of conversion or spiritual growth even when urged to at student gatherings. Thomas pays particular attention in her diary to students whom she deems in need of spiritual conversion and whose salvation she is "anxious" about.⁵⁷ Repeatedly throughout her college years Thomas makes mention of Joe Freeman, a girl whom Thomas "dearly love[s]" and "take[s] a very great interest in," but considers unresponsive to evangelical Christianity.⁵⁸ Describing one particularly exciting evening gathering in Daughter Solomon's room, Thomas notes that "there appeared to be but little feeling on [Joe's] side."⁵⁹ Joe "stood apparently unheeding [their friend] Ella's prayers to kneel," and only knelt when Ella declared that she "would give up her search for religion if Joe would not go on with her."⁶⁰ Astonished by Joe's "invincib[ility]" on this particular evening, Thomas takes the responsibility for Joe's salvation upon herself. A little less than a month after the meeting in Daughter Solomon's room, Thomas pleads with Joe "to go and be prayed for" at church, but Joe would, ultimately, "not be persuaded."⁶¹ While Joe's spiritual state is of primary

⁵⁵ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 88.

⁵⁷ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87.

⁵⁸ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87. It is peculiar that Thomas cites Joe Freeman as one of the girls who was converted on 2 February 1849, but then outlines Freeman's unresponsiveness to Christianity throughout the rest of her journal. Perhaps Thomas believed that Freeman's conversion was not total or genuine, that she had not experienced a second blessing, or that she had lapsed in her faith.

⁵⁹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 88.

⁶⁰ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 88.

⁶¹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 92.

importance to Thomas, Joe is not the only one Thomas shows concern for in her diary. After “talk[ing] with Mary Tucker on the subject of religion,” over dinner one evening, Thomas writes, “How interested I feel for her. How anxious I am with reference to her spiritual welfare.”⁶²

While the detailed attention Thomas gives to the religious activities at Wesleyan is certainly remarkable, the religious culture Thomas describes developing at Wesleyan was not uncommon for women’s colleges generally. Rather, the type of religious culture outlined in Thomas’ diary, a culture which was preoccupied with female students’ spiritual growth and/or conversion, was a common element of the southern woman’s college. Noting the development of a similar religious culture at the school she was attending in the 1850s, Mary Bailey informed her father that “a revival of religion [has] commenced in [our] school [and] many young ladies are anxiously inquiring what they shall do to be saved.”⁶³ According to Mary, “several [of her peers] ha[d] already obtained a hope of pardon,” and she “humbly place[d] her own name in that class.”⁶⁴ In her journal, Susan Nye Hutchison, a teacher at a Raleigh woman’s college, noted that that a “Mrs. Smelt and Mrs. Moore called to see [her],” and that one of them read “a most interesting letter” written by Mr. Davis from Athens [Female College] “descriptive of the revival now going on in the college.”⁶⁵

By concentrating on spirituality while at school, young women fulfilled the expectation that their identities be linked to piety and moral regeneration. At the same time they reinforced the Protestant ideal of the Christian woman, they also, somewhat paradoxically, challenged the

⁶² Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87.

⁶³ Mary Bailey’s letters as described by her father, Bailey, *Daughters at School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 39.

⁶⁴ Bailey, *Daughters at School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 39.

⁶⁵ Susan Nye Hutchison, Journal entry for Nov. 10 1826, SHC, accessed February 10, 2012, http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/h/Hutchison_Susan_Davis_Nye.html.

ideal, for in their very upholding of the image of the pious woman female students exercised an independence that southern evangelicalism did not intend to grant them. Rather than simply adhering to the idea that they be passive and submissive, young women used the authority granted them in religion to be the leaders of their own lives while at college.

In the midst of fulfilling the expectation that they be pious individuals, female students challenged strict rules outlined by colleges. In reading through Thomas's journal it becomes clear that having a focus on peers' spiritual conditions provided students the opportunity to create their own rules and schedules. Numerous entries in Thomas's journal describe how a preoccupation with spirituality became an excuse for neglecting homework and skipping class. Staying up to "hear the girls sing until eleven" during one particularly exciting evening of "glorious revival" hindered Thomas from reading over her lesson.⁶⁶ On another occasion she "ask[ed] Mr. Stone to excuse her from recitation" so that she could go down to Daughter Solomon's room to check on Bell Fernandez, who, she reports, "was perfectly happy lying on the bed shouting the praises of God."⁶⁷ At times attention to religious matters concluded in Thomas both neglecting her homework and thereafter skipping class. Too busy talking to her peers to prepare for her Astronomy class, Thomas "stayed away from recitation and from 11 to 12 was in Fannie Floyd's room talking to her."⁶⁸ Again, a few weeks later, Thomas notes that she "did not attend Dr. Ellison's recitation in Astronomy or Mr. Stone's recitation in Natural Philosophy."⁶⁹ While using religious reasons at times seemed to work at excusing Thomas from classes, eventually her lack of attention to college schedules and rules dissatisfied college authorities. On

⁶⁶ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87.

⁶⁷ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 87.

⁶⁸ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 84.

⁶⁹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 88.

one Wednesday evening Thomas “received the harshest reproof [she] ever did receive” from Mr. Stone, a teacher whose classes Thomas had been repeatedly skipping.⁷⁰

In addition to using their identities as religious persons to neglect homework and skip classes, female students set their own rules and schedules by staying up late and being noisy. Detailing the events of Sue Evans’s evening conversion, Thomas writes, “all [the girls] were shouting and praying and making a good deal of noise when someone said Mr. Myers was coming [down the hallway].” Displeased with the girls’ behaviour, Mr. Myers “requested [them] to come to [their] rooms” and he did this in such a manner that “all [the young women] stopped shouting immediately and left the room.”⁷¹ Rather than paying strict attention to the rules outlined for them, rules which according to parents were intended to remind them of authorities in their lives and thereby prepare them to be submissive later in life,⁷² students used religion as a way to challenge college rules and exercise authority in their own lives.

While female students collectively reshaped female identity by embracing roles as spiritual individuals, there existed a tension within the religious culture students developed that suggests that college women did not view themselves as partaking in a conscious, united female effort to thwart southern gender ideals. Rather, female students’ maintaining of a hierarchal structure even within religious culture suggests that they employed a method of selective identity when defining themselves. That a hierarchal structure based on religious assessment existed at women’s colleges is evident in the very paternal attitude young women adopted in the process of working to convert others. Not only did young women like Thomas attempt to take on an

⁷⁰ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 92. Thomas does not explicitly state that the reason she received a “harsh reproof” from Mr. Stone was because of her skipping his classes, but given that Thomas repeatedly mentions neglecting homework from and skipping this class, it is inferred.

⁷¹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 88.

⁷² Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 156-157.

instructive role in their unconverted friends' lives, but they associated unresponsiveness to Christianity with coldness,⁷³ a characteristic that was deemed unbecoming for young women and was equated, at least by Thomas, with ugliness.⁷⁴ By measuring womanhood according to religious behaviour,⁷⁵ young women reinforced their own individual womanhood while calling into question others' sense of womanhood. And since the extent to which a young woman fulfilled particular gender ideals was a measure of woman's status, affirming one's own womanhood (in this case through displaying pious behaviour) drew lines of superiority and inferiority among female students.

By drawing lines between superiority and inferiority based on religious devotion, female students built hierarchal structures like those encouraged by wider southern society. Relying on an intensely hierarchal structure to sustain society, southerners not only stratified society according to economic class and race, but classified individuals in every respect--including according to religious standards. In fact, as is evident in parents' advice to their college-attending daughters, students were expected to draw lines between themselves and their peers using religion as a guide. Parents repeatedly reminded their daughters that choosing their friends needed to be a thoughtful and strategic process, one wherein attention to "commonalities," (meaning, a type of class), was essential. One of the ways in which students could measure if a fellow student was worth befriending was by assessing her religious character.⁷⁶ Writing to his college-attending daughters, R.W. Bailey made it clear that they should be selective in building

⁷³ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 88.

⁷⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 85.

⁷⁵ Virginia Ingraham Burr, ed. *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Thomas, 1848-1889* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 25.

⁷⁶ As mentioned in "Chapter One," another way of measuring the value of a friend was by paying attention to her refinement, and, consequently her elite status. See "Chapter One," 32.

friendships, “always prefer[ing] those for [their] intimate companionship who [gave] evidence that they [were] influenced by religious principle.”⁷⁷ According to Bailey, there were not only important distinctions to be made between those of higher and lower economic class, but between those who were deemed more or less religious. After warning his daughters that “the boarding school furnishes [not only] many advantages,” but also “concomitant evils” that should be “carefully avoided,” Bailey suggests that, while boarding school is reserved for a select group, “the selection is by no means in strict and single reference to points, which render the selection always best suited to your companionship.”⁷⁸ Bailey advises his daughters to use religious behaviour to gauge the worth of a peer’s companionship, writing,

You may find, even in young ladies of parentage highly respectable...a disregard for religion, and even sometimes infidel sentiments. The allowed and allowable habits of the different classes of society are sometimes found assembled together in the same boarding school, and without reflection and a proper discrimination, you may greatly err by *confounding things that should be separated*.⁷⁹

By making clear that religious behaviour, serving in the South as a marker of class, was a measurement of worth, parents like Bailey encouraged young women to draw lines between themselves and their peers, and, in doing so, to exercise a condescension that contributed to the building of a hierarchy based on religion.

Examining the religious culture that developed at women’s colleges highlights two points: that southern evangelicalism was full of ironies and, second, that it was amidst these ironies that college women found the space to exert agency in their lives. The first irony existent in southern evangelicalism is that while common interpretations of the Bible suggested that women were by nature dependent creatures whose priority it was to obey male patriarchs, the

⁷⁷ Bailey, *Daughters at School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 167.

⁷⁸ Bailey, *Daughters at School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 161.

⁷⁹ Bailey, *Daughters at School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 162.

very status evangelicalism granted to women as pious individuals challenged the notion that women were helpless creatures who should take on only subordinate roles within society. For in simply using the religious authority granted them, southern women simultaneously revealed their ability to be independent, authoritative figures. This was certainly the case at the southern woman's college, where young women fulfilled their identities as pious individuals at the same time that they challenged their supposedly dependent nature. The second irony inherent in southern evangelicalism is that at the same time that evangelicalism encouraged young women to maintain identities as spiritual beings, it also stipulated that they remain passive and submissive--a combination which, considering the very "active, noisy, physical, and enthusiastic" nature of southern evangelicalism, proved impossible to accomplish.⁸⁰ In female students' very embrace of their identities as pious individuals, therefore, they encountered a religion which was itself inconsistent with nineteenth-century ideals for women.⁸¹ It was in the midst of these tensions inherent in southern evangelical ideals, therefore, that women shaped their lives and identities.

The ways in which female students shaped their lives through their religious behaviour reveal that, unlike many scholarly narratives suggest, women were not simply victims of southern religion.⁸² Instead, female students' behaviour suggests that women both challenged and maintained Protestant gender ideals. By concentrating on the religious conditions of their fellow peers, women embraced their prescribed roles as pious individuals who were concentrated on morally regenerating society. In the midst of embracing this role, however, young women

⁸⁰ Anna M. Lawrence, "The Fires of Evangelicalism in the Cauldron of the Early Republic: Race, Class, and Gender in the Second Great Awakening" in *Early Republic: People and Perspectives*, ed. Andrew K. Frank (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2009), 163.

⁸¹ Lawrence, "The Fires of Evangelicalism in the Cauldron of the Early Republic," 163.

⁸² Stephan outlines the tendency existent in scholarship to study only what "religion did to southern women" in his work *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South*, 14.

collectively challenged their identities as passive and dependent beings. Even while redefining female identity, however, they did not embrace a conscious feminist agenda, but rather maintained hierarchies amongst themselves that reveal that they did not fully reject southern social systems. Instead, young women exercised selective identities, both challenging and fulfilling gender ideals in order to live as they wished. Recognizing that southern college women both challenged and contributed to southern gender ideals through their cultivation of a religious culture draws attention to their “often deeply ambivalent roles as social actors”⁸³ and underlines the problem with viewing religion as a monolithic force in southern women’s lives.

⁸³ George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 271.

CHAPTER FOUR:
“Of What Use is All My Learning, the Result of My College Education?”¹:
Southern Women’s Lives After College

An analysis that seeks to measure the value of southern women’s education benefits not only from an analysis of what women did while at college, but what they did after graduation. Assessing the usefulness of women’s education by paying attention to how women used and viewed their education after leaving college offers a different perspective on the value of women’s education than an examination consisting solely of observing educational purposes and curriculum. For while examinations which focus on curriculum and purposes typically conclude that women’s education, being concentrated on preparing women for their subordinate status within the home, initiated no social change,² a look at educated women’s actual lives challenges this assumption. For in the same way that female students created their own cultures and selected identities for themselves while at college, they continued to structure their own identities after college. An analysis of women’s diaries and letters of correspondence reveals that women continued to challenge the identities prescribed to them by their education through maintaining female friendships and extending beyond their “sphere” after college. At the same time, however, women did not advocate the formation of an inclusive sisterhood, as is evident in their continued upholding of southern hierarchal structures.

That scholars often come to the conclusion that southern women’s education was useless and thereby oppressive makes sense not only if one examines the curriculum and practices followed at college, but also if one takes students and parents’ perceptions of leaving college as

¹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 423.

² See, for example, Gordon, “From Seminary to University: An Overview of Women’s Higher Education, 1870-1920,” 474; McMillen, “Education and Religion,” 100.

representing reality. Both parents and students asserted that leaving college marked a new phase in life--one which was void of certain pleasantries offered at college. Considering that parents and college authorities viewed women's education as a means to a particular end--preparing daughters for their roles as wives and mothers--once a young woman spent enough time at college to make a desirable marital match, her education was considered complete. And once her education was deemed complete, a young woman's time of being a carefree schoolgirl ended and she was meant to take on a more serious position as a young lady--one who was too preoccupied with fulfilling the duties of a wife and mother to take part in the same types of activities engaged in while at college. Parents constantly warned their daughters that college was only a transitory time and thus that they needed to make the most of it, preparing themselves to fulfill its ultimate goals. Acknowledging the idea that women's education was only suited for a particular purpose and that pleasantries like intellectual enrichment would not last in the midst of women's daily duties, one father reminded his college-attending daughter that "now [was] the time for [her] improvement" because "as [she] advance[d] in life tho' [her] inclination may lead to reading, [her] situation may prevent [her] doing so."³ Similarly reminding students that their school days were coming to a close and that they needed to prepare for a different type of life--a more serious domestic life--Principal George Davis instructed members of a graduating class to "join in the song and the dance. But in such a sort that when the lights are faded, and the garlands dead, you can, without a sigh, remember that this is but the holiday apartment, and seek your homes in the quiet little parlor, where the wife and mother dwell."⁴

³ As quoted by Clinton, "Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic," 57.

⁴ Davis, "Address Delivered before the Young Ladies of Greensboro Female College, 14th May 1856," 16.

As Anya Jabour's study of young women's keepsake volumes makes clear, young women paid heed to parents' and authorities' warnings that their blissful college days would soon be over and replaced with more serious ones.⁵ That students realized and were burdened by the idea that a new phase of life was upon them is clear in the sadness they expressed concerning leaving college. Having experienced their "school days [as] [the] happiest" days of their lives,⁶ young women viewed graduation as marking the sorrowful separation of friends and the beginning of a new and difficult phase of their lives.⁷ Jabour notes that female students not only linked their separation from college with "loneliness, sorrow, disease, and death,"⁸ but that "their forecasts for the future were invariably gloomy" because of the harsh realities awaiting them in "sad womanhood."⁹

Female students were apprehensive about leaving college and taking on roles of wives and mothers and this is understandable given the practical realities of southern women's lives. Despite the myth that southern belles enjoyed lives of luxury, the pains of marriage and motherhood remained acute even for women of high class. Rather than living in "a South of magnolias, mansions, and courtly gentlemen,"¹⁰ elite educated women lived in a society that glorified woman's role to the extent that it became burdensome. As "naturally" pious and submissive persons, southern women were taught that maintaining a successful marriage was

⁵ Anya Jabour, "Albums of Affection: Female Friendship and Coming of Age in Antebellum Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 107, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 125-59.

⁶ Elizabeth Nelson, Carrington Family Papers, March 15, 1831, as quoted in Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters*, 76.

⁷ Jabour, "Albums of Affection: Female Friendship and Coming of Age in Antebellum Virginia," 135.

⁸ Jabour, "Albums of Affection: Female Friendship and Coming of Age in Antebellum Virginia," 134.

⁹ Jabour, "Album of Affection: Female Friendship and Coming of Age in Antebellum Virginia," 137.

¹⁰ McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 12.

their responsibility, even if victims of a double standard of marital fidelity.¹¹ Furthermore, the “positive attention heaped on motherhood left little reason [for southerners] to limit family size,” even though childbirth proved trying for women’s physical health, and resulted in high death rates--twice that of women in the Northeast.¹² In addition to the burdens southern ideals of marriage and motherhood heaped on women, the idea that women were created to occupy the domestic sphere meant that the majority of women were destined to “spen[d] their lives in relative isolation.”¹³

Though female students contemplated the harsh realities they would encounter after college, not all students passively accepted the idea that the educations they received and the relationships they formed at college were over. Rather, some students expressed frustration over the idea that their education was over and questioned its supposed purposes. In her semi-autobiographical novel *Lily*, Susan Pettigru King spoke for many women when she expressed her frustration at the idea that “the remnants of women’s schooling would vanish” as soon as a young woman left college. Through a fictional character, King bitingly critiques the limited goals of women’s education, proclaiming that it “might [have been] a great deal better had all the money spent on these accomplishments [to have been] put in the Savings bank” than to spend it on something so limiting, and therefore in her opinion, so useless.¹⁴ Similarly critiquing the idea that education should be concerned solely with preparing women for the home, one southern student mused “it seems too singular . . . to talk of going to school for society.”¹⁵ Instead of

¹¹ McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 31-32; 110.

¹² McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 59, 69.

¹³ McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 6-7.

¹⁴ Susan Pettigru King Bowen, *Lily* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1855), 77.

simply assuming their somewhat burdensome roles as refined and pious wives and mothers, therefore, college women questioned how they could put their educations to use, wondering “How will all this end? To what end am I destined?”¹⁶

Taken together, the expressed purposes of women’s education, along with students’ frustrations with these seemingly limited purposes, leads many scholars to conclude that women’s education did little to transform southern women’s actual lives. Noting that education “exposed [women] to new forms and varieties of knowledge,” Lynn Gordon suggests that “[women] were nonetheless confined to the same domestic duties as their uneducated mothers and grandmothers.”¹⁷ Similarly assuming that education worked to consign women to the household and played only a very minor role in changing women’s lives, Sally McMillen writes that, while schooling could “open women’s eyes and encourage unconscious challenges that could lead women to question, explore, and see beyond the limits of their circumscribed world, only a few southern women embraced such challenges enough to alter their behaviour or expectations.”¹⁸ According to McMillen, “the musings of young women who questioned the system must not have been too prolonged or deep, for southern girls were well trained to obey and anticipate a life similar to that of their mothers.”¹⁹ While scholars may be correct in asserting that “southern ladies were not *trained* to explore new avenues of experience, but had preordained roles as wives and mothers in the community of gentility,”²⁰ interpretations which attempt to

¹⁵ Campbell as quoted by Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic*, 103.

¹⁶ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 84.

¹⁷ Gordon, “From Seminary to University: An Overview of Women’s Higher Education, 1870-1920,” 474.

¹⁸ McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 100.

¹⁹ McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 100.

measure the transformative value of women's education based solely on the intentions of college authorities do not account for women's responses to their education. For in addition to some students' explicit frustrations with the limited goals of female education, students' post-college behaviours reveal that women used their college education to redefine southern womanhood and transform their worlds.

First, female students used their college experience to challenge the idea that their identities were wrapped up in their being female family members and they did this by maintaining friendships after college. While female students were instructed to prize husbands above all else and to build female friendships for the mere sake of making connections that would prove advantageous for their future families,²¹ after college women continued in their schoolgirl behaviour of privileging female friendship over family connections, and, in doing so, inadvertently challenged the very assumption that marriage was women's destiny. Having taken part in what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg terms the "female world of love and ritual" while at college,²² educated women did not suddenly terminate the friendships they developed with their peers after leaving college. Instead, women remained fixated on their friendships, both continuing to converse with their peers and, perhaps more importantly, to romanticize these friendships. In former Wesleyan student Ella Gertrude Thomas' diary it is clear that Thomas not only remains in frequent contact with her friends, but that she idealizes her friendships. One example of this idealization occurs in an entry dated 17 May 1852, wherein Thomas reports that she has written a story using her college friends as the story's main characters, noting in

²⁰ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South*, 137. Emphasis mine.

²¹ Bailey, *Daughters in School Instructed in a Series of Letters*, 166.

²² Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America": 1-30.

particular their romantic and heroic natures.²³ Furthermore, former students like Thomas glorified their schoolgirl friendships to such an extent that they grieved when hearing news of their peers' upcoming marriages because, as Anya Jabour points out, young women viewed marriage as marking the breakup of friendships. Receiving a wedding invitation from Mat Oliver, a "dear" friend who "was intimately connected with all [her] school life,"²⁴ Thomas notes that she "wept bitterly," at the "sad reflection" that her friend was now married.²⁵

Since marriage was viewed by many former students as breaking up deep companionships formed at college, some young women not only grieved over their friends' marriages, but decided that they would rather maintain their friendships than fulfill the societal expectation that they marry. Examining the life of former Edgeworth students Bessie Lacy and Maggie Morgan, Steven Stowe notes that these two, having found companionship in female friendship, wanted nothing more than a future in a "snug little room" with "a great big mahogany bedstead, where [they] would sleep like they always [did]."²⁶ Similarly, cousins Laura and Louisa Wirt "agreed that domestic occupations were disagreeable," and "made a solemn promise to each other to remain single. They would live in what they called 'Old Maid's Hall' and 'live and die in single blessedness.'"²⁷ Viewing the duties of a wife and mother to be too burdensome,

²³ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 105.

²⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 83.

²⁵ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 106.

²⁶ Steven Stowe, "'The Thing Not Its Vision': A Woman's Courtship and Her Sphere in the Southern Planter Class," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 116.

²⁷ Anya Jabour, "'It Will Never Do for Me to Be Married': The Life of Laura Wirt Randall, 1803-1833," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 196.

Sarah Lois Wadley too dreamed of a life of “single blessedness,” and after college dedicated herself to her own reading and teaching rather than to finding an eligible suitor.²⁸

Though most educated southern women were unable to fulfill the goal of “living in single blessedness,” they did, nonetheless, continue to prize female friendship and, in doing so, shaped southern marriage patterns. Having experienced deep friendship with their college peers, young women sought true affection in marriage and thereby bolstered nineteenth-century appeals for companionate marriage. For example, while Bessie Lacy was unable to fulfill her dream of living her life as an “old maid,” Steven Stowe’s study of Lacy’s correspondence with her fiancé Thomas Webber Dewey reveals that Lacy, having experienced intimacy with her friend Maggie Morgan, expected the same intimacy to be a part of her courtship and marriage. Stowe writes “through her strong friendship with Maggie, Bessie learned to expect a kind of intimacy from a well-loved person, an intimacy which would become an emotional standard for her later relationships.”²⁹

That college played a role in inspiring women’s appeals for companionate marriage is perhaps further evidenced in educated women’s choosing to marry later than average. As Michael O’Brien points out, while the median age for marriage among southern women was nineteen, a number of educated women married in their late twenties or even their early thirties.³⁰ This fact is significant given the observed pattern that individuals tend to marry later when having the freedom to choose a partner.³¹ Rather than basing marital choices simply on suitors’

²⁸ Wadley, Diary, August 8, 1859-May 15, 1865.

²⁹ Stowe, “The Thing Not Its Vision,” 116.

³⁰ Michael O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860*, vol. 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 264.

³¹ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 145.

wealth and family status, former college students drew on their college experiences of friendship to seek relationships of mutual affection. By taking part not only in reassessing singlehood, therefore, but also in redefining nineteenth-century marital relationships, these women not only dreamed of, but inaugurated “a future destiny wherein their identities were not linked primarily with husbands.”³²

By redefining southern womanhood through reassessing singleness and bolstering ideals for companionate marriage, educated women not only attempted to transform their own worlds, but also shaped nineteenth-century society at large.³³ This recognition not only challenges the assumption that women passively accepted the gender constructs their educations meant to reinforce, but highlights the importance of a “bottom-up” approach to American history. Most interpretations of American history attribute changes in ideas concerning gender and marriage patterns ultimately to overarching causes like politics, economics and watershed events. For example, in her work *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, Stephanie Coontz suggests that appeals for companionate marriage were inspired by Enlightenment ideals³⁴ and in her *Liberty, A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations 1780-1840*, Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller suggests that appeals for companionate marriage emerged ultimately because nineteenth-century economics altered demographics.³⁵ While certainly helpful in explaining overarching causes for changes in marital ideals, these explanations do not altogether explain changes in the South, a society where Enlightenment ideals like those described by

³² Jabour, “‘It Will Never Do for Me to Be Married’: The Life of Laura Wirt Randall, 1803-1833,” 195.

³³ It is interesting to note that educated southern women’s reassessment of singleness anticipates a later trend among educated women to choose to remain single. See Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 207, on college-attending women’s choices in the late nineteenth century.

³⁴ Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 5.

³⁵ Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations 1780-1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

Coontz were interpreted in a way that continued to reinforce patriarchy and hierarchy³⁶ and where a capitalist system like the one Chambers-Schiller identifies as an instigator of changing patterns in the Northeast was not yet in place. Because they lack the explanatory power to fully understand changes that were occurring within marriage patterns in the South, existing scholarly interpretations of American marriage patterns should consider the importance of education for, as Patricia Palmieri invites scholars to consider, education, among other things, has the power to “affect changes in marriage philosophy.”³⁷ When examining the lives of educated southern women, it becomes clear that women themselves, and not just overarching forces such as politics and economics, were agents of societal change.

Second, in the midst of maintaining female friendships, college women continued to challenge the identities prescribed to them in their educations after leaving college by perpetuating both a real and an “imagined” intellectual community.³⁸ Instead of assuming that their days of study were over because of the duties brought on by wifedom and motherhood, former students continued to engage in intellectual activities. Contrary to what scholars such as Michael O’Brien assume,³⁹ southern college women both founded and engaged in literary societies. Perhaps the most established female literary society in the antebellum South, the Sigourney Club, founded in 1848 and located at Limestone Springs Female High in South Carolina, was a group made up of both current college students and alumnae. Committed to what

³⁶ See, for example, the South’s negotiating of Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals in Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South or the Failure of Free Society*.

³⁷ Patricia A. Palmieri, “Review of *Liberty, a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1740-1820*,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 603.

³⁸ Kelley describes “imagined intellectual communities” in her *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic*, 104. I borrow the term from her.

³⁹ O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860*, 260.

Barbara Ryan and Amy Thomas call “the same objective of all literary societies--the making of the learned woman,”⁴⁰ members of the Sigourney club worked to redefine women’s identity by engaging in intellectual discussions often reserved for men. As Mary Kelley points out in her work on antebellum literary societies, members of the Sigourney club engaged in discussions concerning the “public sphere,” including debating matters of national and political economy.⁴¹ In doing so, these literary societies “provided occasions for grafting onto the conventional model of womanhood a powerful female intellect.”⁴²

Furthermore, in addition to maintaining a real learning community like that which young women established while in college, college graduates continued to challenge the idea that their identities were defined solely by their connection to family by engaging in an “imagined” intellectual community.⁴³ Because of the rural nature of the South, not all women had the privilege of joining literary societies after leaving college. However, as an examination of women’s diaries and letters makes clear, this does not mean that these women disengaged from intellectual activity. Rather, women living in rural settings continued to educate themselves by creating an imagined intellectual community. The diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas highlights that, after attending college, women continued to engage in academic pursuits through both their reading and their writing about it. Throughout her diary, Thomas repeatedly reminds her imagined reader that she is attempting to build upon and continually “improve”⁴⁴ her college

⁴⁰ Barbara Ryan and Amy Thomas, *Reading Acts: US Readers’ Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950* (Memphis: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 70.

⁴¹ Kelley, “‘A More Glorious Revolution’: Women’s Antebellum Reading Circles and the Pursuit of Influence,” 173.

⁴² Ryan and Thomas, *Reading Acts: US Readers’ Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950*, 70.

⁴³ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 104.

⁴⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 278.

education through reading “solid” texts.⁴⁵ Among those texts she deemed worthy of serious study included political speeches, historical biographies, travel diaries, and religious and philosophical works.⁴⁶ Similarly highlighting the importance of continued academic study in her life after college, Sarah Lois Wadley constantly made note of her reading and writing, marking out so many books that she wanted to read that she was forced to contend “sometimes I attempt to do so many things that they are all neglected.”⁴⁷ By creating both real and imagined intellectual communities, former college students challenged the idea that women’s academic study was useful only, or even primarily, for its ability to help women attract eligible suitors and to keep their husbands content. Rather, women prized intellectual activity both as a way to enter male domains and as a means to personal fulfillment. By maintaining intellectual pursuits after college, former students challenged the assertion made by college authorities that women were only destined to be “cultivated,” and not “learned.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, acknowledging that college graduates maintained rich intellectual communities despite authorities’ assumptions that doing so was not integral to female identity challenges contemporary scholars’ assumption that “Most females accepted the fact that their plantation environment afforded few opportunities for intellectual enrichment after marriage.”⁴⁹ Rather than realizing and accepting that “their intellectual development would most likely wane with marriage, decline with housekeeping,

⁴⁵ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 155.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 155. Among the many works Thomas cites in her journal are Greek and Roman epics, numerous works by Shakespeare, including *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, poems by Henry Hart Milman, such as *Fazio or the Italian Wife*, travel narratives by James Bayard Taylor, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*, and Maria Jane McIntosh’s *Charms and Counter Charms*. Additionally, Thomas mentions reading speeches by contemporary politicians, including Thomas Jefferson.

⁴⁷ Wadley, Diary entry, Friday, June 5, 1863.

⁴⁸ Herschel V. Johnson, *Address*, 12-13, as quoted by Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, 257.

⁴⁹ Clinton, “Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic,” 58.

dwindle at motherhood, and at no time result in any measure of social recognition” as though this was simply “a fact of life and a product of culture,”⁵⁰ young women transcended the limits of their education’s goals and used what they learned to experience fulfilling lives.

Third, in addition to redefining female identity by maintaining female friendships and a real and imagined intellectual community, college women challenged the identities their educations prescribed to them after college by using education to gain positions that extended beyond their prescribed “sphere.” While southern conventions suggested that “no southern woman of means ever proposed to work at anything outside of the home,”⁵¹ numerous women put their educations to use after college by opening up schools and/or becoming school teachers. One school alone produced alumnae who played central roles in the founding of at least eight institutions of learning.⁵² Countless women used their college educations to organize institutions for women’s education. After attending a Methodist college in Madison, Georgia, Rebecca Latimer Felton used her education to open a school on her own land in order to make money: “Obliged to earn the bread [they] ate . . . [her] husband and [she] decided to open a school at Cartersville and do something for the young people who had been almost without school facilities.”⁵³ Felton noted the role her education played in enabling her to find fulfillment outside of the domestic sphere in her biography, writing “How I enjoyed that work would take a volume to tell and my diligence in my own school days was a prime factor for success in this strenuous time.”⁵⁴ Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas not only challenged gender constructs by working

⁵⁰ Clinton, “Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic,” 60.

⁵¹ Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth*, 62-63.

⁵² Mary Claire Engstrom, *The Lives of Burwell Students* (Hillsborough, NC: the Historic Hillsborough Commission, 2007), 20.

⁵³ Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth*, 73.

outside of the home and earning an income, but directly critiqued the state of female education in the South, writing “I am inclined to think that we are wrong so far as the education of our women is concerned. It is apt to be too superficial and our young girls leave school too soon.”⁵⁵ Sarah H. Douglas and Mary Julia Baldwin, graduates of Mary Baldwin College, similarly advocated women’s education and organized schools in Waynesboro and Staunton, Virginia in the 1840s and 1850s.⁵⁶

While not opening new schools, some college graduates stepped out of the domestic sphere in order to pursue employment in teaching. After her husband fell into heavy debt in the 1850s and 1860s, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas worked as a school teacher and became the breadwinner in her family. Highlighting the importance her Wesleyan College education played in sustaining her very survival, Thomas wrote “The enemy [Union soldiers] can take all else-- Thank God they cannot deprive me of my education.”⁵⁷ Bessie Lacy, Willie Lea, Sarah Lois Wadley, and Elizabeth Allston Pringle likewise were among the many young women who used their college educations to gain work as teachers.⁵⁸ These women not only found financial security in teaching, but a sense of personal satisfaction. Noting the satisfaction she found in teaching, Elizabeth Allston Pringle remarked “I find I can teach! And I love it!”⁵⁹ and remarked that she was enthralled by the fact that a Mr. H. had made a comment about “*we* music teachers”

⁵⁴ Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth*, 73.

⁵⁵ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 198.

⁵⁶ Watters, “The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942,” 43.

⁵⁷ Watters, “The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942,” 244.

⁵⁸ Beadie and Tolley, *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States, 1727-1925*, 130.

⁵⁹ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 309.

to her.⁶⁰ Also noting that teaching made her feel important and consequential, Sarah Lois Wadley confessed, “I am constantly occupied, occupation is life to me.”⁶¹ By using their education to enter into and gain satisfaction within the public sphere, college graduates transcended the intended goals of their engendered education and continued to explore broader definitions of southern womanhood after leaving college.

Finally, women continued to redefine female identity after leaving college by engaging in religious activities just as they did while at college. In the nineteenth century southern women extended beyond the “sphere” of the home by engaging in evangelical reform movements. As the most elite members of society, educated women played a major role in the organization of such voluntary societies, using the status granted them not only by religion, but also by their social class and educational background to advocate for societal change. One of the most prominent societies educated women organized was the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Engaging with reform literature proliferating in the northeast, college women not only joined but headed the WCTU. Rebecca Latimer Felton and Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas were among the many educated women who served as presidents, vice presidents, and secretaries of the WCTU and thereby took on public roles.⁶² Using the writing and communication skills learned at college, along with the sense of confidence and independence it granted them, these women not only gained public roles, but, in advocating temperance reform, they challenged southern society’s double standard concerning men’s and women’s purity.⁶³ By challenging men’s

⁶⁰ Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood*, 311.

⁶¹ Wadley, Diary entry for Friday June 5, 1863.

⁶² Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 18, 450; Joan Marie Johnson, *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges: Feminist Values and Social Activism, 1875-1915*, 144.

⁶³ Nell Irvin Painter, “Introduction: the Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas: An Educated Woman in the Eras of Slavery, War, and Reconstruction” in *The Secret Eye*, 35.

behaviour, these women of the WCTU, as Cynthia Kierner points out, “subverted the patriarchal ideal” and did so through a culturally legitimated medium--women’s benevolence.⁶⁴ Rather than subjecting themselves to authorities’ demands not to use their education to extend their influence beyond the household and thereby “soil [their] garments with matters that d[id] not pertain to [their] position in society,”⁶⁵ women made use of religious activities in a way that “gave [them] outlets for relatively autonomous public activism at a time when few acknowledged their desire or capacity to contribute to public life.”⁶⁶

At the same time that college graduates used their education to redefine southern womanhood and to advocate societal change, they behaved as they did at college and maintained hierarchal structures that prevented them from embracing all women. Paradoxically this undermined their very challenge to existing gender constructs. Even though educated women’s words and behaviour suggest that they believed in an alternative and wider definition of womanhood, their participation in marital, educational and evangelical reform reveals that these women did not establish a “sisterhood” based on the premise that all women were bound together simply based on their gendered status. Rather, many educated women, distancing themselves from their northeastern abolitionist counterparts, openly admitted that they were not “women’s rights women”⁶⁷ and worked to reinforce class and race hierarchies in at least three interrelated ways. First, while making appeals for companionate marriage, educated women did not advocate equality in marriage to the extent that companionate marriage was envisioned as

⁶⁴ Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women’s Place in the Early South, 1700-1835* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 216.

⁶⁵ James A. Long in an address delivered before the 1858 graduating class of Edgeworth Female Seminary, as quoted by in Victoria E. Bynum in *Unruly Women: the Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 56.

⁶⁶ Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women’s Place in the Early South, 1700-1835*, 203.

⁶⁷ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 160.

leading to interracial marriage.⁶⁸ Rather, the equal status women appealed for between men and women in companionate marriage was limited to granting equal status between whites of similar class. Since companionate marriage was understood as only existing between those of equal position, interracial marriage was excluded based on the assumption that black and mulatto women could not offer white men the same caliber of affection as white women could.⁶⁹ In the midst of their appeals for companionate marriage, therefore, educated white women may have redefined white womanhood, but simply reinforced ideas concerning women of colour, ideas which maintained white supremacy.

Second, educated women maintained racial hierarchies and thereby resisted sisterhood among all women in their limited appeals for women's education. At the same time that educated white women critiqued existing educational opportunities for females and advocated for women's education to be less limited in purpose and equal with men's, their goals for education were limited to the education of white women. In fact, many educated women argued that educating coloured women (and men) would endanger society by threatening white supremacy. According to Wesleyan Female College graduate Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, educating young white women, even those of lower social class, was important because education prevented white women from marrying black men,⁷⁰ but educating women of colour would simply "intensify their already innate tropical, passionate nature" and thereby further provoke their demoralizing effect on white men.⁷¹ Consequently, while educated women established

⁶⁸ That interracial marriage was viewed as degrading and as a threat to southern society is clear in Thomas's *The Secret Eye*, 42, 50, 320-21.

⁶⁹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 42, 50, 320-321.

⁷⁰ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 50.

⁷¹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 42, 50.

institutions for white women's education all over the South in the antebellum period, the formal education of coloured women did not gain momentum until years after the Civil War.⁷²

Third, and finally, educated women maintained social hierarchies and revealed their anti-sisterhood sentiments by reinforcing black women's inferior status in their evangelical reform efforts. While college-educated women like Rebecca Latimer Felton and Ella Gertrude Thomas, leaders of the WCTU, argued that temperance would benefit white and black women alike,⁷³ their appeals for societal change rarely led to abolitionist claims. Rather, even in their plans for moral reforms, educated women contributed to an intellectual tradition that advocated that women (and men) of colour were in need of paternal care. Representative of educated women's justifications for slavery, Thomas suggested, "the negro as a race is better off with us as he has been than if he were free, but I am by no means so sure that we would not gain by his having his freedom given him."⁷⁴ Justifying slavery in this way, female reformers envisioned slavery as a benevolent system, and, by showing compassion on those of "inferior" status, they "legitimized [the] continuing dominance" of the white, educated elite.⁷⁵

Not only did educated white women's marital, educational, and evangelical reform efforts often lack concern for less enfranchised women among them, therefore, they actually sustained pejorative images of women of colour. Thus, college women used their education to create images that disempowered women who were considered 'other' at the same time as using it to empower themselves. Ultimately, then, college enabled educated women to challenge particular understandings of white womanhood while still maintaining their regionalism and

⁷² Ana A. Martinez Aleman and Kristen A. Renn, *Women in Higher Education: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc), 266.

⁷³ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 450.

⁷⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 47.

⁷⁵ Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835*, 213.

elitism--identities which were foundational to their existence within southern slave society. Ironically, however, by perpetuating particular constructions of black womanhood, college women were inadvertently reinforcing their own position as persons in need of protection from white men--a position which inscribed their status as dependent wives and mothers, a status that their post-college behaviours challenged.

Instead of suggesting that southern women's education did little in the way of transforming educated women's lives, women's recollections of their post-college experiences imply that their education was immensely powerful despite its limited goals. By inspiring women to re-envision singleness and marriage, giving them the desire to learn and the ability to teach, and providing the means to organize evangelical reform efforts, college enabled southern women to redefine their own identities. Unfortunately, this redefinition was limited. While college allowed elite women the opportunity to redefine their own identities as females, it did not enable these women to see past race boundaries to redefine all women. In more than one way, then, educated women's behaviour reveals that "education is power."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 1.

CONCLUSION

A historical analysis that takes into account women's recollections of their college experiences proves rewarding because it challenges the typical scholarly narrative that suggests that, because women's education was engendered, it was ultimately an oppressive force. An examination of student's perspectives of college highlights how women discovered and used power in the midst of their engendered educations. College women not only challenged southern gender constructs and formed new identities as women, but simultaneously employed hierarchical systems that, at times, reinforced more conventional gender ideals and ultimately undermined any type of sisterhood or collective redefinition of women. Recognizing that college women exerted agency in these ways not only presents a more complicated and complete picture of southern women's education, but also sheds light on wider issues in both southern women's history and women's history more generally. Such an examination thereby also points to new directions in historical scholarship.

First, an examination of southern women's education from the perspective of students' diaries and letters contributes to wider debates within southern women's history because it suggests that southern gender ideals, as espoused through the woman's college, were oppressive despite the fact that they were meant to act as "a marker of difference that distinguished, hierarchically, the dominant class from the 'barbarian' cultures."¹ Though scholars are correct in pointing out that the gender ideals that colleges worked to inculcate were meant to reinforce educated women's elite status, the gap that existed between the gender ideals espoused through southern women's education and the actual behaviours of female students highlights the fact that

¹ Laura Lee Downs (describing Jacqueline Jones' work), *Writing Gender History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 67. For more information on how gender ideals reinforced white hegemonic power, see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present*.

southern gender ideals were too restrictive. Female students' challenging of the feminine ideals that were advocated through their educations through their cultivation of academic, social, and religious cultures reveals that being positioned as ladies on pedestals was ultimately unfulfilling.

Second, in addition to suggesting that southern gender ideals were oppressive for women, an analysis of students' recollections of their college experiences sheds light on broader debates in southern women's history by suggesting that women, in response to oppressive gender ideals, promoted alternative definitions of southern womanhood. In contrast to a scholarly tradition that suggests that women did not promote alternative views of womanhood because doing so inadvertently challenged their elite status as white ladies,² a look at female students' lives implies that, even if not always overtly, college women's behaviours redefined what it meant to be southern women. In contrast to the southern "lady," a college woman was academic, defined by extra-familial relationships, and independent. Thus, contrary to a particular school of thought that assumes that, because gender ideals secured their elite positions, women simply accepted restrictive gender ideals and their subordinate status within society, an examination of collegiate culture reveals that women desired, and worked for, "privilege" without its "price."³

Third, an examination of college women's recollections provides insight into wider discussions in southern women's history by revealing that women, while in some senses oppressed by power structures, were, like many scholars suggest, nonetheless actually complicit in generating such systems.⁴ At the same time that college women challenged restrictive gender

² Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle*, 120; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household Black and White Women in the Old South*, 30, 47, 192-193; McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 10.

³ Scholars employ the phrase "Privilege and its Price" (coined by Laura Edwards) to describe the relationship between gender, race, and class. While women were granted racial and class privilege, it came with a price--narrow gender ideals and, ultimately, subordination to men. See Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore Southern Women in the Civil War Era*, 15-16.

ideals and promoted alternative views of southern womanhood, they also upheld wider societal ideals and, paradoxically, reinforced the very gender ideals their more deviant actions undermined. Because gender ideologies were so tied to class and race ideologies,⁵ college women's upholding of hierarchical structures in their relationships with one another and with others after leaving college undermined the type of collective redefining of southern womanhood that their other behaviours assumed. Because "female solidarity did not come naturally to women of the planter class,"⁶ educated women did not advance an inclusive female agenda, but continually drew lines of inclusion and exclusion that proved rewarding for some and oppressive for others. At times, the lines of exclusion that female students drew even reinforced more traditional gender ideals. Thus, even in the midst of redefining white southern womanhood, women were complicit in generating the same power systems that their more deviant actions worked to undermine.

That college women acted as agents in seemingly contradictory ways (both challenging gender constructs and at times reinforcing them) highlights the complexity of southern women's identities and reveals that the categories of "victim" and "agent" that are so often employed by women's history are too neat when describing actual historical characters. A serious examination of college women's lives reveals the intersectionality of various facets of identity and the ambiguity that accompanies this. Characterizing educated southern women as either passive southern belles or raging feminists is unfair, for, as George Rable points out, "to view southern women as either seething with discontent or mindlessly mouthing the truisms of their society is

⁴ See, for example, Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, 82; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 192-193; McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 8.

⁵ For a particularly well-developed analysis of the connections between gender, race, and class, see Jacqueline Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*.

⁶ Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, 27.

to ignore their painful and often deeply ambivalent roles as social actors – actors who might occasionally criticize but who could also bolster their society’s basic and often unspoken assumptions.”⁷ While categorization is helpful and necessary to the historian’s task, an analysis of southern college women’s lives reminds contemporary observers to grant past characters the same complexity we do contemporary persons.

Finally, that college women were agents in multiple ways dispels the myth often subsumed within women’s history that the emergence of feminism was a revolutionary event in the sense that it completely transformed women’s lives from those of subordination to those of liberty.⁸ Southern women were working out, and at times redefining, what it meant to be “women” outside of a formalized women’s movement. This suggests that it is a misnomer to think that the feminist movements of the twentieth century were watershed events in the sense that they completely changed women’s lives, for even while suspicious of “women’s rights women,” many southern college women acted in ways not only very similar to their northern feminist counterparts,⁹ but also in ways that even today are understood as “feminist”: they redefined womanhood in very particular, oftentimes narrow, ways, but redefined it for the sake

⁷ Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism*, 271.

⁸ That the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminist movements are assumed to be watershed events in women’s history is implied in the very way women’s history has been focused on the study of northern women, who are assumed to be “real” social actors because of the region’s link with feminism. For more on the tendency within women’s history to privilege northern women’s experiences, see McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 2. Additionally, some scholars suggest that it was not until the 1930s that, because of the popularity of a formalized woman’s movement, southern women were able “to shake loose from the tyranny of a single monolithic image of woman and were free to struggle to be themselves.” See, for example, Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: from Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1970), 231.

⁹ For example, in her work *In the Company of Educated Women*, Barbara Solomon comes to many of the same conclusions regarding the ideals of women’s education and college students’ behaviours as this thesis does. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, xix.

of empowerment nonetheless.¹⁰ This realization underlines the idea that women of all times and places, like all people, exert control over their own lives in myriad ways.

While only a modest contribution to southern women's history, an examination of women's responses to their college education yields conclusions, then, that inspire new directions in historical scholarship. Rather than assuming that those people in official positions of power, such as those at educational institutions, as well as the corresponding records they left, actually held and hold all authority, this study of students' perspectives reveals that power is rarely one-dimensional, and therefore that historical examinations should not be either. Furthermore, this analysis of students' recollections of their college experiences reveals that, even while perhaps offering a challenge to those in official positions of authority, those who hold power outside of official positions do not necessarily exercise agency in ways that lack self-interest and are totally 'other' from that which they challenge--this realization reminds historians of the need to be suspicious of totalizing categories if making past persons visible is to remain central to the historical enterprise.

¹⁰ Robert Dale Parker defines contemporary feminism most basically as being concerned with "taking women seriously." While feminism itself can take on multiple meanings depending on context, it is this most basic, contemporary understanding of feminism that I am relying on here. Robert Dale Parker, "Feminism" in *How to Interpret Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 136.

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