



“Prettier Than They Used to Be”: Femininity, Fashion, and the Recasting of Radcliffe’s Reputation, 1900–1950

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DURING the first half of the twentieth century, institutions of higher learning underwent a sea change. In just fifty years, the number of Americans attending college grew more than tenfold, from 238,000 to over 2,660,000. Riding the crest of that wave were women, whose ranks swelled—thanks to achievements in women’s rights, the labor demands and displacement associated with industrialization, the expansion of the middle class, and the standardization of the education system—from 85,000 in 1900 to more than 800,000 five decades later.¹ As historians of higher education and gender have shown, the public’s initial reaction to collegiate women

This essay is the result of research funded by a dissertation grant from the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, which has kindly granted permission to quote from their collections. The author would like to thank librarians Sarah Hutcheon and Diana Carey for their assistance as well as Carnegie Mellon faculty members Scott Sandage, Steve Scholssman, and Lisa Tetrault. Dr. James Axtell provided advice, editing, and inspiration. The essay benefitted immensely from comments made by an anonymous reviewer and the journal’s editor.

¹U.S. Department of Education, “Enrollment in educational institutions, by level and control of institution,” August 2007, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/do7/tables/dto7_003.asp, accessed 3 September 2009; Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 63 and passim; Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959); and John Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). While the number of women students grew significantly, their percentage vis-à-vis men remained the same, averaging 40 percent for the period studied.

The New England Quarterly, vol. LXXXII, no. 4 (December 2009). © 2009 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved.

ranged from concern to outrage, but in time the prevalent disdain for the dowdy “bluestocking” succumbed to a more positive attitude toward the woman who wore the varsity sweater she had not borrowed, but earned.² While various social and cultural forces influenced the public’s rising acceptance of educated women, those women, and the colleges they attended, made a concerted effort to encourage that shift, an undertaking that has remained largely unstudied.³

Women who attended coeducational colleges and universities comprised nearly 80 percent of female students by 1920 and 90 percent by the mid-1950s, and they were generally seen in a more favorable light than those who attended all-female schools.⁴ Among such same-sex institutions, the Seven Sisters, a cluster of elite women’s colleges in the northeastern United States, drew the most vicious condemnations.⁵ One social critic claimed that the schools were “turning out a higher-class and more expensive article than men are willing to accept,” and another labeled the students “physically and socially unattractive.”⁶ Seven Sisters’ graduates, with their career ambitions and

²See Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Lynn Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Lynn Peril, *College Girls: Bluestockings, Sex Kittens, and Coeds, Then and Now* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). On the history of the “bluestocking,” see Nicole Pohl and Betty Schellenberg’s *Reconsidering the Bluestockings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Many of the book’s essays deal with England, not the United States, but the opening essay presents the subject’s historiography.

³One work that does address the subject is Deborah M. Olsen’s “Remaking the Literature: Promotional Literature of Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley Colleges in the mid-to-late 1940s,” *History of Education Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 418–59.

⁴Susan Poulson and Leslie Miller-Bernal, eds., *Challenged by Coeducation: Women’s Colleges Since the 1960s* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), p. 6.

⁵The Seven Sisters (Vassar, Wellesley, Mt. Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Smith, Barnard, and Radcliffe) were first given the name in the late 1920s in reference to the Pleiades, the daughters of Titan Atlas and the sea nymph Pleione.

⁶R. Le Clerc Phillips, “The Problem of the Educated Woman,” *Harper’s Monthly*, December 1926, p. 63, and William J. Ballinger, “Spinster Factories,” *Forum*, May 1932, p. 302. For more on the history of Radcliffe College, see Jill Lamberton, “Claiming an Education: Alice Mary Longfellow and the Legacy of Transatlantic Collaboration in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Higher Education” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2007), and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, ed., *Yards and Gates: Gender in Harvard and Radcliffe History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). On the history of

perceived low marriage rates, were not to be ignored. Not only did they threaten men's livelihoods; they threatened the very existence of the American family.

Each of the Seven Sisters had its own public image. Wellesley girls were debutantes; Mount Holyoke was for the prim and proper. Radcliffe's reputation was the most unflattering. The "Harvard Annex" was chartered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as Radcliffe College in 1879, and by 1905 its students were already "noted more for their learning than beauty." The reputation for intelligence was well earned. Given its affiliation with Harvard, arguably the nation's premier institution of higher learning, Radcliffe had high academic standards. Writing to her mother in Montana in 1909, Hazel Hunkins lamented, "You can't get in Radcliffe unless you pass Harvard exams. If I had my choice, I would go to Radcliffe, but I could never get in." Hunkins consoled herself that, although Radcliffe's faculty and facilities were "the best in the U.S., the girls are all grinds." She attended Vassar instead.⁷

The basis for the claim that Radcliffe students were "unattractive" is difficult to establish, but the opinion was widely held and graphic: Radcliffe women had stringy hair and shiny noses; they wore flat shoes, rumpled clothing, and thick glasses. Among the women's most caustic critics were their male neighbors across the Yard, whose publications provided plenty of fodder for periodicals around the country. Harvard caricatures portrayed the 'Cliffie as a "synonym for all that is unattractive in women," "a thoroughly unattractive figure . . . [who] wander[s] into the library like the witch of Endor and enquire[s]

other women's colleges, see Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Knopf, 1984); Patricia Ann Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 512-29.

⁷"Types of Pretty Girls in the Freshman Class at Radcliffe," *Boston Journal*, 19 October 1905, p. 6; Hazel Hunkins (Hallinan) to her mother, 12 May 1909, Hazel Hunkins Hallinan Collection, MC532, box 77, folder 11, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. The term "grind" was used as we use "nerd" today.

if the lost volume of Kant had been returned.”⁸ Reputations are notoriously difficult to change, but at Radcliffe, administrators, publicists, and students mounted a concerted campaign to combat the lingering impression that learned women were unattractive, unfeminine, and unmarriageable. By 1951, a Harvard professor was commenting, “The Radcliffe girl carries feminism and femininity in almost equal balance. It’s enough to upset anybody.” Those closest to the Yard were late in discovering what the *New York Times* had already proclaimed in 1949: “everyone agrees that Radcliffe girls are prettier than they used to be.”⁹

Marriage, Femininity, and Radcliffe’s Administrators, 1900–1930

Even though the college-educated woman had been a focus of intrigue and inquest for nearly half a century, by the early 1900s she loomed large on the country’s cultural horizon. *Ladies’ Home Journal* covered May Day pageants and dorm antics. The *New York Times* 1906 article “The College Girl’s Wardrobe—What Should Go in the Freshman Trunk?” coached prospective college girls on how to avoid the “blush that comes through the knowledge of wearing clothes that are not in good taste.”¹⁰ Etiquette books such as *The Correct Thing in Good Society* (1902) offered chapters on how to behave, study, and dress at college. Not only was the college girl being instructed; she was being investigated. As a modern-day researcher has noted, “one of the earliest topics of population research in the United States was the demographic behavior

⁸“All About Radcliffe,” *Harvard Crimson*, 15 December 1942, p. 2, and “The Student Vagabond,” *Harvard Crimson*, 14 October 1931, p. 2. During the period studied, articles from Harvard publications were reprinted in the mainstream press and other student newspapers. For example, *The Daily Californian* (University of California) covered the literary back-and-forth between Harvard and Radcliffe. I use the noun “Cliffie,” as I do “coed,” historically, and any negative connotations attached to the terms are not mine but those of the contemporaries to whom I refer or allude.

⁹“Radcliffe College,” *Mademoiselle*, October 1951, p. 45, and J. A. Lewis, “Harvard Goes Co-Ed, but Incognito,” *New York Times Magazine*, 1 May 1949, p. 17.

¹⁰“The College Girl’s Wardrobe—What Should Go in the Freshman Trunk?” *New York Times Magazine*, 9 September 1906, p. 26.

of women college graduates.”¹¹ The female student’s spending habits were analyzed at the Wharton School (University of Pennsylvania), her preferences for hosiery dissected by home economists, and her yearly budget tracked by admissions officers. In the first decade of the century, much of the advice and scrutiny was focused on students at single-sex institutions because coeducational facilities were only beginning to admit women on a routine basis.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, naysayers had questioned the toll that higher learning was taking on women’s physical health, mental stability, and emotional well-being. In *Sex in Education* (1873), Dr. E. H. Clarke asserted that there were so many female college graduates who had been “permanently disabled” by their intense study as to “excite the gravest alarm, and to demand the serious attention of the community.” Playing upon fears about the fecundity of uneducated immigrants, Clarke wrote that if large numbers of college-educated women continued to be barren, whether by choice or by disability, “it requires no prophet to foretell that the wives who are to be mothers in our republic must be drawn from trans-atlantic homes.”¹² The educated woman, in short, was endangering the traditional make-up of the American family.

To combat critics like Clarke, women’s college administrators assumed the role of experts, citing firsthand experience that men such as Clarke lacked. Entering the national discussion on women’s education, presidents and deans, as historian Margaret Lowe has shown, invested “much time and effort to establish socially palatable images of their students.”¹³ They published books and articles and spoke at commencements and club meetings to convince the public that women at single-sex colleges were “regular girls.” In her commencement speech in 1905, Radcliffe’s first president, Elizabeth Agassiz, described

¹¹Mary Cookingham, “Bluestockings, Spinsters and Pedagogues: Women’s College Graduates, 1865–1910,” *Population Studies* 38, no. 3 (November 1984): 349–64.

¹²E. H. Clarke, *Sex in Education* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1875), p. 63.

¹³Margaret Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 80.

her students as “young girls who have differed from other girls in nothing but superior intelligence, earnestness, and training—human girls who enjoy music and dancing and theatricals.” As for their social lives, Agassiz said, “The time is past when any reasonable being can complain that Radcliffe girls have no college life. Some of them, indeed, have so much college life that I cannot see how they can do their work.” The address was reprinted in newspapers throughout New England.¹⁴

Dispelling the image of the book-bound, barren bluestocking was a serious priority for women’s college administrators, but initially they and the faculty puzzled over how to attack the problem, for there was no clear, scientific evidence for a direct correlation between birth and marriage rates and a college education. As Charles Franklin Emerick of Smith College argued in a 1909 issue of *Political Science Quarterly*, numerous factors influence life patterns, and studies too often assume that “college women and their non-college associates are in every respect alike save that the former are college-bred.” “The higher education of women is far too young for satisfactory statistical investigation,” Emerick concluded.¹⁵ In time and with more graduates to profile, such investigations did yield reliable results, and when that opportunity presented itself, women’s colleges were among the first to examine their graduates’ rates of marriage and child bearing. Those surveys, as well as others conducted by contemporary and modern demographers, illustrate that in the first two decades of the century, women’s college graduates were indeed approximately 20 percent less likely to marry than women who did not attend college. Vassar’s comprehensive 1919 study showed a marriage rate of 60 percent during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and that of the Radcliffe classes of 1911–15 ranged between 60 and 65 percent.¹⁶ By the mid-1920s, however, the trend had reversed

¹⁴“Commencement Address,” Elizabeth Agassiz Papers, SC 99, carton 1, folder 35, Schlesinger Library.

¹⁵Charles Franklin Emerick, “College Women and Race Suicide,” *Political Science Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (June 1909): 276, 282.

¹⁶Mabel Newcomer and Evelyn S. Gibson, “Vital Statistics from Vassar College,” *American Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 4 (January 1924): 430–42; Norma Ware and

itself, and the marriage rates of women's college graduates differed little from either their less-educated sisters or those who had attended coeducational institutions, although they did marry, on average, two years later.¹⁷

Despite the statistics, the Seven Sisters retained their reputation for being, as a 1932 article by Willis J. Ballinger titled them, "Spinster Factories." According to Ballinger, "the faculties of our women's colleges make [a contribution] to celibacy," and their administrators are "apostles of dull and narrow living." At these cloistered campuses, "we have far too many dateless girls. They gravitate into celibate ideals from neglect." The curriculum, he went on, has "far too many courses in history, in economics, in social and natural science," many of which should be replaced with classes on home decoration, beauty culture, and dancing. Women's colleges, Ballinger advised, should make "every effort . . . to show girls how to dress as becomingly and as aesthetically as possible." Such changes, he concluded, would make "happier marriages, and more of them."¹⁸

According to Ballinger, Radcliffe's students were not receiving the training they needed to counteract their natural dullness. A 1912 magazine profile of the school observed that despite the college's ability to attract students, "the subtle enemy to her growth is the poor reputation for sociability she has received—for some reason people think that no 'real live' girls go to Radcliffe." The stigma clung to Radcliffe's students for decades. In 1935, *The Harvard Man's Guidebook*, which offered Cambridge newcomers advice on navigating its night life, warned, "smart Harvard men will avoid Radcliffe social functions as he would the bubonic plague, unless he is the type that cares for French ices and scones and elderly maiden chaperones who take their duties seriously."¹⁹ Evidently, though, a

Marta Wenger, "Life Patterns of Radcliffe Alumnae, 1900–1970: A Report on the Centennial Survey," October 1984, Associate Dean/Radcliffe College Papers, R6VE, ser. 2, carton 7, folder Admission, Library.

¹⁷See Jo Anne Preston, "Negotiating Work and Family: Aspirations of Early Radcliffe Graduates," in Ulrich, *Yards and Gates*.

¹⁸Willis J. Ballinger, "Spinster Factories," *Forum*, May 1932, pp. 301–4.

¹⁹Ione Proctor, "Radcliffe College," *Eastern and Western Review*, June 1912, p. 4; R. E. Cohen, ed., *The Harvard Man's Guidebook* (Boston: n.p., 1935), p. 11.

reasonable number of Crimson men failed to heed the guide's warnings, for by the 1950s, an estimated 60 percent of those Radcliffe women who married, married Harvard graduates.²⁰

While they were battling the public's perception that Radcliffe's women were unmarriageable, women's college administrators were simultaneously parrying accusations that their students were unattractive and unfashionable. 'Cliffies were under particular scrutiny. In an article entitled "The Problem of the Educated Woman," which ran in *Harper's Monthly* in December 1926, female author R. Le Clerc Phillips wondered if women at single-sex institutions were "encouraged to go to college because they are ugly . . . or whether they become plain and unattractive as a result of hard study." She blamed students for their lack of interest in dress and grooming but also chastised administrators, who "desire to turn out their pupils in their own image. And too often they succeed." Female administrators of these "Adamless Edens," Phillips charged, were "frigid to the last degree in their deportment, inconspicuous to the point of drabness in their clothes, sober to the point of dullness in their conversation."²¹ Phillips's diatribe spoke to lingering fears that women's colleges arrested their students' sexual and social development and, in the worst cases, fostered lesbianism.²²

Time and again, administrators had to remind the American public that the Seven Sisters were not a breeding ground for old maids. In her article "Citizens of the World," Barnard dean Virginia Gildersleeve rebuked those who "still think of colleges, and especially women's colleges, as cloistered places, entirely aloof from the present-day problems." Social events with Ivy neighbors, the camaraderie of the campus, and intellectual

²⁰"Pembroke Finds 'Cliffies Consider Themselves 'Liberal Thinkers,'" *Brown Daily Herald*, 13 November 1959, p. 1.

²¹Phillips, "The Problem of the Educated Woman," p. 62.

²²Concerns about lesbianism are a subtext of many criticisms leveled at women's colleges. See Patricia A. Palmieri, "Here Was Fellowship: A Social Portrait of Academic Women at Wellesley College, 1895-1920," *History of Education Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 195-214, and Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).



FIG. 1.—Eleanor Stabler (Radcliffe Class of 1914) and her dorm pals enjoy a late-night snack. Administrators at women's colleges stressed that their students were "regular girls" who benefited greatly from the camaraderie of campus life. Eleanor Stabler Brooks Papers, 1903–83, Radcliffe Archives, SC 128-1-10, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Image reproduced by permission of the Schlesinger Library.

stimulation were touted as benefits of student life. As early as the 1900s, one Radcliffe administrator was boasting of the “wonderful femininity of girls colleges” that “may make girls sufficient unto themselves.”²³

But insofar as they warmed to the notion of an educated woman, Americans preferred the lipstick-wielding coed over the frumpily clad ‘Cliffie. Phillips carefully distinguished “the increasing class of girls who merely go to college” from the “highly intelligent” who attend women’s colleges “for purely intellectual purposes.” When it came to attracting men, Seven Sister students, who were “bending over books and burning the midnight oil,” could not compete with coeds, who were “going from beauty salon to beauty salon, trying a succession of Marcel waves, complexion tonics, rouges and hair tints.”²⁴

The boy-crazy, spend-happy coed was often portrayed as more devoted to fashion than coursework. In 1915, Penn State’s humor magazine, *Froth*, ran a piece called “The Co-Ed’s Stocking,” which asked Santa to “place in the toe some Roger and Gallait, a few boxes of rou-finger nail polish, a powder puff or two” along with “some easy final examinations and a few dances at a real frat house.”²⁵ It was generally agreed by contemporary observers that coeds dressed more handsomely and formally than their sisters at single-sex schools. Students themselves admitted that when classrooms were shared with men, “heels are a little higher, tailored dresses take the place of skirts and sweaters and hats are worn on well[-]curled heads.”²⁶ Because their standards of dress were more in keeping with mainstream tastes, coeds raised fewer eyebrows, and their administrators felt less need to defend them to the public.

Relying not on state funds but on private benefactors and high tuition fees, Radcliffe administrators were eager to

²³Virginia Gildersleeve, “Citizens of the World,” *Century Magazine*, Winter 1930, p. 82; LeBaron Russell Briggs, *Routine and Ideals* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), p. 118.

²⁴Phillips, “The Problem of the Educated Woman,” p. 59.

²⁵“The Co-Ed’s Stocking,” *Froth*, December 1915, p. 22. The incorrect spelling of French perfumer Roger and Gallet was likely intended for comic effect.

²⁶“Questionnaires Reveal Oddities of Fashions at Girls’ Schools,” *Daily Collegian*, 9 October 1934, p. 1.

reassure donors, parents, and the American public at large that while elite women's schools had something different to offer, that difference in no way undermined their students', or society's, notions of what constituted an appropriate femininity. Early in the century, LeBaron Russell Briggs, president of Radcliffe College from 1903 until 1923 and a prolific writer on education, gave a commencement speech at Wellesley College. He opened by addressing typical objections to higher education for women: it was "a social disadvantage"; "studying mars beauty"; "a masculine woman is as bad as an effeminate man." Such sentiments were "said so often," Briggs conceded, that "I hesitate to repeat [them]." In answering the critics, he averred that "there is no sex in learning and nothing ungentle," and he insisted that "masculine women" were no more "commoner in college than out of it." With firsthand accounts of life on campus, he sought to convince the public that the goal of women's colleges was not that the student "be less womanly but that she may be more of a woman."²⁷

Two decades later, Seven Sisters administrators were still struggling to portray their students as properly feminine. In an article that ran in *Harper's Monthly* three months after Phillips's, Henry Noble MacCracken, president of Vassar College, responded to her criticisms by once again stressing that educated women were women first and foremost. "Early caricatures affected the mannish mode," he recalled. But, he maintained, "That has gone now. The college woman is as near the norm of the American womanhood of similar economic, social, and racial condition as can be imagined."²⁸

To highlight the "normalcy" of their students, administrators attempted to distance their institutions from the bluestocking generation. At the end of his tenure at Radcliffe, Briggs remembered, "When I was young, a girl who went to college was thought queer . . . People who know have long since discovered that the college girl is quite as human and delightful as any other girl." Although he acknowledged that "no doubt

²⁷Briggs, *Routine and Ideals*, p. 100.

²⁸Henry Noble MacCracken, "Parents and Daughters," *Harper's Monthly*, March 1927, p. 460.

there are odd or unwomanly college girls," he promised that "they are singularly few." Not long thereafter, the college's new president, Ada Comstock, compared present-day 'Cliffies to their foremothers. She remarked, "This generation, so aptly described as 'decent and dauntless,' has a sense of adventure, instead of the smugness of the 90's." Sweeping aside gross generalizations, Comstock highlighted the student body's diversity. "The modern college girl represents, not only one kind as formerly, but every variety from the wealthy debutante to the girl from the poorest and most uncultured home."²⁹ Radcliffe rightfully claimed a wider student demographic than her Sisters, for the school's admissions policy privileged academic achievement over religious or economic background.

Upper-level administrators continued to tackle negative stereotypes about their students, but by the late 1920s, their attention was increasingly diverted to more pressing concerns. The school's publicity department, which had evolved from a "relatively unappreciated arm of educational administration" to "an emerging force of growing magnitude," filled the breach. "Harassed" administrators, a 1939 article explained, understood firsthand the need for "catching and holding that elusive and fickle public favor which is necessary for the success of any rising movement or force in our culture." In the wake of the bad press garnered by the 1920s' raccoon-coat-clad collegian, institutions of higher learning had to find ways to speak to an expanding student base and a watchful and ever critical public.³⁰

The Fashion Industry and Radcliffe's Publicity Department, 1930–1950

College officials clearly understood that if they did not create their own vision of Radcliffe, the press would do it for

²⁹LeBaron Russell Briggs, "To Schoolgirls at Graduation," in *The Freshman Girl*, ed. Kate W. Jameson and Frank C. Lockwood (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1925), p. 63; Ada Comstock, "The College Student of Today," *Boston American*, 1 March 1930, p. 5.

³⁰Rex Harlow, "Public Relations Gaining Increased Recognition," *Journal of Higher Education* 10, no. 5 (May 1939): 263–90.

them. Given the institution's academic reputation and its feminist leanings during a defining era of women's history, the school had long drawn media attention. Radcliffe was, as a 1914 editorial in the student newspaper explained, "an educational institution, an avowed servant of the public welfare, as a community of college women, at a time when the activities of women are of paramount interest." And so, "Radcliffe College cannot escape publicity." "Since then we must have publicity," the editorial concluded, "is it not up to us to see that we get the right kind?"³¹

Administrators agreed, and in 1916, together with students, they created a press board. Students, selected by competition, would work with individual editors at Boston papers, and a chair from the senior class and a college official or faculty member would supervise. Undergraduates were encouraged to report information about their clubs and causes to press board members or to an administrator at the "News Room," which for a time was located on the third floor of Fay House. Such diligence and foresight helped to "save the whole publicity department from overlooking some story of real value," the *Radcliffe News* declared. In soliciting students for yet more stories, the *News* asked, "how many realize that of all the news items and pictures of Radcliffe activities which have appeared in the Boston papers recently, practically all came through our own undergraduate reporters, working with these publicity agents?"³² As Radcliffe grew, and the field of public relations did as well, the college sidelined such student-driven efforts and, in the early 1930s, hired trained professionals to devote significantly more attention to ensuring a positive presence in the press.³³

Publicists at Radcliffe and her sister schools quickly became integral not only to the colleges' image crafting but to their fundraising and student recruitment campaigns as well. Many

³¹"Editorial," *Radcliffe News*, 11 December 1914, p. 2.

³²"Plan for a Press Board," *Radcliffe News*, 14 April 1916, p. 1; "What Is Good Publicity?" *Radcliffe News*, 28 October 1921, p. 2.

³³I am using the term "publicity department" as a catchall to describe all of the college's various publicity efforts, which fell under the headings of "news room," "publicists," and "public relations office."

of the promotions specialists were recent graduates and, as such, were personally invested in defeating outdated stereotypes of the educated woman. In "Stuffiness Wiped Out of Women's College Public Relations" (1948), a *Boston Sunday Herald* columnist observed, the publicists used "the same techniques to interpret their schools to the general public and to obtain vital support from their own alumnae that business and industry had long utilized." The piece profiled Seven Sisters public relations practitioners and described their career challenges. Highlighting the "problem of getting into popular circulation serious educational developments," Radcliffe's Barbara Norton noted that she "was constantly on the lookout for educational news that can be given the public appeal that pretty college girls' pictures get readily." The concern was not new. In 1922, members of the press board lamented, "The things Radcliffe really stands for most editors are not interested in. They want to know what kind of hats we affect, whether we dare to smoke in public, or whether there are any of us left with nice, long hair."³⁴

In 1929, the *Boston Post* conducted an informal survey of students' hair color and captioned an accompanying photograph, "Blondes and brunettes, all with a smile of confidence in proving that Radcliffe does have a lot of pretty girls." In 1931, the paper returned to the Radcliffe campus to comment on the appearance of the school's students. In an article entitled "Balanced Attire for Radcliffe," the reporter noted, "If the Radcliffian has a good opinion of her fashion, it seems that she has a right to be," since her wardrobe is "both practical and fashionable." As for 'Cliffies' reputation for being unstylish, the reporter asked, "Are there any frumps?" and concluded, "None were visible in the time spent over there." Several years later, in 1938, when the college switched its gym

³⁴"Stuffiness Wiped Out," *Boston Sunday Herald*, 5 December 1948, p. 45; "Editorial," *Radcliffe News*, 17 March 1922, p. 2. The publicists at the Seven Sisters formed an intercollegiate committee in 1928 called The Seven Women's Colleges to promote their schools collectively. For more information on the union, see "Banded Seven," *Time*, 13 November 1933.

uniforms from bloomers to shorts, the *Post* ran a two-page story.³⁵

The Radcliffe student's appearance was still being scrutinized, but the beholder's attitude was shifting. Even the college's most vocal critics acknowledged that a change had occurred. In 1931, a *Harvard Crimson* columnist writing under the pen name "The Vagabond" declared:

Long years ago our fathers in the pride of their youth set out to build up a Radcliffe tradition. She had chestnut hair, in long braids; she had large, low heeled, button shoes; she had cotton stockings. . . . She peered through thick glasses and talked through a shiny nose.

But then, one day he had wandered "by chance through that indefinite area of brick known as Radcliffe Yard. Hello, what was this? No doubt a Debutante hurrying to tea on Brattle Street."³⁶ As the years went by, the *Lampoon* and the *Crimson* continued to send up the 'Cliffies, but their portrayals became more varied, less stereotypical.³⁷

The educated woman's physical appearance was, time and again, the primary focus of the public's gaze, and the school's publicists did not back away from the responsibility of ensuring that that image was as appealing as it could possibly be. The goal of Radcliffe's publicity department was simple: to encourage the local and national press to portray its students as multifaceted young women who had both brains *and* beauty. Publicists could exploit various surveys and reports to demonstrate their students' intelligence, but they had to find a way to flaunt 'Cliffies' good looks. Toward this end, they pursued a clever strategy: they developed a win-win partnership with the fashion industry. When collegians first emerged as a viable

³⁵"Blondes Rule Radcliffe," *Boston Post*, 7 October 1929; "Balanced Attire for Radcliffe," *Boston Post*, 21 January 1931. The piece on Radcliffe's gym uniforms ran in the 30 October 1938 issue of the *Boston Post*.

³⁶"Opinion Column," *Harvard Crimson*, 14 October 1931, p. 2.

³⁷Indeed, as Radcliffe recruited more actively from outside New England, its student body grew more diverse, and dorms were built to accommodate the larger enrollment.



The only examination which a Radcliffe girl can't pass.

FIG. 2.—*The Harvard Lampoon*, 21 October 1925, p. 66. Radcliffe women responded to the cartoon by stating that there are a few things a Harvard man cannot pass gracefully: 1. A football; 2. A bargain counter; and 3. Out (*Daily Californian*, 13 November 1925). Image reproduced by permission of the *Harvard Lampoon*.

market in the late 1910s, the fashion industry had attempted to dictate styles; indeed, Cambridge shops had staged seasonal fashion shows or advice clinics in Radcliffe facilities. In 1930, a shoe industry publication admitted that the trade's attempt to impose its will had failed. "If there is any one thing that the college girl especially rebels against," the writer concluded, "it is advice." The industry had come to realize, as one fashion reporter put it, that "college girls are a fashion law unto themselves." To gain insight into their choices, retailers and manufacturers set out to enlist students' help; to reach the women of Radcliffe, they had to go through the school's publicity department.³⁸

Radcliffe had established itself as one of the nation's premier women's schools, and, by the mid-1930s, its preeminence brought a notoriety that could help sell skirts, sweaters, and saddle shoes to collegians around the country.³⁹ And so, by the 1930s and 1940s, the school's publicity department was presenting its students not only as consumers but as consultants as well. Recognizing that they had the advantage of a ready supply of insiders who could explain the seemingly inexplicable, college publicity departments paired students with manufacturers, merchants, and magazines—all of whom were willing to tout 'Cliffies as trendsetters in exchange for the collegians' stamp of approval. Selecting just the "right" undergraduate to represent the school at a runway show, as a guest editor for a women's magazine, or on a manufacturer's advisory board, publicists were able to control and refine Radcliffe's public image.

The publicity department's composite portrait of the cute 'Cliffie attracted requests for student models, for permission to use campus illustrations in store displays, and for information about the women's wardrobe choices. To monitor how

³⁸D. Louise Weber, "College Girl Likes Shoes Swanky," *Shoe and Boot Recorder*, 9 August 1930, p. 236; Estelle Safier McBride, "Why College Girls Dress That Way," *New York Times*, 10 December 1944, p. SM28.

³⁹Papers of the Radcliffe College Publicity Department are found in the school's archives, housed at Schlesinger Library. The collection is found in RG 10, ser. 1. Boxes 6, 7, 8, and 9 contain the specific requests from the fashion industry.

the Radcliffe woman would be portrayed, publicists forbade students from giving interviews or having their pictures taken without first consulting the office, which usually insisted on having a staff member present. When manufacturers called for consultants, the request was published in the school paper, and applicants were screened by the publicity department. Such was the case in 1934, when Chicago-based Marshall Field contacted the school to secure contestants for a nationwide search for new design talent. The announcement seeking “young women with more than an average flair for fashion” ran on the front page of the *Radcliffe News* and referred interested parties to Miss Gough, the head of the publicity department. Another competition was held by Campus Original Guild, a New York-based company that sold clothing and accessories fashioned by college women only. The firm paid between \$10 and \$25 for designs and featured the student’s name and school on the item’s hangtag. With the help of the school’s publicists, the guild also recruited a campus representative from the senior class to “keep the Guild informed of latest fashion news.”⁴⁰ Similar requests and initiatives were prevalent throughout the 1930s and accelerated during the 1940s.

The school’s involvement with retailers, both locally and nationally, ensured that, as a 1938 article in the *Radcliffe News* declared, the “typical Radcliffe student, she of the flat heels, the stringy hair, and the spectacles, is rapidly becoming an extinct specimen.” That year, the reporter noted, a student named Virginia Hoagland “represented Radcliffe beauty enhanced by Stearns’ clothes” as she paraded around the store dressed in attire available in its college shop.⁴¹ ‘Cliffies also served as consultants to stores such as Slattery’s, which embraced the philosophy that “there’s no better authority on college fashions than college girls themselves.” When the store recruited students who would “g[i]ve their approval or veto to wardrobe

⁴⁰“Chicago Company Announces College Fashion Contest,” *Radcliffe News*, 12 January 1934, p. 1; “Campus Originals Guild Offers Opportunities,” *Radcliffe News*, 4 October 1940, p. 4.

⁴¹“Radcliffe Girls Model Fashions During Summer,” *Radcliffe News*, 14 October 1938, p. 3.

suggestions” at its annual college clinic, its appeal was handled by Radcliffe’s publicity department.⁴²

In addition to forming advantageous relationships with retailers, Radcliffe’s publicists forged beneficial associations with young women’s magazines such as *Mademoiselle*, *Calling All Girls*, *Seventeen*, and *Harper’s Junior*, which presented good-looking Radcliffe students to a national audience. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the department worked hand-in-hand with magazine editors, who requested everything from information on students’ diets to names of potential models. In addition, Radcliffe women were recruited to serve as guest editors. Because the students’ photographs would be published in the magazines, both editors and publicists sought out photogenic nominees. In 1952, for example, Radcliffe’s director of publicity, Joan Projansky, replied to an editor’s inquiry with the pertinent information that one student under consideration “without her glasses is a cute, perky, elf-like looking girl”; the other “is a blond, quite attractive girl with a wide smile.” Projansky admitted that “Neither are beauties, but both are nice looking girls.”⁴³

Between 1930 and 1950 Radcliffe’s publicity department worked to convince naysayers that “smart” and “pretty” were not mutually exclusive categories. Besides their partnerships with the fashion industry and women’s magazines, publicists pitched stories to major media outlets and radio programs. In one such overture to *Life*, Projansky proposed a piece tracing the evolution of the woman’s college graduate. The 1950s ‘Cliffie, she insisted, has “beauty and brains—and makes use of them.”⁴⁴ Projansky’s mission was clear: to get “across the idea that the blue-stockinged days are far behind us.”⁴⁵

⁴²“Mannish Clothes for Campus Preferred by College Girls,” *Boston Globe*, 25 July 1940, p. 17. College shops, first introduced in the early 1930s, became important venues for back-to-school shopping for the next several decades.

⁴³Joan Projansky to Mary Beth Little, 10 April 1952, Radcliffe Publicity Papers, RG 10, ser. 1, box 9, folder 63, Schlesinger Library.

⁴⁴Joan Projansky to editor at *Life*, 14 March 1952, Radcliffe Publicity Papers, RG 10, ser. 1, box 7, folder 66, Schlesinger Library.

⁴⁵“’49 Grad New Publicity Director,” *Radcliffe News*, October 1950, p. 3.

Style, Self-Regulation, and the Radcliffe Student, 1920–50

Perhaps the most significant force in altering popular perceptions about Radcliffe's students was the students themselves. As Anne Nancy Murray, class of 1946, wrote to her parents during her first days at the school, "This is going to be the cutest freshman class they've had in a long time. We are determined to live down the Radcliffe reputation."⁴⁶ Students fought the battle on two fronts. Recognizing that "intelligence is often imagined in this ignorant world to be synonymous with general unattractiveness," they mounted a campaign against those who continued to harp upon their appearance.⁴⁷ At the same time they turned inward, creating a campus culture governed by self-regulation. Applying their own standards to social dictates about femininity, they made and enforced dress codes, often ignoring fashion editors' advice and refusing to participate in beauty contests, events many students believed to be "against Radcliffe principles."⁴⁸

Spreading the word privately and publicly, students took to their pens and their typewriters to correct the erroneous representation of their classmates. In 1910, Eleanor Stabler wrote to a friend who was interested in attending Radcliffe, "the attitude of Harvard boys toward Radcliffe girls has been misrepresented"; they "do not despise Radcliffe girls as so many people in N.Y. have told me they would." One Harvard senior had assured Stabler that he "liked Radcliffe girls because they had more to them than the society 'fluffy ruffle' type."⁴⁹ Leaving nothing to chance, students diligently documented their popularity with nearby men's colleges. In 1926, 'Cliffies conducted an extensive survey of the dating activities of 250 dorm women, discovering that in a six-day period, they had

⁴⁶Anne Nancy Murray (Morgan) to parents, 25 September 1942, Anne Nancy Murray Morgan Collection, SC145, box 2, folder 11, Schlesinger Library.

⁴⁷"That Typical Radcliffe Girl," *Radcliffe News*, 6 December 1935, p. 2.

⁴⁸"Barnard, Moors Refuse to Enter 'Cliffe Best-Dressed Girl Contest," *Harvard Crimson*, 14 February 1959, p. 3.

⁴⁹Eleanor Stabler (Brooks) to "Dorothy," 10 November 1919, Eleanor Stabler Brooks Collection, SC128, box 1, folder 2, Schlesinger Library.

had 635 dates. When the data were published in the school newspaper, researchers concluded that their findings were fundamentally “contrary to the formidable reputation of our Alma Mater as an abandonedly studious, and therefore much neglected college.” Time and again, students insisted that there was no Radcliffe type, “in spite of casual remarks that we all have horn-rimmed glasses, straight hair, crooked stocking seams, and a lost stare.” As upperclassmen told newcomers in the *News*’ yearly “Freshman Issue,” “The students are about as varied a group as one could find.”⁵⁰

In their offensive campaign, Harvard was generally the women’s first target—unless, that is, they deemed it beneath them to respond. In one case, for example, they questioned “whether to give the author of a scintillating, startling statement the gratification of being recognized by retorting or whether to let it pass by as though of little consequence.” More often than not, however, the *News*’ editors took a swing. In 1926, the senior class bequeathed “to that Journal, not unknown in the best police court circles, the *Lampoon* . . . a gesture, not ladylike but meaningful.” As with many of the two schools’ literary contretemps, this round was covered by the local papers.⁵¹ Because it was their appearance that most often drew Harvard men’s disdain, Radcliffe women turned the tables on them, observing that Harvard men “usually dress sloppily or wear sports clothes.” In 1933, a Radcliffe class poem described Cambridge as a place “where sons of Harvard, so they say, / Go ’round dressed almost any way, / Slouchy hats upon their head, / Soft-soled sneakers they never shed.” In 1936, an outspoken first-year student announced in the *Crimson* that she had never “expected to find so many unattractive Harvard men.” “They’re so untidy,” she declared, that “I felt like buying some of them a new hat.”⁵²

⁵⁰“The Reward of the Unrighteous,” *Radcliffe News*, 26 February 1926, p. 2; “Radcliffe Ingredients,” *Radcliffe News*, 1 September 1939, p. 1.

⁵¹“Dear Lampy,” *Radcliffe News*, 16 March 1931, p. 2; “Radcliffe Seniors Give Class Gift,” *Boston Post*, 22 June 1926.

⁵²“As College Rivals See Each Other,” *Boston Post*, 4 December 1930, p. 5; “Seniors Bequeath Earthly Goods,” *Radcliffe News*, 21 June 1933, p. 2; “Radcliffe Freshman

Radcliffe women used their intellectual fire power to shoot down negative stereotypes issued not only from Harvard Yard but from beyond it as well. Every few months, editorials in the student newspaper attacked the popular press for its unflattering portrayals of women's colleges. *Radcliffe News* editors berated the author of the caustic "Spinster Factories" (1932) for his laughable recommendation that the curriculum be altered to include bridge and makeup lessons. "Has he never heard of the beauty talks and style shows in so many 'spinster factories'?" they quipped.⁵³ By puffing up their active involvement with the fashion and beauty industries, 'Cliffies deflated the author's accusations that students at women's colleges were mannish and unstylish.

Dismissing negative images with words alone, Radcliffe students recognized, would fail if their actions offered any grounds for scorn, and so they set about policing themselves. Because they understood the power of dress, Radcliffe women developed codes regulating what could be worn and when. In 1928, an editorial in the *Radcliffe News* reminded readers that clothes "matter immeasurably." To convince students to keep up their appearances during finals, the editors linked attire to academic success: "Your mental attitude depends a great deal on your personal appearance; as you feel sloppy or scatter-brained, or neat and methodical, that what you are writing will take on a different appearance." It was a winning argument for the grade-conscious 'Cliffies.⁵⁴

Through student-led organizations, Radcliffe women regulated not only dress codes but other activities as well, from

Finds Cambridge What She Expected; Amazed by Untidy Students," *Harvard Crimson*, 1 October 1936, p. 1. To a large degree, Radcliffe's criticisms were merited. Harvard men were arguably the most lackadaisical dressers of elite men's schools. *The Daily Princetonian* joked that Harvard men "can wear their clothes unpressed for a week without suffering social ostracism" ("Some of My Best Friends Are at Harvard," 20 April 1921, p. 2). Throughout the period studied, Princeton was the arbiter of men's clothing, with Yale running in second place.

⁵³Ballinger, "Spinster Factories," *Forum*, May 1932, p. 304; "Spinster Factories," *Radcliffe News*, 22 April 1932, p. 2. The physical education department at Smith College introduced a class called Beauty Culture in 1928.

⁵⁴"Editorial," *Radcliffe News*, 21 February 1928, p. 2.

curfews and calling hours to dances and dorm decor. The Student Government Association published the standards of behavior in its annual handbook, the *Redbook*, and each year students voted to renew or revise regulations to ensure that they accurately reflected class sentiments. The students' rules were often in keeping with what society deemed "appropriate" or "inappropriate" for women of their age. But, as is obvious in two key examples, Radcliffe students were more interested in pleasing themselves than others.

In the 1890s, Dean Agnes Irwin, who believed that "hair, being the crowning glory of women, was undoubtedly an advertisement of her sex[,] and propriety demanded a covering for it," implemented a rule that students wear hats in Harvard Square. Although Irwin had initiated the directive, it was the students who voted, year after year, to retain it. When the regulation was debated in 1924, student Vera Micheles argued that "nowhere in Cambridge are we distinctly separated from the rest of the world. We are living among the people of Cambridge. Therefore it has seemed the most courteous attitude to accept a convention that we find here." Although Micheles's opinion prevailed, throughout the 1920s students complained that the measure was outdated and unenforceable. By 1934, an editorial in the school paper noted that the "distinguishing characteristic" of the "undergraduate student is the absence of head-gear in the Square." By the end of the decade, the hat requirement had faded into obscurity.⁵⁵

Another contentious article in the student's wardrobe was pants, and throughout the 1940s, students argued where it was and was not proper to wear them. As with hats, some students urged their colleagues to consider the sensibilities of the citizens of Cambridge. "As long as we live in a community," they asserted, "we might at least respect and follow some of their ideas." The majority, however, believed that by regulating pants and jeans attire to certain times and places, Radcliffe's

⁵⁵"Fifty Year Review," *Radcliffe News*, 7 January 1938, p. 3; "Symposium on Hats," *Radcliffe News*, 21 November 1924, p. 2; "A Flag of Truce," *Radcliffe News*, 14 December 1934.

students not only promoted good relations with their neighbors but suited themselves as well. The rules loosened with each passing year. The 1947–48 *Redbook* stated that slacks and jeans “may be worn in the dormitory until 2 PM on week days and until 11 AM on Sundays” but could not be worn “in any other place or at any other time, except in a storm or sub-zero weather.” The next year, jeans were permitted in the dormitories until 5 o’clock. Enforcing the regulation was the responsibility of each house’s committee, but it was, as the newspaper reminded students, “up to each girl to maintain a good appearance and not abuse the privilege.”⁵⁶

Radcliffe students took a more conservative approach than their sisters at Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley, where although slacks were officially verboten, “everyone wears them anyway and nobody bothers to enforce the rule that they aren’t allowed.” The masculine-inspired ensembles the women wore attracted a great deal of negative press. One fashion writer commented after visiting Bennington College that “Dungarees, old faded blue color, have a field all their own. First thing the girls do when they put them on is to roll up the trouser legs half way. They wear tailored men’s shirts with them with tails outside.” Bennington had a reputation for having the most relaxed dress code among elite women’s schools. “In most colleges, slacks are prohibited at dinner. But in Bennington they appear at any old meal, including Sunday dinner.”⁵⁷

The press struggled to understand the popularity of ultra-casual attire at some women’s colleges. A 1944 article in the *New York Times* entitled “Why College Girls Dress That Way” claimed that the Seven Sisters’ sloppy styles were a reaction to “strict preparatory schools, where they are forced to wear uncomfortable uniforms.” Other journalists, speaking particularly of rural all-female campuses, concluded that with no men nearby to impress, women neglected fashion. In a 1938 profile,

⁵⁶“Pulling in the Slack,” *Radcliffe News*, 15 October 1943, p. 2; Student Government Association, *Redbook*, 1947–48, p. 39; “Girls Now Wear Jeans in Dorms by New Ruling,” *Radcliffe News*, 14 January 1949, p. 1.

⁵⁷“Girls Take to Boys Clothes for College Wear This Fall,” *Boston Traveler*, 25 July 1940, p. 10.

Life magazine commented that at women's colleges, "Their campus clothes are primarily for comfort whereas their co-ed sisters' are for attracting male students."⁵⁸

Although their colleagues at sister institutions simply flaunted extant regulations about pants and jeans, Radcliffe women were intent on forming an official consensus. In 1942, a student-run poll asked 'Cliffies to share their views about where and when it was appropriate to wear pants. Sixty-nine of the nearly 350 women polled approved of students wearing slacks on the streets of Cambridge, while 253 did not; 119 said slacks should be allowed in class, whereas 202 disagreed. Private settings, however, were a different matter altogether. When asked if slacks were proper to be worn at home, 300 women said "yes," 23 said "no," and 24 were undecided.⁵⁹ The results of the poll, which was conducted in May as student editors were preparing the *Redbook* for the following school year, were helpful in establishing new dress codes.

While administrators and publicists worked to frame a portrait of Radcliffe students as feminine and stylish, students improvised their own dictums about dress. As did college women elsewhere, Radcliffe women defied fashion editors' elaborate wardrobe suggestions and appointed themselves the sole sartorial authority. Beginning in the mid-1930s, upper-class 'Cliffies sent to each incoming student an issue of the *Radcliffe News* that described appropriate campus attire. Time and again, first year students were warned to "avoid the more extreme fashions that are shown in the August college issues of fashion magazines." One article sympathized, "Every store in the country has joined with *Harpers'*, *Vogue*, and *Mademoiselle* to present college fashions." There was only one reliable source of fashion advice, however, and campus leaders assured nervous new students, "We want to tell you." Given their urban location, 'Cliffies dressed more conservatively than their country colleagues. They acknowledged that casual trends, such as

⁵⁸McBride, "Why College Girls Dress That Way," p. SM28; "Youth Tell Their Story," *Life*, 6 June 1938, p. 56.

⁵⁹"Students Like Slacks at Home—Not in School," *Radcliffe News*, 1 May 1942, p. 3.



FIG. 3.—Anne Nancy Murray (Radcliffe Class of 1946) dons a man's shirt, jeans, and dirty saddle shoes. Although Radcliffe women were cautious about when and where they wore casual clothing, dress regulations were established by the students themselves, not by college administrators. Anne Murray Morgan Papers, 1890–1996, Radcliffe Archives, SC 145.1-7f.7-47, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Image reproduced by permission of the Schlesinger Library.

the early 1940s fad for pigtails, may be “all right for the country colleges, like Wellesley and Wheaton, but not for a city college.”⁶⁰ By collectively formulating and enforcing their own tastes, Radcliffe’s students cobbled together a unique style specific to their own campus.

It was a style that students inhabited but did not flaunt, as is clear in their reluctance to participate in the beauty contests popular during the 1940s and 1950s. In 1940, for example, the Union Photographic Society sponsored a “Glamour Girl of the East” contest, which was flooded with applicants from Bryn Mawr, Sarah Lawrence, Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley. The *Harvard Crimson* grumbled that Radcliffe students, who avoided the venue, considered “themselves either above or below such publicity.” In 1947, the *Crimson* organized its own beauty contest, aimed at finding Radcliffe’s best-looking first-year student, and within a few years, the annual event had become a de facto “Miss Radcliffe” competition. Radcliffe’s student government, which had grown progressively hostile toward the affair, enlisted the support of administrators to end it. President Wilbur K. Jordan claimed that the contest was “incompatible with other college policy to have one girl represent the entire College,” but the students viewed it more as “an un-Radcliffe idea” that was “more for Wellesley or Vassar than for Radcliffe.”⁶¹ In disdaining beauty contests, Radcliffe students demonstrated that they would not sacrifice their integrity as educated women simply to project an image that Harvard men, let alone the larger public, might admire.

The Lingering Debate about Beauty and Brains

By the end of the 1940s, the collective energies of Radcliffe’s administrators, publicity department, and students had

⁶⁰“Simple Basics Make Best ‘Cliffe Costume in Uncertain Climate,” *Radcliffe News*, 1 September 1948, p. 1; “Clothes Requirements for Radcliffe Are Simple,” *Radcliffe News*, 1 September 1938, p. 1; “Pigtail Latest College Fad,” *Boston Globe*, 24 September 1941, p. 9.

⁶¹“43 Photo Contest to Reveal ‘Glamour Girl of the East,’” *Harvard Crimson*, 24 April 1940, p. 1; “It Would Have Been Fun,” *Harvard Crimson*, 28 September 1956, p. 2.

softened the school's image as an academy for mannish spinsters, but the reputation for a nigh-on intimidating intelligence remained. As late as 1958, *Harper's* columnist David Boroff was reporting that Harvard men disliked having 'Cliffies in their classes because the women "raised the curve—that is, make courses harder by raising the average."⁶² And yet, as president W. K. Jordan had noted in 1952, the men had not been scared off. The college's "dedicated pioneers" of the turn-of-the-century, he wistfully observed, had "given way to an entirely different type of woman"—Radcliffe graduates who in "almost dull uniformity marry young men who typically have just graduated from Harvard."⁶³

Jordan's pensive tone signaled a crisis in all-female institutions of higher learning. With the expansion of coeducational advanced education after World War II, established elite women's schools were increasingly being seen as passé, as high-priced vestiges of the old guard.⁶⁴ In the late 1950s, school publicists set out to develop a radio program on the Seven Sisters' merits. The program, wrote one promoter, was intended to "positively clear up many misconceptions about our colleges" and to prove that "women's colleges are NOT obsolete." Radcliffe publicist Deanne Lord approached Archibald McLeish, asking him to lend his voice—and his cultural clout—to the effort. His response was disappointing:

Why women's colleges anyway? Why not just send Susie along to Ohio State? Lots more fun. And, at places like Michigan and California, better faculties than any women's college but Radcliffe and maybe Barnard can muster. Because I'm sure you will agree that is *the real dog* at the door.⁶⁵

⁶²David Boroff, "Imperial Harvard," *Harper's Magazine*, October 1958, p. 33.

⁶³W. K. Jordan, quoted in "Pembroke Finds 'Cliffies Consider Themselves 'Liberal Thinkers,'" *Brown Daily Herald*, 13 November 1959, p. 5.

⁶⁴For more information on the changing public image of women's colleges, see Deborah M. Olsen, "Remaking the Literature: Promotional Literature of Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley Colleges in the mid-to-late 1940s," *History of Education Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 418–59. For information on challenges faced by women's colleges since the 1960s, see Poulson and Miller-Bernal, *Challenged by Coeducation*.

⁶⁵Archibald McLeish to Deanne Lord, Radcliffe Publicity Papers, RG 10, ser. 6, box 2, folder 83.

And so, Seven Sisters administrators and publicists, who earlier had sought to portray their students as “regular girls,” were now presenting them as a select clientele that required special training in first-rate facilities, facilities that only all-female institutions could provide. To advance this effort, administrators resurrected the image of the bluestocking or, as Jordan termed her, the “dedicated pioneer.” Boroff, for one, thought that she had survived, for in 1958 he commented that “there is still a vestige of the old bluestocking spirit” at Radcliffe.⁶⁶

Radcliffe’s students would have agreed with him. Over the course of half a century, as their reputation for plainness and unsociability had dimmed, ‘Cliffies increasingly took criticism of all kinds as a matter of course and even, at times, as a badge of honor. When they refused to enter *Glamour* magazine’s Best-Dressed College Girl contest in the late 1950s, Harvard quipped that their “recent assertion of independence from the norms of femininity must be applauded as most Radcliffe.” After decades of self-regulation and governance, the students were confident enough about their appearance and abilities that they could embrace their bluestocking heritage. Any accusations of dowdiness—of “the Radcliffe stereotype (‘stringy-haired intellectuals’)”—that remained were now viewed “among upperclassmen of both institutions . . . as a defense mechanism by ‘insecure’ Harvard men who can’t get dates.”⁶⁷

But whether she rises above the criticism or attempts to combat it, the highly educated woman remains an object of scrutiny and suspicion in our own time. As Harvard economist Claudia Goldin wrote in the *New York Times* in 2006, “Highly educated women are getting a bum rap from the press.”⁶⁸ A new generation of demographers has tracked her marriage habits and rates of reproduction, arriving at many of the same conclusions as their forerunners a century ago: the highly educated woman marries later and has fewer children than her less accomplished sisters. Yet, whereas highly educated women of the

⁶⁶Boroff, “Imperial Harvard,” p. 33.

⁶⁷“Cliffe Couture,” *Harvard Crimson*, 16 February 1959, p. 2; “Pembroke Finds ‘Cliffies Consider Themselves ‘Liberal Thinkers.’” p. 5.

⁶⁸Claudia Goldin, “Working It Out,” *New York Times*, 15 March 2006.

bluestocking era were chastised for forsaking motherhood to pursue careers in academia, business, and industry, today, as Goldin's op-ed piece explains, highly educated women are derided for doing the opposite—abandoning their professions to raise families. No matter the validity of either accusation, the underlying assumption persists: the goals of motherhood and advanced education are inherently incompatible.

College women, as a group, may no longer draw the ire of social critics, and university administrators may no longer feel the need to sell their students as “regular girls,” but they continue to be categorized, to borrow a phrase from Le Clerc Phillips, as the “class of girls who merely go to college” or those who go “for purely intellectual purposes.” In the twenty-first century, women outnumber men on college campuses, and the “Girls of the Big Ten” is one of *Playboy*'s most popular issues. A Wellesley graduate now serves as our secretary of state, and the *Washington Post*, pandering to its audience, writes about her pants suit.⁶⁹ Some things have changed; some have not.

⁶⁹Robin Givhan, “Wearing the Pants,” *Washington Post*, 9 December 2007, p. A 24.

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