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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Rhetoric Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hrhr20>

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Version of record first published: 19 Nov 2009.

To cite this article: B. Evelyn Westbrook (2002): Debating Both Sides: What Nineteenth-Century College Literary Societies Can Teach Us about Critical Pedagogies, Rhetoric Review, 21:4, 339-356

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15327981RR2104_2

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Debating Both Sides: What Nineteenth-Century College Literary Societies Can Teach Us about Critical Pedagogies

Nineteenth-century college literary and debating societies, which required at least some students to publicly question dominant ideologies and the status quo, offer a potentially rich historical analogy to some of today's critical pedagogies. Using archival evidence from the Clariosophic Society of South Carolina College, the author points out the limitations of using certain kinds of agonism, specifically pro-con debate, to achieve the goals of critical pedagogies.

For much of their history, American colleges have offered what today seems inadequate preparation for the formidable rhetorical challenges students would face outside the classroom: Until the end of the nineteenth century, rhetorical instruction at most colleges involved rote memorization and recitation of classical languages (Berlin, *Writing Instruction*; Halloran; Graff), and for much of the twentieth century, the current-traditionalist movement focused narrowly on modes of discourse and mechanical correctness (Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*).¹ The past few decades, however, have witnessed an explosion of work on service learning and critical pedagogies, both of which try deliberately to connect rhetorical education with its civic and public functions.

Pedagogies that strive to engage students with issues of real political and public consequence often foreground conflict, debate, and controversy in order to acquaint students with nondominant perspectives and encourage ironic stances toward hegemonic values and ideologies. Often called “liberatory,” “oppositional,” or “critical” teaching, these pedagogies center on conflict emerging from assigned texts, students’ own ideas and texts, and classroom debates. Patricia Bizzell and Mary Louise Pratt, for instance, recommend exposing students to texts written from perspectives other than their own in order to engage them in oppositional discourse, resistance, and critique (Pratt 215). Joseph Harris, on the other hand, recommends focusing on conflict that arises from the “differing and sometimes disturbing writings of actual students” (38). Similarly, Ira

Shor advocates using student discourse on a theme or topic as a starting point for dialogue that later incorporates expert perspectives. Susan Jarratt and Christy Friend contend that “heterogeneous debate” in the classroom encourages students to question dominant paradigms and “[give] voice to traditionally marginalized perspectives” (Friend 16). And Thomas Sloane, though a professed advocate of humanism, not critical teaching, claims that writing teachers should “[make] debate the conceptual model of rhetoric and actually [require] students to argue both sides of a question” (287).

While critical teachers advocate different models of agonism, they often agree that conflict and debate in the composition classroom should encourage students to (a) resist hegemonic ideologies, or as Friend says, “deal critically with the arguments they encounter in the dominant culture” and (b) question their own stances on political and ethical issues, or as Lynch et al. put it, risk “being changed in and through the dialogic process” (68). Critical pedagogies, in short, invite students to question the status quo, as well as assume what Ira Shor calls a “critical posture towards the construction of the self in society” (Buffington and Moneyhun 16).

The two claims critical pedagogues often make—that agonistic debate challenges both dominant ideologies and students’ beliefs—incite a range of criticisms. Critical of the first claim, Graff objects to what he sees as critical pedagogies’ “predetermined outcome”—the assumption that “the unleashing of critique in the classroom ultimately leads to the unmasking of domination and disenfranchisement” (Jay and Graff 206–07). Beyond being skeptical that conflict and debate will inevitably lead to a critique of the status quo, Graff and Jay are concerned that in their pursuit of social justice, some critical pedagogues might stifle true debate and impose leftist ideologies on their students. While sympathetic to the goals of critical pedagogies, Ellen Cushman questions whether classrooms can ever be sites of social change: She argues that because of their insular focus on the classroom, critical pedagogies offer little of political or social relevance to communities beyond the academy.

And skeptical of the second claim, that treating the classroom as a contact zone challenges students’ own beliefs, Joseph Harris fears that importing difference and conflict from readings can balkanize classrooms, polarize debates, and lock students into fixed affinities. Furthermore, Stephen Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy contend that social critique and student change can take place in Deweyan classrooms that stress cooperation rather than confrontation. Moreover, A. Suresh Canagarajah argues that in “safe houses” rather than contact zones, disenfranchised students may better develop “meta-pedagogical awareness” and achieve the critical distance necessary to both resist and participate in academic discourse.

Without much empirical grounding, both criticisms and defenses of critical pedagogies in the writing classroom have remained largely speculative. This paper attempts to test the claims made by some critical pedagogues using evidence not from current pedagogical practices but through a historical analogy to nineteenth-century American college literary and debating societies. In “extracurricular” literary and debating societies, nineteenth-century students staged pro–con debates on contemporary social and political questions (Harding; Potter); had access to impressive society library collections where they could read literature on a range of contemporary issues (Simpson; Harding; Graff; Michener); and practiced oratory, debate, and composition, all rhetorical skills they would use as future orators and statesmen (Biemiller; Hellman; Weidner; Potter). Because students who debated the unpopular side of divisive public questions aimed to “win” the debate (most often determined by a popular vote), they were challenged to present cogent and compelling critiques of dominant ideologies as well as argue from the perspectives of disenfranchised minority groups—namely women and slaves. For example, in the literary society that will form the case study for this paper, the Clariosophic Society of antebellum South Carolina College,² students debated questions like “Have the sexes naturally equal minds?” or “Situated as we are should our slaves be debased the means of knowledge?” And regardless of their sincere positions on these issues, in order to compete, at least some students had to present arguments that undermined public opinion and conventional ideologies. Because these exercises resemble those advocated today by Sloane, Bellon, and others, they can teach us about our own pedagogies: By examining societies’ archives and members’ journals, we can see whether arguing both sides really put members’ ideas and ideologies “on the line.”

Ted Lardner, Margaret Marshall, and Michael McClure have argued that pro–con argumentation reduces the complexity of social and political arguments. Similarly, Dennis Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn Cooper worry that overemphasis on conflict and pro–con argumentation urges students to adopt simplified positions and encourages eristic debate at the expense of inquiry. The historical example of college literary societies may therefore help us to assess how well some kinds of agonism, specifically pro–con debate that compels students to argue from contrarian positions, serve the goals of critical pedagogies.

Antebellum College Literary Societies, “Nurseries of Eloquence”

American college literary societies began with Harvard’s Spy Club in 1722 but were fixtures on virtually every college campus by the early nineteenth cen-

tury, springing up wherever colleges themselves did (Sack 269–70; Harding). In 1805, for example, the same year that South Carolina College was founded, its two literary societies, the Clariosophic and the Euphradian, were also established. Not only were literary and debating societies ubiquitous on nineteenth-century college campuses until the Civil War, but they enrolled nearly every student.³ Heidemarie Weidner reports that almost 100 percent of students at Butler University joined one of the college's five societies (6). Similarly, virtually the entire student body of South Carolina College belonged to one of the two literary societies on campus (Hollis 232). Society membership was even mandated at colleges like Muhlenberg and Waynesburg (Sack 274). As Lawrence Biemiller contends, "whether associated with colleges, or not, literary societies were mainstays of intellectual life in the 19th century" (B2).

Despite their "extracurricular" status and even though they were governed by students, not faculty, literary and debating societies were considered an integral part of the academic curriculum. In fact, at universities like Columbia and Butler, students who participated in societies were exempt from classroom rhetorical exercises (Saslaw 205; Potter 254; Weidner 2). Societies were viewed as "valuable sources for the enrichment of the curriculum" (Sack 274) because they counterbalanced the classically steeped courses that more often demanded that students recite others' compositions in Latin or Greek than invent and deliver their own. In contrast to antebellum classrooms that emphasized Greek and Latin, literary societies conducted their activities entirely in English. In fact, a quarter of a century before Harvard abandoned Latin, members of the Spy Club debated questions in English (Engle 39). And in 1770 members of the Harvard Speaking Club were not allowed to speak Latin without permission from the society's president (Potter 239). In further contrast to classroom study, which focused on classical themes and texts, literary societies provided a forum in which members could debate contemporary political and ethical issues. As Gerald Graff claims, the opportunity to "dramatize central conflicts and controversies of contemporary culture . . . did far more than formal classes to situate students in relation to the cultural issues of their time" (45–46). The topics that members of South Carolina College's Clariosophic Society debated, for example, ranged from perennial philosophical and ethical musings to the very questions that contemporary statesmen were considering in the legislature.

Not only were members of literary societies able to debate issues of public consequence, but they were expected to invent and deliver original orations and arguments, something their professors rarely demanded of them until their final year in college. Albert Kitzhaber explains that until the 1870s American educators felt that rigorous drill and recitation offered the best sort of education: "[The nineteenth-century] student often memorized the pages of his textbook and re-

peated them to his teacher verbatim” (qtd. in Berlin 31). At South Carolina College, for instance, students spent class time alternately in lecture, during which time they copied their professors’ lessons verbatim into a notebook, and in recitation, when they were called upon to repeat (often from memory) a selection from a previous lecture or reading. We can assume that these practices encouraged students’ intellectual passivity and created a need for literary societies wherein students assumed more active roles in their learning. As one student explains in *The Haverfordian*, “The private room gives time for thought and study; and the recitation-room affords but little opportunity for learning to express our thoughts. It is in the society that we, even while students, partake of active life” (qtd. in Sack 274-75). At South Carolina College, all society members (except freshmen) were, indeed, expected to actively participate in debates and declamations. Even when enrollment was at its peak in 1848, every member of the Clariosophic Society performed in at least three debates throughout the year. Moreover, members who weren’t prepared or able to participate were fined 50 cents if they were seniors or juniors, 25 cents if they were sophomores, and 12 cents if freshmen.

In short, at a time when the college curriculum was narrowly focused on the rote memorization and recitation of classical texts, students were reading, writing, and debating about a wide range of public issues in their literary societies. Literary and debating societies, therefore, acquainted nineteenth-century students—many of whom would become statesmen—with not only the methods of debate and forms of parliamentary procedure but also the very political and public questions they would encounter as public figures (Sack 274; Potter 238; Saslaw 203). Recognizing how nineteenth-century societies served as what Thomas Harding calls “training grounds for men in public affairs” (1),⁴ Maximillian Laborde, professor of rhetoric at South Carolina College from 1842–65 and honorary member of the Clariosophic Society, writes:

It is, perhaps, not saying too much to add that in our educational system, [literary societies] are the nursery of eloquence, and they gave the first impulse to many of the distinguished men of Carolina who have added so much to her renown in the halls of the state and national Legislatures. (Hamilton 5)

Not only at South Carolina College were literary societies “nursur[ies] of eloquence” for future public leaders; Nathaniel Hawthorne claims that it was at Bowdoin College’s Athenian Society that Franklin Pierce received his training for public office: “[T]he first civil office, I imagine, which Franklin Pierce ever

had, was that of chairman of the standing committee of the Athenian Society” (qtd. in Michener 221).

If societies like the Athenian and Clariosophic did, in fact, train students for public office, how did they influence students to think about the issues they debated? Did students regard debates as contests to be won, diversions from otherwise banal studies, or sincere inquiries into issues of public consequences? Asking these questions of South Carolina College’s Clariosophic Society, which like most other antebellum societies was at its peak before the Civil War, gives us the chance to see members debate particularly passionate political issues at a critical moment in American history (Harding 179). Furthermore, these questions are worth asking of nineteenth-century literary societies like South Carolina’s Clariosophic Society not only because they can provide us with a more complete picture of nineteenth-century rhetorical education but also because they allow us through historical analogy to look critically at today’s writing pedagogies that similarly foreground agonistic debate.

The Radical Potential of the Clariosophic Society

As war clouds gathered before the Civil War, literary societies all over the United States, but especially in the stronghold of the Confederate South, grappled with serious public questions. South Carolina College’s Clariosophic Society was no exception. Like other southern societies (and like most of their northern and western counterparts), members of the Clariosophic Society vigorously debated contemporary social and political questions, including slavery and secession (Harding 193). In fact, Clariosophics debated so many political questions that one member, Maxcy Gregg, complained in his 1835 valedictory speech of the society’s preoccupation with “politics of the day.” Indeed, of the 135 questions debated between 1842 and 1847, 53 dealt explicitly with contemporary local, national, or international politics.⁵

Because societies were forums wherein students debated issues of the day, it is tempting to characterize them as instruments of change in a reform era. Indeed, some scholars have (Frederick Rudolph; Richard Hofstadter). However, Rita Saslaw reminds us that college literary societies were extensions of conservative and elite institutions of higher education and therefore assumed the role of preserving the values of society for future generations. Furthermore, except at progressive schools like Oberlin, antebellum literary societies were open only to the most privileged white males. And even at Oberlin, Saslaw argues, societies “did not fill the role of a forum for social activism” but “merely succeeded in providing a protected arena for the discussion of political, philosophical, religious, and historical topics” (200, 201).

If debating divisive political and social issues in the composition classroom fosters social critique, as some contend, then we might expect members of the Clariosophic Society to occasionally challenge conventional wisdom and hegemonic ideologies. Because Clariosophics' votes indicated "their own private feelings as to the question discussed," society minutes, which record the decisions reached on questions debated, can serve as a barometer of student opinion (Hollis 235). Thomas Harding explains that "as most questions [for debate] were settled by popular vote and the votes recorded, the decisions furnish a first-hand account of what Southern college boys were thinking about in the years that witnessed the disruption of the Union" (193). Furthermore, Harding observes that in the decades immediately preceding the Civil War, "the decisions of the Southern college societies were generally in line with the prevailing attitude toward slavery in the South" (Harding 194).⁶ Clariosophics' votes on questions debated between 1842 and 1847 suggest, indeed, that even though societies encouraged discussions of contemporary questions, members consistently reaffirmed dominant Carolinian ideologies and political sentiments rather than critiquing them.⁷

As historians like Robert Forbes have noted, South Carolinians were "the Americans most dedicated to preserving [slavery]" (81), and South Carolina was what historian Manisha Sinha calls "the secessionist state par excellence" (187). It's no surprise, then, that in their debates Clariosophic members doggedly upheld Confederate positions regarding slavery and secession:

- Is the spirit of liberty higher in countries where there are slaves or where there are none? (debated March 12, 1842, and decided affirmatively⁸)
- Situated as we are should our slaves be debased the means of knowledge? (debated January 7, 1843, and decided affirmatively)
- Has a state the right to secede from the Union? (argued on October 31, 1846, and decided affirmatively)
- Is it likely that slavery will be eventually abolished? (argued on February 19, 1848, and decided negatively)

The Clariosophics' proslavery and secessionist positions reflect how deeply embedded racial slavery was in Carolinian ideology and politics: In their disapproval of providing slaves "the means of knowledge," Clariosophics sided with Carolina's planter politicians, who, fearing insurrection, were reluctant to permit Methodist ministers or missionaries to instruct or preach to their slaves (Ambrose 56). Furthermore, the society's affirmative decision on the question, "Is the spirit of liberty higher in countries where there are slaves or where there are none?" reflects a characteristic Confederate defense of slavery:

Historian Robert Forbes claims that Southern supporters of slavery often stigmatized challenges to slavery as threats to liberty, especially the right to property (81).

The liberties and rights of white, propertied men were not surprisingly upheld by members of the Clariosophic Society who debated such questions as:

- Is it not an infringement upon the inalienable rights of man for government to prohibit expatriation? (argued on February 7, 1846, and decided affirmatively)
- Is our right to property natural or the gift of Government? (argued March 20, 1847, and decided affirmatively)
- Is the right of making wills a natural right? (argued March 27, 1847, and decided affirmatively)
- Is the free agency of man compatible with the necessary order of things? (argued on November 7, 1846, and decided affirmatively)

Clariosophics routinely defend the white man's "inalienable" rights to property and citizenship. Although championing freedoms and securing individuals' rights may seem inconsistent with proslavery positions, these sentiments also acted, as Forbes explains, as "safeguards to slavery" (70): Man's "natural right" to property implied that slavery was the white man's natural right.

Despite Clariosophics' staunch defense of the white man's right to property, Clariosophics paradoxically denied a father the right to will his estate to his daughter: On the question "Ought a man to have the right of entailing all his property on his daughter?" (argued on February 5, 1842), Clariosophics decided negatively. In fact, between 1842 and 1847, members upheld sexist ideologies in all four questions (including the one listed above) that considered women's rights and liberties:

- Have the sexes naturally equal minds? (debated on May 2, 1846, and decided negatively)
- Do the duties of women in Society demand for her a college Education? (argued April 3, 1847, and decided negatively)
- Is the female mind naturally inferior to that of man? (considered on December 4, 1847, and decided affirmatively)

Time and again, society members denied women's rights to property and education and defended a patriarchal social order. Furthermore, despite growing awareness of the masterful female orators of the day—like South Carolina's own Grimké sisters—Clariosophics insisted on women's intellectual inferiority. Rac-

ism and sexism in South Carolina were, Sinha posits, two sides of the same coin: “Just as belief in race and class inequality complemented each other in Carolinian proslavery discourse, the justification of racial slavery led slavery ideologues to champion gender inequality” (90).

Sinha contends, in fact, that racial, gender, and class inequality formed the ideological foundation of antebellum South Carolina’s peculiarly antidemocratic political structure. Their vindication of slavery, argues Sinha, caused Carolinian planter politicians to question the democratic ideals of universal liberty and equality, a challenge to the Declaration of Independence and to natural-rights theory that Sinha calls “counterrevolutionary.” For instance, proslavery theorists like Alfred Huger, David Gavin, and Albert Taylor Bledsoe blamed democracy and “the cult of egalitarianism” for slaveholders’ troubles (Sinha 225). And some Carolina planter politicians like James Henry Hammond went so far as to describe South Carolina’s government as an aristocracy (Sinha 226). The antidemocratic, counterrevolutionary rhetoric that Sinha documents is also reflected in many of the Clariosophics’ decisions:

- Had the National Convention of France the right to depose Louis XVI? (debated on January 1, 1843, and decided negatively)
- Ought the terms of Judgeship to be limited to a certainage? (argued on January 8, 1843, and decided negatively)
- Was Cromwell an honest politician? (argued on November 22, 1845, and decided negatively)
- Was the execution of Charles I justifiable? (argued January 17, 1846, and decided negatively)
- Is an elective or hereditary monarchy better calculated to advance national prosperity? (argued on March 21, 1846, and decided negatively)
- Was Brutus justified in assassinating Caesar? (argued on May 15, 1846, and decided negatively)
- Is the primogeniture system a beneficial one to a nation? (argued on May 23, 1846, and decided negatively)
- Should the Governor of our State be elected by the Legislature or the people? (argued on May 30, 1846, and decided affirmatively)
- Should our Congressmen be governed by their own sentiments or by those of their constituents? (argued on November 2, 1846, and decided affirmatively)
- Are the people more easily corrupted than the Legislature? (argued on January 9, 1847, and decided negatively)
- Was the administration of Cromwell beneficial to liberty? (argued on January 15, 1847, and decided negatively)

Clariosophics favored laws that would extend public figures' terms in office. They also preferred rule by an elite rather than by the people, even though they felt that the public was less vulnerable to corruption. And although they voted against the primogeniture system, members preferred a hereditary monarchy to elected representatives. What's more, they defended monarchs like Louis XVI and Charles I and emperors like Julius Caesar while criticizing Brutus and Cromwell.

In short, then, even though society debates provided a forum for airing divisive political and social issues, members of the Clariosophic Society consistently voted to uphold Carolinian proslavery, antidemocratic, and separatist positions. Furthermore, though these debates were politically charged, they may have been regarded as purely academic exercises that were ultimately irrelevant in political spheres. Indeed, this is what Charleston planter Hugh Legare implied when he dismissed the question of whether to justify or condemn slavery on principles of natural law, calling it "a very good thesis for young casuists to discuss in the college moot-club," but one that he and his fellow politicians would not undertake "for we have no taste for abstractions" (qtd. in Forbes 93).

Perhaps we don't often see members of the Clariosophic Society resisting dominant ideologies and conventional values because a popular vote isn't a sensitive-enough measure to indicate the transformative potential of rhetorical exercises like debating both sides. In fact, many scholars claim that literary societies' radical potential resided not in the collective but within the individual: "Participating in the societies' debates," claims Gerald Graff, "made possible the experimental trying out of ideas so necessary for intellectual self-definition" (46). Rather than being forced into predetermined positions, students were able to "try out" different ideas and perhaps even "meet [others] in discussion," as one Butler society member put it (qtd. in Weidner 14). This kind of ideological experimentation required students to assume malleable identities, an effect of the societies' pedagogy that John Engle greatly admires: "[B]y insisting on debate . . . as their chief pedagogical tool, [societies] view the self as flexible and shapeable—a series of roles, if you will—always becoming, never being" (41). Yet not all society members were open to the kind of ideological flexibility debating both sides of an issue required; in fact, Clariosophics decided in the affirmative on the question, "Is it not probable that much evil may even finally result to youth, from arguing questions contrary to their own sentiments?" It seems that at least some members worried that debating both sides, even for the sake of argument, posed a serious threat to their identities and values.

By focusing on the individual member, rather than the collective social body, however, we might be able to see whether agonistic debates challenged at least some participants, as Pratt puts it, to "put [their] ideas and identities on the

line” (39). One way to assess how individual society members responded to demands that they consider both sides of an argument is to read their journals. Journals of two society members who recorded their experiences at South Carolina College during the decades prior to the Civil War have been preserved: Edward Henry Kellers, who in 1853 kept a diary of his sophomore year at South Carolina College, and Giles Patterson, who kept a journal of his stay at South Carolina College from 1846 to 1848.

Edward Kellers’ journal presents no evidence that society debates challenged him to rethink his positions or ideas. In fact, in the following typical entries, Kellers describes society debates as uneventful, even tedious:

[April] 9th, [1853]. Saturday. Fine morning. No recitation this morning on Pelham. Wm Reynolds was not at the chapel. Major William read and prayed in the place. Put on a white vest for the first time this season. Went downtown. Sat awhile at the American Hotel. Saw the college cadets drill! Read all the afternoon! After supper went to the Society. Was greatly bored. Bought a Euphradian star, \$4.25!¹⁹ Was called on to go out to serenade but refused! Fooled a Negro which had supper for sale. This day had ended fine. Rather warm, so much so that white pants were greatly worn by the students.

Saturday, May 7th, 1853. No recitation this morning. Rose about one half past nine. Got my breakfast sent to me. Afterwards walked in the woods. The weather was very warm, the warmest day this year. Read til dinner. After sat under the tree til supper. After attended Society. Not much going on. Samuel Melton spoke on which incites a man to good—hope of reward or fear of punishment. Decided in the negative. Melton spoke on his side. Returned. Went to bed. Very tired after a long talk with Hames. Steven found my star. Paid 50 cts. for so doing.

Although elsewhere in his journal Kellers eagerly discusses intellectual issues, he seems uninterested in the activities of the literary society. Without motivation or interest, it is unlikely that Kellers was profoundly affected by the debates he heard at the society.

In contrast to Kellers, Giles Patterson demonstrates an avid engagement in the activities of the Clariosophic society. He often seems more interested in society events than in his coursework, and he frequently records details of debates in his journal. For example, in the following entry, Patterson describes a “spirited

debate” that took place in the society, then betrays a relative lack of interest in his coursework, devoting only a few lines to describing the day’s recitation:

Last Saturday night the Clariosophic Society met again after the three months’ vacation, and we had a very spirited debate afterwards, one more interesting I have not often witnessed. It was advanced by Landrum on the question, “Is there more evidence of the existence of God than of the existence of matter.” That the knowledge of the existence of matter implied or carried with it the idea of a soul, that the soul was immortal not eternal, it must have had an originator, that the originator is God, in fact that the evidence of the existence of a God preceded the knowledge of the existence of matter. By Loque, that the world could not have taken its form and have had all its revolutions and motions from chance, therefore, it must have had a maker, that the idea of the maker goes before the idea of the matter because we see nothing has the marks of design upon it without previously knowing it had an author, and therefore the evidence. These were what I considered the most valid that were used. An election comes off next Saturday night for officers of the Society. Allen and Lipscomb are the candidates for the presidency. I hope that Allen may be elected. This morning I arose a hour before recitation (half past 5 o’clock) put on a clean shirt as I always do on Wednesdays, looked over my lesson, went to recitation, and was not called upon. (27–28)

Even though Patterson called the debate “spirited,” a description that implies a lively exchange between two or more sides, he only recalls one side of the argument—the side that confirms his belief in the existence of God.¹⁰ Furthermore, he judges only the arguments that uphold his belief among the “most valid.”

In a later entry, on November 1, 1846, Patterson describes another “spirited debate” in the society—this time on the question of secession:

Last night there was a spirited debate on the question, “Has a state a right to recede from the Union,” and as is usual there were some who strayed far from the question. Some thought their patriotism was questioned by it and flew off to picturing the horrors of disunion, some the oppression of the majority, some drew general conclusions from particular premises, etc., virtually arguing the question as if it stood thus: “Is there any cause which can give a right to a state to recede from the Union,” which no true son of Carolina

would attempt to refute. I shall not pretend to a report of the debate and therefore leave it. (35)

In this entry, unlike the last one, Patterson acknowledges two passionate sides of the debate and criticizes both: Those who argued the affirmative, he claims, ineffectively argued on the grounds of tyranny of the majority. Those who advanced the negative side, whom Patterson criticizes for melodramatically “picturing the horrors of disunion,” used equally faulty reasoning. Despite his contempt for both sides, Patterson concludes with a declaration that implies the question itself was ultimately moot, for “no true son of Carolina would attempt to refute” a state’s right to secede from the Union. While the debate helped Patterson to recognize the specious reasoning in both sides of the debate, it didn’t seem to challenge Patterson to modify or rethink his own position.

These two students’ journals—one that betrays a general apathy toward the societies and the other that reveals a student engaged in debate but clinging to his original positions—offer no evidence that society debates challenged students’ ideas. Furthermore, the testimony of one other society member, Maxcy Gregg, confirms this observation. In his 1835 valedictory speech, society president Maxcy Gregg criticizes the society’s tendency to focus on political issues, which he claims encourages students to narrow their thinking and retreat into rigid positions:

In a democracy, to become a good speaker is to become distinguished and powerful. Accordingly, the object of this Society is to prepare its members for public speaking. With this view, it becomes an important consideration, what are the questions, the discussion of which forms the best training for the contests of the bar, the popular assembly, and the Legislature.

At present, most of the subjects of debate are taken from the politics of the day; or if any others are brought forward, they are commonly skipped over with little attention. It is true that the political events which are constantly taking place, from their immediate importance, are most apt to excite interest and curiosity; but it does not therefore follow that [the] discussion [of politics] is the best way of learning to think justly, to compose clearly, and to speak with eloquence and force. On the contrary, the habit of talking exclusively on politics, as on any other single subject, tends to produce a narrowing of views and a confined way of thinking.

Gregg further asserts that party affiliation can encourage men to “fall into the habit, on all subjects, of deciding first and reasoning afterwards—of arguing

for victory, instead of inquiring for truth.” Rather than arguing questions of politics, Gregg proposes that the society devote its attention to metaphysics, morals, and literature, all of which are “better calculated to expand the mind, to improve the language, and refine the manner.” These subjects do not, he concedes, lend themselves to “practical utility,” but they exercise the mind and encourage students to consider multiple perspectives.

Rhetoric teachers today are not any more likely than nineteenth-century Clariosophics were to take Gregg’s advice to abandon political topics or contentious debate in the writing classroom; if we continue to be persuaded by the promises of critical pedagogies, however, we must try to better understand how what we do in our composition classes challenges (or fails to challenge) students’ beliefs and ideologies.

Conclusions and Unanswered Questions

Nineteenth-century literary societies offer a potentially rich historical analogy to some of today’s critical pedagogies: Though there are significant differences, both foreground conflict and involve debate of current political and social issues. Furthermore, both challenge at least some students to consider non-dominant perspectives and assume ironic stances toward hegemonic values and ideologies. However, claims that pro–con debate encourages students to resist dominant values and reexamine their positions on important issues don’t seem to hold for members of South Carolina College’s literary and debating societies, at least given the available evidence.

Drawing as I do from limited evidence—minutes and records from one antebellum society and journals from two students—I must qualify my claim and call for further research. Even though archival materials from the Clariosophic Society suggest that antebellum societies may have been less radical than their pedagogy would imply, it is still possible—even likely—that they encouraged at least some participants to rethink important public issues and question dominant ideologies. Certainly these kinds of things were possible in societies that required students to advocate nondominant perspectives and critique the status quo. Further archival work on societies could not only test my conclusions but also help determine when and under what conditions such pedagogies go awry.

There are a variety of potential explanations for why the Clariosophic Society did not have the kind of radical effect on its members that we may have expected. One is that the society meetings were student led. This kind of pedagogy, where students choose topics, prepare and deliver speeches, and evaluate one another’s arguments, is in many ways close to the student-centered spirit of many critical pedagogies. Nevertheless, without a teacher to guide the exercises, suggest readings, play “devil’s advocate,” or evaluate students’ performances, mem-

bers may very well have lacked the motivation or support for arguing reasonably from a contrarian position. While this is one possible explanation, we should keep in mind that nonacademic societies (those that were not affiliated with a college or university)—like the London debating societies that Mary Thale examines or the African-American literary societies that Elizabeth McHenry and Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish describe—were radical and subversive institutions. Perhaps, then, the institutional structure within which college literary societies existed prevented them from becoming sites for social critique.

Another factor that may have prevented members of the Clariosophic society from challenging their own beliefs and ideologies was what Graff calls societies' "depende[nce] on social homogeneity" (46). All privileged white males who expected to become lawyers, ministers, or politicians, Clariosophics not only had a difficult time imagining and representing minority perspectives, they also had little to gain from such exercises—especially in the years leading up to the Civil War. As Christy Friend has noted, this is rarely the case in today's universities: Diversity "builds into classroom activities a potential for multivocal participation" that would have been impossible in antebellum literary societies (20). Nevertheless, it's still worth asking how we can better challenge students—especially privileged ones—to consider minority perspectives.

Another reason that societies may have failed to operate as forums for cultural and political critique is their emphasis on competition over inquiry. As Clariosophic Maxcy Gregg put it, students may have been "arguing for victory, instead of inquiring for truth." Without much at stake in questioning the status quo, members could dramatize radical ideas while keeping a safe distance from the subversive politics they advocated. And after it all, they could slide back into their comfortable positions and even pat themselves on the back for having argued "the other side." In today's universities, where "diversity" is the watchword, few students could get away with the kind of blatant sexism and racism that the Clariosophics flaunted. Nevertheless, students today can still assume subversive positions for the sake of a grade, earn their mark, and then retreat to their former ideologies, feeling liberalized by the process. In fact, in "Community Service and Critical Teaching," Bruce Herzberg shares his colleague's experience of overhearing students admit to feigning exactly this kind of enlightenment in order to earn an "easy A" in a service-learning course (309). The critical question, then, is how to convince students—especially privileged ones—that more than their grades are at stake in classroom exercises that ask them to put their ideas and ideologies on the line.

Unfortunately, the archives of nineteenth-century literary societies like South Carolina College's Clariosophic Society don't provide us with simple answers to these questions. They can, however, invite us to think more critically about how and why critical pedagogies work and fail in our writing classrooms today.

Notes

¹I would like to thank *Rhetoric Review* reviewers Patricia Bizzell and Clyde Moneyhun for their generous comments on an earlier draft of this article. I am also grateful to Laura Wilder, Peter Castor, Steven Lynn, and especially Trish Roberts-Miller for helping me to shape my argument.

²South Carolina College was renamed University of South Carolina after the Civil War.

³Except in the West and at historically black colleges and universities, literary and debating societies declined steadily after the Civil War.

⁴Included on Harding's list of nineteenth-century public figures who had been active in college societies are James Madison, John Quincy Adams, John Randolph, Daniel Webster, George Bancroft, Samuel F. B. Morse, and Woodrow Wilson.

⁵Readers can request a full list of the 135 questions that the Clariosophic Society debated between 1842 and 1847 from the author. Because of space limitations, I'm not able to include them as an appendix.

⁶Harding observes that prior to 1840 antislavery advocates sometimes prevailed in societies of the Lower South (194) but that proslavery sentiment became more intractable in the 1840s.

⁷Although I examined records and documents from the Clariosophic Society from the time of its founding in 1805 through the time its activities were suspended because of the Civil War, I chose to document, code, and closely analyze the questions considered by the Clariosophic Society during the five-year period from 1842 through 1847 for two primary reasons: It was the period in the society's history that saw peak enrollment and activity, and it coincided with the attendance of Giles Patterson, whose diary provides one of the more vivid pictures of the activities of the Clariosophic Society from a student's perspective.

⁸The "affirmative" indicates the first term, and "negative" signifies the second one.

⁹Kellers belonged to South Carolina College's Euphradian Society, the rival society of the Clariosophics.

¹⁰Patterson professes his spiritual devotion elsewhere in the journal.

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