Friends Till Life Doth End: Litchfield Female Academy's Bonds of Friendship

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MADISON SAVAGE
The Making of the Litchfield Female Academy

Nestled in the hills of western Connecticut, the former site of the Litchfield Female Academy is marked with a sign declaring it the first academy for girls in America. After earning this title in 1792, the academy continued to teach over 3,000 students, mostly women, for over 40 years. The academy’s founder, Sarah Pierce, strove to give young women students advanced academic opportunity while instilling lifelong habits in alignment with the concept of Republican Motherhood. The lives of these students over the years are documented through letters, diaries, and school records. Using these letters and diaries, this thesis will examine how the young lives of students were affected by the many constraints of the school. The school’s constraints fostered a nearly complete lack of privacy through intense supervision and constant evaluations, both inward and outward. The academy’s teachers completed weekly evaluations of students and encouraged them to self-reflect daily as well. I will examine how the students’ letters and diaries demonstrate the ways students adapted to constraints of their scholastic atmosphere through self-care by creating a separate written environment of their own as means to escape.

The student body of the Litchfield Female Academy was composed of both boys and girls from fifteen states/territories (and abroad), aged in their teens. Although the school was a female academy it operated by admitting local young boys as well, so that of the roughly 3,000 students, 121 were boys. They began in their pre-teen years and left before their mid-teens, when most girls typically began the school. The only group of students who mostly hailed from Litchfield were boys. Male students typically used the academy as a form of preparation/preliminary schooling before enrolling in higher education. The already existing dame schools of the time were often coeducational, and offered basic reading and alphabet memorization to both boys and girls. Litchfield also had had quasi-public town schools that operated on both town and tuition support
beginning in 1727.¹ All students, including the minority of students who were from neighboring states had connections within the town.²

Nearly all students were from wealthy backgrounds, especially those who could afford to travel long distances by stagecoach to attend the school. Of course, in early America those who had the means to send one or all of their children (especially their female children) to receive an education were nearly entirely white families, as exhibited with the female academy. At the Litchfield Law School, however, there is documentation for one African American male student named Moses Aaron Simons, born to an enslaved mother, who was admitted to the New York state Bar Association in 1816. His career in law was cut short while living in New York City. After an altercation at a public dance Moses was arrested and despite being defended by colleagues and wealthy connections he was found guilty, with his race undoubtedly playing a key role in the verdict³. Due to this guilty verdict he lost the support of any potential clients. He was very likely the first African American lawyer in the country, and potentially the only person of color to have attended either the Litchfield Law School or the Litchfield Female Academy, as there are no other documentations of students’ race.

As the first academy for girls, Litchfield Female Academy played a major role in the history of women’s education and entrance into public life, or as described by historian Mary Kelley as “civil society.” For generations to come, women were still excluded from participating in organized politics in America. Civil society, however, was a public space inhabited by private persons left fully open for white, then black women to thrive in.⁴ The purpose of the Litchfield Female

² Brickley, *Sarah Pierces Litchfield Female Academy*, 122.
Academy was not to invade the public spaces of men, but, to give women the educational background needed to actively and effectively exist in the civil society as learned wives and mothers within their own “sphere”. Ironically, this groundbreaking innovation for girls was not intentionally revolutionary. The school’s creator, Sarah Pierce, believed in both intellectual equality of the sexes and the concept of Republican Motherhood. Linda Kerber, an historian who coined the term Republican Motherhood in 1976, describes it in the context of early American female education. She explains, “Her political task was accomplished within the confines of her family... The Republican Mother’s life was dedicated to the service of civic virtue; she educated her sons for it; she condemned and corrected her husband’s lapses from it…. The creation of virtuous citizens was dependent on the presence of wives and mothers who were well informed…”

Sarah Pierce greatly valued this new sphere for women that combined education with domesticity. She emphasized repeatedly that “educating girls would not prepare them to undertake male roles and occupations.” Throughout her life, Pierce “stressed the rhetoric of Republican Motherhood, sharing its paradoxical qualities of both expanding and limiting opportunities for women.”

Gender historians of life in early America label a lot of early activism in women’s history as ironic or contradictory. While it was revolutionary to educate women at higher levels than ever before, early activists like Sarah Pierce still did not break away from the restricting confines of separate gender spheres. Despite these ironies, the Litchfield Female Academy stood out amongst all other academies that began to flourish over the same time period, including those for men.

In 1832 the school’s Prospectus was published by Brace and Pierce. Five years earlier, Brace had replaced Pierce as the academy’s director but they continued to both teach. It explained

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the rules and curriculum of the school, and exhibits the way the school changed under the influence of Brace. This document begins with an insightful passage describing Brace and Pierce’s motivations for incorporating an academy for young women. It read, “It has always been our belief, that the female intellect was as susceptible of as high and extensive cultivation as that of man; though, from her different destination in society, and her various employments, a different education must be pursued. It is not now necessary to enter in to a discussion of the question whether the abilities of the sexes are naturally equal; it is sufficient to notice, that the circumstances of life require a varied exercise of those abilities.” This specific quote is vital in understanding the purposes and goals of the academy and inspirations from Republican Motherhood. This school was to be the ideal institution for producing Republican Mothers (or teachers) who were capable of gaining an expansive education at the same level as men, so that they could go on to teach their own sons at this same level. Both Pierce and Brace made it clear: despite challenging gender norms and roles, they were not challenging gender spheres.

At the close of the 1818 school term, Sarah Pierce addressed her students and explained her primary goal for the academy. Since its start, she aimed to use this academy to “vindicate the equality of female intellect.” She sought to do this by crafting a scholastic curriculum composed of not only feminine ornamental studies, but also of intellectual topics which will “ornament the mind.” Her curriculum combined traditional women’s activities like embroidery with topics usually reserved for male learners. Students used their artistic lessons to create intricate maps, historical timelines, or embroidery pieces depicting biblical scenes. The ornamental activities were never purely ornamental, they were always connected to a larger academic lesson. Pierce wrote in the 1820s, “May we not hope that by cultivating the solid rather than the ornamental branches of

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education, our young women will emulate their sisters in Europe in moral and intellectual acquirements…”8 Although Pierce added these “solid” branches of education, she made sure to give each topic “an acceptable feminine justification.”9 Young women of the Litchfield Female Academy were taught English grammar not for public speaking or voting, but in order to write letters and take part in proper conversations. Men learned geography and history for political and commercial values and women learned it to emphasize patriotism and Christian values.10

Although the curriculum of the academy was feminized, it was still considered ahead of its time for female education. Such an expansive and diverse curriculum and well-rounded knowledge set the Litchfield Female Academy apart from other academies beginning to sprout across the nation whose curriculum did not begin to compare until the late 1820s. The curriculum, paired with the readings of notable women writers arguing for equality Pierce instructed students to read, made for a more unique and innovative education. Pierce taught the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More, furthering her promise to vindicate the intellectual equality of women. These two writers produced some of the earliest feminist literature, and the circulation of their works gave birth to some of the earliest literary societies for women. Women could come together to discuss the works of these women through intellectual conversations to share and debate ideas. By incorporating their writings in class, Pierce was building her own literary community of young scholars capable of having serious intellectual conversations. Other academies were also considered “more practical,” were more affordable, were as community-based as the town of Litchfield, and had less commitment to religion. The Litchfield Female Academy also stood out in comparison to male institutions across the country. The academy cost significantly more to attend than male institutions.

8 Sizer, To Ornament Their Minds, 42.
9 Ibid, 43.
10 Ibid, 43.
academies and colleges and had a higher attendance than the surrounding men’s schools as well. Litchfield’s curriculum also stood out for the way it often fostered competition amongst students and was one of the first to do so. The school’s 1832 Prospectus admitted that this competitive nature existed in only some situations. It stated that the school’s system, “does not operate to produce rivalship, except in a few instances.” These few instances, although they didn’t make up the entire curriculum, created enough competition to have a lasting impact. Some of the instances were the spelling and vocabulary competitions which were made “to exercise the faculties of the mind.” These competitive assignments paired with the school’s public exhibitions fostered rivalry and competitive attitudes amongst students.

As a woman, Sarah Pierce herself could not attend institutions of higher education at this time. Instead, she sent her nephew, John Pierce Brace, to Williams College in order to receive training in “higher branches” of academics and he graduated from the college in 1812. Pierce sent him for the purpose that he would then use his new academic background to teach these “higher branches” to Litchfield Female Academy students, which he did beginning in 1814 (after also attending the Litchfield Law School). These academic experiences of Brace’s are what allowed the Litchfield Female Academy to have a curriculum that set it apart from all other schools for girls. Although Brace received a higher level of education than Pierce, it did not stop Pierce from devoting herself to furthering her own academic endeavors. After being unhappy with the current texts available for her students, she wrote her own history textbook titled *Sketches of Universal History Compiled from Several Authors*. Both Pierce and Brace utilized a unique and advanced

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11 Sizer, *To Ornament Their Minds*, 35.
12 Litchfield Female Academy collection, Litchfield Historical Society, Helga J. Ingraham Memorial Library, 7 South Street, P.O. Box 385, Litchfield, Connecticut, 06759.
13 Litchfield Female Academy collection, Litchfield Historical Society, Helga J. Ingraham Memorial Library, 7 South Street, P.O. Box 385, Litchfield, Connecticut, 06759.
curriculum to showcase their female students’ abilities, but it was when Brace became the director in 1827 and took the lead teaching in the academy’s later years that the curriculum expanded even more. It grew to include subjects previously only reserved for men; including Latin, Moral Philosophy, Logic, Rhetoric, and Natural Philosophy. He ran his classroom “in real college style”\textsuperscript{14} and taught the young women just as he had been taught in a men’s college.

In order to gain traction in the fight to prove women’s intellectual equality, Pierce used proper education and behavior as her tool. Fortunately for her, the town of Litchfield was the ideal place to support and assist in her cause. Nationally recognized ever since the end of the Revolutionary War for its prominent political inhabitants and for being home of the first law school in America, Litchfield was an epicenter for early American intellectuals. Many of these figures had played a major role in securing independence. Local inhabitants were highly-educated, prominent families with important connections and resources. The Litchfield Law School was established in 1784 as the first of its kind and also drew in young students from all throughout the country.

Arriving in Litchfield in 1798 to be the town’s minister, Reverend Dan Huntington wrote that it was, “A delightful village, on a fruitful hill, richly endowed with schools both professional and scientific, with its venerable governors and judges, with its learned lawyers, and senators, and representatives both in national and state departments, and with a population enlightened and respectable.”\textsuperscript{15} These lawyers and political figures played a major role in advancing the progress of the female academy. Pierce first began the school in her family home’s dining room. Just six years later, in 1798, twenty-six prominent men in town led by the law school’s founder, Tapping Reeve, raised money through subscriptions to build a proper schoolhouse for the academy.\textsuperscript{16} It is important

\textsuperscript{15} Sizer, \textit{To Ornament Their Minds}, 20.
\textsuperscript{16} Sizer, \textit{To Ornament Their Minds}, 25.
to note that the men who donated to the cause did not become trustees or take on any sort of leadership responsibility for the school. With nothing monetary or political to gain in return for their investments, the men of Litchfield acted out of the best interest for the women in town, including their own daughters and granddaughters who would attend the school. Ten of these subscribers had a total of thirty-two children who attended the school, and six of the men were grandfathers to twenty-two students. Another four had nieces and nephews, along with one man who had a great-niece at the school. Additionally, two men adopted daughters who attended the school.17

**Disciplinary Framework**

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the school that portrays the Litchfield Female Academy experience was the school’s rules regarding both students’ conduct and academic performance. Rules and expectations for students were rigid, specific, and orderly. Students were to follow Pierce’s rules precisely, in addition to the rules set by the host families they boarded with in town. Unlike modern day dormitories built for housing students, Litchfield Female Academy students boarded with local families throughout town. The head of the household (typically the fathers) set their own guidelines for boarders and would send weekly “certificates” to the academy detailing the students’ behavior in the home.18 As historian, and past Litchfield Historical Society president, Lynne Templeton Brickley notes, “The rules of the Litchfield Female Academy covered every moment and aspect of the students’ lives.”19 If not for the school’s reputation for strict rules and supervision, most parents would not be comfortable sending their daughters to earn an education while living in another family’s home. Pierce’s strict rules ensured that the school was not an

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18 Ibid, 153.
19 Sizer, *To Ornament Their Minds*, 36.
intrusion on the community or on the lives of her young respectable women students. In
advertisements, the academy was displayed to the public properly and positively. In 1832, the
*Litchfield Enquirer* released an advertisement for the summer term. It read, “The long established
reputation of the School; the experience of its teachers; the moral and religious instruction enjoyed;
the published and elegant society with which the pupils can associate; the beauty and healthfulness
of the village, all conspire to recommend this Institution to the patronage of the public.”

The academy, and the town of Litchfield itself, prided itself on maintaining a proper, polished, and
distinguished reputation.

Because these rules were so important to her, Pierce required students to copy out the rules
of the school as they were recited aloud by her. It was important that the rules were both read aloud
to students and copied by them to make sure they all knew exactly what was expected of them. She
again repeated reading the rules aloud Saturday morning, paying special attention to those she felt
were broken during the week as an unsubtle reminder. Additionally, during this weekly ritual Pierce
would do “fault telling.” The “fault telling” sessions were weekly criticism that pointed out what
each student was doing wrong by not following the rules. Pierce would ask them questions about
their faults like, “Have you wasted any time during the week?” Each student had to confess to
their own faults from the week and share what they did wrong. Additionally, these “fault telling”
sessions were done in public, not just in front of fellow students, but to all who wished to attend.
Townsfolk, Litchfield Law School students, and strangers alike could attend these sessions. Any
student in trouble with Pierce, whether it be academic or behavioral, would have their faults
displayed for all to see.

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The grading system of the school was made of a complex system of credit and debit marks, and was closely related to the rules of the school. Good academic performance earned credit, and poor performance earned debit marks with each student’s goal to be earning as many credit marks as possible. The number of credits each student had were tallied and ranked on a daily to monthly basis. This system of marks and misses was not limited to just academic performance, but also included the behavioral performance of students. There was no solid line separating academic and behavioral spheres – the rules and discipline included both. Completing scholastic assignments correctly, maintaining proper hygiene and tidy appearances, and being cheerful all earned a student credit marks. This same system that gave credit for writing compositions and reciting lessons also gave debit marks for slouching in class or walking with poor posture about town.  

Today, these actions inside and outside class are kept mostly separate, and only include school intervention when absolutely necessary. At the Litchfield Female Academy, however, the rules of the school itself listed behavioral expectations right alongside scholastic requirements. Some rules also combined the two areas, like the ninth rule listed in 1826 which stated, “You must never interrupt your companions by talking, or any other distraction during the hours of school, or those set apart for study.” After weekly fault telling sessions, Pierce and Brace totaled and reviewed students’ tallies across several categories. They were academic performance, industriousness, behavior, and boarding house conduct. Although these grades came from different areas of student life, they all factored in to the student’s total credit marks. After attending the academy from 1810-1816,

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23 Brickley, *Sarah Pierces Litchfield Female Academy*, 133.
24 Litchfield Female Academy collection, Litchfield Historical Society, Helga J. Ingraham Memorial Library, 7 South Street, P.O. Box 385, Litchfield, Connecticut, 06759, Series 1, Folder 26.
Catharine Beecher once compared the school’s rules to the Christian Ten Commandments for how seriously they were followed.26

The academic aspects of the system can be classified as any non-behavioral action completed during school hours. It included accuracy and correctness in a student’s work, completing assignments on time, memorizing material, and taking any classes or subjects required of them. For these actions, students would be disciplined for giving wrong answers, not completing assignments, or not putting proper effort or productiveness into their work. Another major source for grading and judging of student’s academic abilities was through testing, almost always done orally in front of peers. Assignments completed by each student were read aloud, and at the end of academic terms all students were expected to perform in front of their peers various plays and scenarios created by Pierce. As Pierce aged, her nephew John Pierce Brace, also a teacher, took on a larger role in the academy in 1814 and incorporated further subject matters acquired during his years at Williams College and Litchfield Law School. Brace continued Pierce’s ever-public manner of teaching and grading. Every week, students were assigned weekly compositions to write on various topics and then read aloud to the class. Many students found this weekly presentation to be a source of stress, although they found great pride if their composition was selected by Brace to read aloud himself.27

The side of this grading system with the biggest impact on students’ day-to-day lives was the behavioral side – especially with its relation to family boarding. Students were disciplined for poor behavior, and could be disciplined for their actions outside of school hours. In a letter to her brother, a student named Mary Chester wrote, “Everything here is founded on system and as fix’d as the laws of the Medes and Persians. We must go to bed at such a time; and am accountable to my

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26 Brickley, Sarah Pierces Litchfield Female Academy, 134.
27 Sizer, To Ornament Their Minds, 44.
Instructors for almost every moment.” 28 When students were not in class, they spent a great deal of their time within the homes they boarded in. A large part of their evaluations came from how they conducted themselves within these homes and under the rules of the families who lived there through “certificates” sent to the academy each week. It was not difficult to lose credit marks based on behavior. Poor behavior included even the most natural feelings of homesickness. Students lost 30 credit marks for homesickness, but those who were not “peevish, homesick or impolite” would gain credit.29 It was difficult for students to find a balance between missing their loved ones while still showing respect to their parents for providing them this opportunity away from home.

Students’ conduct and etiquette were not only important for the school’s grading system, but also a defining aspect of their reputation and accreditation as intellectually capable female learners. In early America, proving intellectual equality of the sexes was not an easy task. Although the town of Litchfield itself was very supportive of the girls’ endeavors, this support for the advancement of young women was not widespread. Similarly, not everyone believed in the academic abilities of female students like the intellectuals of Litchfield did. It was a part of Pierce’s goals for the school that her female students were taken seriously as intellectuals, and in order to do so they had to abandon feminine stereotypes and adopt the scholarly traits typically attributed to men. To be seen as logical students, they had to commit to a mindset of logic without strong “womanly” emotion. Pierce expected all students to act with dignity, show respect for authority, and only use rational thought. “False” sensibility was absolutely not welcomed, as it played in to gender stereotypes of the incapability of women to learn and reason logically. False sensibility, in this context, was one that only affects the nerves and is considered excessive emotion. This label was almost solely applied to women. For example, women students at this time learned about European history in

28 Brickley, Sarah Pierces Litchfield Female Academy, 133.
29 Sizer, To Ornament Their Minds, 40.
class. If a student was too overcome with emotion to learn about the graphic nature of European wars, however, she would have been the exemplification of false sensibility in academics. The opposite, known as “true sensibility” was much more desirable. Caroline Chester wrote in 1816 that, “True sensibility is that acuteness of feeling which is natural to those persons who possess the finer perceptions of seeing, hearing, and feeling.”³⁰ This real, true sensibility went hand in hand with sociability, but the false kind harmed women’s progress by fueling stereotypes that held women back in public society.

Sarah Pierce used her strict guidelines as one of her tools to vindicate the intellectual equality of women. Just as she was proving her students to have true sensibility, she also was proving their capabilities to be truly respectable members of society. At start of each day, Miss Pierce demanded, “You are expected to rise early, be dressed early, be dressed neatly, and to exercise before breakfast. You are to retire to rest when the family in which you reside request you. You must consider it a breach of politeness to be requested a second time to rise in the morning or retire of an evening.”³¹ Students were expected to live out these rules and values at all times, and never stop being productive. A typical day for students began with an early rise, some form of exercise (usually an outdoor walk), class for the majority of the day, and then the afternoon was spent writing, doing embroidery, household chores, or any other productive activity. Idleness was never acceptable; rather, students must always be doing something productive with their time. The Prospectus of 1832 states,

“Our pupils are required to rise before a certain hour, and to exercise at stated times; never to trouble the families where they reside by absence from meals or family prayers; and to retire to rest and to rise in the morning when requested. They are required to attend public

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³¹ Brickley, *Sarah Pierce’s Litchfield Female Academy*. 
worship at some of the churches of the village… During the hours of regular school time, every moment must be fully occupied; no reading is allowed unconnected with academical duties; no talking or moving is permitted; no writing of billets, or communication of any kind with each other; and every employment subject to the cognizance of the teachers. In addition to their stated exercises, at least two hours each day must be devoted to close study, and the effect is to produce, in most, a strict, regular, and constant employment of all their time, not occupied in sleep and exercise.”

The format of the school revolved around routine and following instruction, and this mode of steady routine and rituals followed into the personal lives of students as well.

**Family Boarding**

Although the act of sending children away for new opportunities, whether monetary or educational, was not entirely new to early American families, the Litchfield Female Academy still had to ensure they were providing a proper environment for boarding students. The academy’s rules and routines helped form the academy’s national reputation. This reputation helped to encourage parents to spend their time and money on sending their daughters to a school that was miles, states, or even oceans away. Lynne Brickley states, “The family boarding system allowed parents to send their children great distances while remaining assured they would be under the firm guidance and discipline of a family similar to their own… parents were confident that the families with which their children boarded shared their value system.” Not only could parents trust the school, but they could trust the homes and community of the town as well. The families of students were sometimes

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32 Litchfield Female Academy collection, Litchfield Historical Society, Helga J. Ingraham Memorial Library, 7 South Street, P.O. Box 385, Litchfield, Connecticut, 06759.

33 Sizer, *To Ornament Their Minds*, 39.
in touch with the household, too, mostly when the families were related or had friendly connections. For example, a student named Harriot Champion was boarding with an aunt and uncle in 1801 when her father wrote to the household saying, “I wish you to advise her as if she were your own.” With this housing structure, students were never left without guidance and discipline, and sometimes continued to have pressures from their guardians back home.

Even elite families in New England typically lived in modestly-sized homes until the mid-to-late 19th century, and this included most of the homes that boarded Litchfield Female Academy students. With so many students attending the school at once, the families who hosted students often had to overcrowd their homes to accommodate them all. The Lyman Beecher house in particular was home to over twenty people in 1816, where student Catherine Cebra Webb wrote that, “We could not take much of a bath - which was a great trial to me.” Most students were used to living in close quarters because their own families back home would have similar sized houses, but they typically did not ever experience living so closely with other people who were not family members. Despite this crowded environment, the Beecher house also provided a pleasant and even fun scene. Living under this same roof, Harriet Beecher Stowe recalled years later, “One of my most decided impressions of the family as it was in my childish days was of a great household inspired by a spirit of cheerfulness and hilarity.” Not all homes, however, were as cheerful and social as the Beecher home. The best-known boarding home belonged to a widow named Mrs. Edwards with her two unmarried daughters. The strict rules, expectations, and supervision in this home earned it the nickname of the “convent” by local male Litchfield Law School students. Some students complained about homes being too crowded or too strict. Caroline Chester, in 1816, wrote of the

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34 Ibid, 40.  
36 Sizer, To Ornament Their Minds, 40.
time she was late for her nighttime curfew and was scolded by homeowner Dr. Daniel Sheldon. “I opened the door with a trembling hand, no one was in the room, but soon Dr. came… I told my excuse, he interrupted me by saying it was but a poor excuse, that I might as well as come as not, for it would have been perfectly proper if I had only been five years old… As I went up the stairs I wept as a child and wished I was at home with those friends whom I so dearly loved.”

Boarding with a family could provide socialization and excitement for students, or it could add onto the stress and pressure of living under a strict ever-watching eye.

**Student Self-Reflections and Competition**

Along with outward criticism, students were taught to inwardly reflect on their own actions and abilities. Self-examination and evaluation were a central part of the school, and forced students to constantly focus on how to improve their erroneous ways. Student diaries and journals often express the stress and pressure inflicted by these reflections. In 1816, Caroline Chester wrote, “Miss Pierce requested the scholars to write down their faults… As to my faults it would be almost impossible to enumerate all for the I have so many, I feel that I waste much of my precious time…” Students repeatedly documented their own faults in their diaries, along with their dedication to self-improvement. These faults related to their performance in school, their behavioral actions, and their overall mindset and attitude. The public manner of student evaluations also sparked competition and sometimes resentment. In a letter to her half-brother in 1822, Delia Storrs wrote, “Wednesday afternoon we have our holydays, but we generally attend school as it is the most interesting afternoon in the week, the dissertations are read, which are generally very good, though there are exceptions and of course mine is one. Sophronia and I write every week or rather

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37 Ibid, 42.
38 Sizer, *To Ornament Their Minds*, 37.
Sophronia has done it and I intend it, for as yet I have written but two. I have also the pleasure of informing you that her dissertations have always ranked among the best and she has had the greatest number of extra credit marks, for their superior excellence, of any one in school.” 39 Not only did the students face criticism from Pierce, judgement from the town, and harsh self-discipline, but they also constantly compared themselves to one another.

Competition amongst young women in an academic setting was an entirely new phenomenon at the time. Not only had young women rarely left their homes to attend school before, but they were never encouraged to compete against each other in this manner. It was not until more schools began to flourish in surrounding areas that competition started to become more commonplace. The Litchfield Female Academy held spelling contests, recitations of memorized texts aloud, and called upon students to read assignments aloud in front of class. Some of these tasks were not much different from modern day school activities, but the students at this school were not accustomed to this type of system and wrote of their stresses in their diaries. Eliza Ogden wrote of feeling ashamed when she answered incorrectly, Caroline Chester blamed herself for not thinking well enough, and Mary Camp put herself down in writing about the way other students far exceeded her. 40 The most stressful of all academic events were the end of the term examinations and exhibition. Before the final exhibition, John Brace conducted five days of quizzing aloud across eight different subjects for the students as they were arranged in class “in real college style.” 41 John Brace himself documented the progress and accomplishments of students both throughout the term and during the final examination stages. He would make notes on which students were exerting

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41 Ibid, 61.
their every nerve to finish at the top of the class.\textsuperscript{42} This competition put great strain on students, whether they finished ahead or fell behind. No matter the outcome in class, students were instructed to never outwardly gloat over their own accomplishments or show excitement at another student’s failures, despite their evaluation being completed in a public arena.

**Reading**

There were many fears that young academic women would fall victim to excessive emotion or, even worse, succumb to temptation from dangerous sources. One threat in particular was from fiction. Novels were typically considered “morally dangerous” for young women as a tool that could “inflame [women’s] fancy, and effectually pave the way for their future seduction.”\textsuperscript{43} Many adults, particularly men, claimed that young women should not read these novels in order to be protected from themselves. Pierce herself was ambivalent to novels. She approved of her students’ readings only those with moral lessons, useful factual information, or good examples of writing abilities. Despite widespread encouragement to stay away from novels or any books that did not provide an educational purpose, many young women found comfort and excitement in reading for fun. Student Julia Cowles found a guilty pleasure in reading a novel, although it brought her stress, too. She wrote in her diary a self-confession that she had been reading a novel but vowed to quit. Just a few weeks later, however, she again confessed, “Been so much engaged in reading ‘Grandison’ that other things have been neglected, especially my journal.”\textsuperscript{44} This quote plays into both the rigid expectations of young women in general, and also speaks to the levels of behavioral self-reflection expected of Litchfield Female Academy students in particular.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 62.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 157.
\textsuperscript{44} Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 183.
Books played an influential role on the lives of students. The act of reading in general was an important activity, especially for those feeling lonesome or in need of an escape from their new reality. There was no precedent on how to act, feel, or know what to expect while attending the academy. Navigating this newness in a public spotlight only added more stress to the students. One way to combat this stress was to absorb oneself in the privacy of books. Many students found joy and fulfillment in reading nonfiction books or essays for fun. Caroline Chester declared the books “were the means by which ‘we learn how to live.’” Reading also provided another opportunity for women to promote themselves in civil society. Literary societies for women began to pop up throughout the country and libraries became a haven for women wanting to learn as much as possible. These began in 1839, in a period after other academies like the Litchfield Female Academy began to flourish all across the country and provide literary resources to women students. This widespread use of reading as a source of joy and intellectual fulfillment was also important to female writers. Their studies, works, and opinions were now being circulated for other women to read, debate, and have serious conversations about. No longer were men the only ones allowed to have meaningful intellectual conversations about philosophical writings of other men - women could do the same within this new civil society.

Most importantly to Litchfield Female Academy students, books provided a separate, private environment that fostered imagination. Mary Kelley notes in *Learning to Stand and Speak*, “Books served equally important private purposes, turning an individual reader inward and inviting communion with a fully realized world set apart from life’s external circumstances. They provided

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46 Literary societies for women began to really flourish after Margaret Fuller, a New England teacher, created her project called “Conversations.” These conversations were designed to spark intellectual talks amongst women on the topics of anything from Greek mythology to contemporary gender conventions, see Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 112.
the occasion for a solitary commingling of the shifting subjectivities of reader and text that could kindle the imagination and lead to unexpected outcomes.” She quotes author Caroline Howard Gilman as saying reading is a privilege, “which not gives a spring to the happiest thoughts, but peoples solitude, softens care, and beguiles anxiety.” For students living in such stressful, newfound environments with almost no privacy, to read was to escape and find comfort otherwise not provided to them.

In a letter to his daughter in 1853, John Price declared that books “are the best company you can have - they never tell tales upon you, and you always have them at command.” This quote spoke to the feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and rivalries in school that students were often trying to escape. In addition, Price mentioned that a book will never “tell tales upon you,” implying that gossip or rumors were a somewhat common issue amongst friends.

One Litchfield Female Academy student in particular who may have been a living example of someone telling the “tales” that Price warned about was was Laura Maria Wolcott. Throughout her diary, she shifted her devotion to her friends back and forth, and sometimes writes negatively of others. On one day, after experiencing the stresses of competition she wrote about fellow student Sophronia Beebee. She called her an “artful mean deceitful lyeing girl. without one principle of honour about her.” She went as far as having said, “if I live six years until I am twenty I never shall think of her otherwise.” Wolcott was not afraid to speak her mind in this diary, and often discussed her unsteady friendship with another student named Amelia. After the two were fighting, Wolcott wrote on a Tuesday entry, “Amelia has not spoken to me yet I cannot conceive what reason she has for behaving so. I am sure she will never find a friend who loves her better or was more willing to

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48 Ibid, 187.
pardon the inequalities of her temper.”⁴⁹ Perhaps when John Price proclaimed that books would never tell tales, he was referencing the dramatized perils discussed by students like Laura Maria Wolcott who were unafraid of gossiping about fellow classmates whether it be through diaries or letters. In addition to Wolcott’s writings, the academy was not immune to other forms of drama amongst students. There were cliques of girls in the school who were even referred to as certain names by Brace. One was named “Tammany Society” in 1814 and another “The Club” in 1823.⁵⁰

**Writing and Receiving Letters**

Not only did books hold an important role in student’s lives, but letters did too. In ways, letters were of even more importance to the students because of their personal connection and interactive component. In the late 18th century and early 19th century, rural America had limited modes of travel and communication, meaning students could not visit home sometimes for years at a time. They depended on occasional visits from relatives, and relied heavily on written communication as a way to grasp onto their former lives and familiarity back home. Just as they found comfort in reading books, Litchfield students expressed some of their happiest moments when receiving and reading mail. Letters were a form of personalized and interactive writing that allowed students to escape their public worlds and enter a space of private expression and familiarity with loved ones. Not only could students escape their everyday stresses while reading, but they could do so while writing as well. Over and over again, students wrote about their excitement at receiving letters, the care they took in writing each one, and the disappointment they felt when not receiving letters as frequently as desired. It is also important to note that this

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⁵⁰ Brickley, *Sarah Pierces Litchfield Female Academy*, 125.
sentiment did not come from just any mail in general, but in those being sent from best friends and family members. Litchfield students relied on their close friendships to stay positive when struggling in stressful environments, and they were able to maintain friendships through letter writing.

One of the most meaningful aspects of letter-writing and reading for students was the privacy it allowed them to create. Letters were a form of comfort and freedom of expression while living a life of minimal privacy. Students created this privacy within letters (which was not typically a fully private act during this time period) by requesting that the recipient not share its contents with anyone else. In closing, Maria Amelia Clark wrote to Sarah Deming in 1827, “Yours in great haste & much affection I don’t mention school I expect to another quarter however PS please not to show this to any person Farewell” and in another letter she closed with, “please write soon, corne soon, & burn this soon, as read yours ever M. A. Clark”51 While Clark was attending school in Litchfield, Deming was living in Wethersfield, Connecticut and the two kept in contact through letters while separated. Earlier, in 1813, Juliana McLachlan wrote to Jane Brace and said, “Caution your cousin Ann against showing my letter to any person and particularly: Miss Wells as I recollect perfectly her being a great critic.”52 This quote shows that letters were not private by default and were often passed around various readers. Students had to create the air of privacy themselves within their writing and make their own space for secrecy. With these requests, letters were the only parts of students’ lives that were not shared, judged, or criticized by others.

Nearly every student whose letters have survived wrote about the importance of this form of communication. In her school journal written in 1816, Eliza Ogden explained, “I went to the Post

Office expecting to get a letter, but I was very much disappointed not to find any there; I have not had any since I came from home." In a letter to Sarah Deming in 1830, Maria Amelia Clark wrote “I have long-anxiously watched the post for a letter, at length it came bearing joy & pleasure, I kindly thank you for the friendly solicitude you manifest for my health, & would inform you that I was threaten'd with the consumption, I have been afflicted with pain in my side, & loss of appetite, spitting of blood, & a violent cough, I have three blisters on myself & under the Physicians care, but I feel now much better, I have to jump the rope, take three pills & a compound syrup daily. & in a few days I hope to be as well as ever, as the blisters have removed my pain, & my cough has greatly subsided.” Having opened her letter by explaining that she was waiting anxiously for her correspondence to arrive, Clark expressed her great joy in finally receiving it. She also discussed how ill she has recently been (and continued to be), hinting at the importance of letter writing. She continued to prioritize her letters, and still gain a sense of pleasure from them, especially in a time of ill health.

In 1817, Minerva Finkle wrote to Eliza Ogden, “it affords me great pleasure to receive letters from a friend who I so highly esteem and the correspondence which we have commensed I hope may not be discontinued…” Once again, the students expressed the joy they gain from receiving letters from friends, especially those whose friendship they valued the most. Eliza Ogden seems to have been a well-loved student due to the high volume of letters she received from various Litchfield Female Academy students. Juliana Shepard, who was not previously friendly with Ogden while Ogden was still living in Litchfield, included her own letter in Minerva Finkle’s envelope in

53 The Journal of Eliza A. Ogden; Written While at Boarding School in Litchfield, Conn. 1816-1818. TS, Litchfield Historical Society.
hopes that correspondence between the two could begin. Her letter read, “Dear Miss Ogden, As
Miss St John has prefaced my letter it will apologize for my intrusion. Although I claim but little
acquaintance, yet it would be a pleasure to me to have
a partial correspondence between us. How have you been, how do you enjoy yourself this summer?
According to the (torn) country how is your health? I have not time to (torn)
ly arranged letter -- Miss St John is hurrying me and lest I should burden you with an uninteresting
letter I will come to a close Yours respectfully Juliana Shepard”56 The joy students like Shepard
found in writing and receiving letters could be created not only amongst best friends, but also with
new budding acquaintances.

The act of letter writing (and reading) served as a form of self-care for students when they
were able to use their correspondence to vent their frustrations, and thus, admit to feeling much
better once having the ability to write. Sarah Ann Ransom wrote to her cousin Sara Gay in 1815
with this sentence in the introductory lines, “After passing a very bad examination I concluded I
could not spend a few moments in a better employment than by fulfilling my engagements in
writing you.”57 Ransom was left feeling discouraged after the pressure of a bad examination in
school, and used the act of writing to a loved one as a tool to help her feel better in return. When
times were tough for students, they found solace in their friendships, particularly in those
maintained through the activity of writing private letters.

Friendship as a vital piece of student life was commonplace. Mary Kelley writes, “In
highlighting the shared gender identity, the mutual supportiveness, and the deep affection that were

57 “Sarah Ann Ransom (Litchfield) to “Dear Cousin”.” Sarah Ann Ransom to Sarah Gay. September 29, 1815.
manifest in friendships... historians have acknowledged the importance of bonds forged by students at these schools.”

She goes on to quote a graduate of the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia, Eliza Laskey, as saying her and her classmate’s schooling, “have brought us acquainted with such ties of intimacy, as cannot be dissolved without the tenderest emotions.” Relationships and interactions between women in America changed when students from across the country could come together to live in shared homes and take on the challenge of being some of the first female students in the country together. It was the reliance on friendships, and the reliance on maintaining them while separated through letters that made the experience of Litchfield Female Academy students complete. Litchfield Female Academy students were able to combat the stresses and pressures of public judgement and surveillance by fully immersing themselves in their friendships with letter reading and writing.

The secrecy and intimacy of letters were actively created by students themselves. Of course, this level of secrecy could have been produced as a slight dramatization inspired by the writings of fiction. In an era before the media of television and film, fiction served as a model for drama and excitement. It is likely that students would try to recreate this excitement in their letters by adding an air of mystery in the secrecy. In every aspect of the students’ lives, however, they were closely watched and critiqued, therefore giving them reason to seek out an outside source for privacy. Class work was all evaluated aloud, the families housing the students kept a close eye on their behavior, and women students especially were expected to constantly conduct themselves in an appropriate manner at all times.

Another outlet these letters provided was a sense of intimacy and affection amongst close friends. As some of the first women students gaining an advanced education, Litchfield Female

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58 Kelley, Learning to Stand and Speak, 103.
59 Ibid, 104.
Academy students were advised to always act logically and never with “false sensibility”. The stereotypes that held women back in the academic arena revolved around the misconception that women could not think logically or without the distraction of fragile emotion. Because of this, Pierce and Brace made sure their students were constantly conducting themselves with true sensibility. Writing private letters to friends was one of the only ways that students could tap into their more emotional and affectionate side. In writing, students could express what made them upset, what non-academic events were going on in their friends’ lives, and how much they appreciated each other’s companionship. The bonded pair of Maria Amelia Clark and Sarah Deming yet again provided an example of affectionate privacy in 1830. In two letters sent in June and November of that year, Clark wrote a loving poem in one letter and an observation on her other friendships besides Sarah’s in another. The poem read,

“We still are friends tho far apart
And heart does still respond to heart
We cannot be alone
We shall be friends till life doth end
We will be friends till God shall send
And calls us to his throne
We will be friends in worlds above
We'll tun our harp & sing of love
In sweet angelic tone
Amelia C”

This poem touches on loneliness, the permanence of their relationship, and even the sacred nature of their friendship that Clark claimed would last into the afterlife. In the other letter later that year, Clark observed, “Surrounded by nearly a hundred young ladies, I look in vain among them to find one congenial heart in unison with mine, like yours.” The importance of friendship was not only noted in letters, but in diaries as well. In her 1820 journal, Mary A Child noted, “News from my dear friend at home. What a favor to have friends who feel interested in my welfare and though separated from them do not forget or neglect me. Why am I not left as thousands are to the mercy of a sensuous and unfeeling world and without home and without friends. Surely I have great cause of thankfulness to the giver of all good instead of murmuring at the few of the perplexities of life which have been allotted to me.” Once again, despite distance the friendships in students’ lives remained important and valued. As Mary Child stated, she was grateful to have this connection in her life, especially when she was far away from home.

**The Success that Ended the Academy**

By analyzing the letters shared between students, these writings provide a physical example of how the school’s teachings improved students’ abilities. From the beginning, Sarah Pierce wished to instill in her students the ability to read and write at the highest level, use logic and reasoning comparable to that of men, maintain a focus on self-reflection, and for all students to understand proper “true” sensibility while still putting the womanly virtue of motherhood first. In these letters, Pierce’s goals for her students come to life. Almost all students corresponded with near perfect grammar, many participated in logical intellectual conversations through their letters, those who wrote home sent self-reflections on their progress at school, and every student who expressed

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loving emotion for their friends did so while personifying the true sensibility Pierce wished to
instill. Students were able to take the lessons taught by Pierce in the classroom and apply them to
their personal lives and relationships. Not only did Pierce shape them as young academics, but as
pious well-rounded young members of civil society in America.

Just as the friendships in students’ lives remained important, the value of education
remained important as well. Over the years, the academy also created teachers. Some stayed to
assist Pierce in Litchfield, others went on to join the teaching staff at other academies or seminaries,
and some went on to create schools of their own throughout the country. Within the first ten years
of the Litchfield Female Academy operating, over thirty graduates went on to become teachers
themselves. Not only were they expanding access to education for women across the country, but
they were doing so using the lessons, curriculum, and overall lifestyle instilled in them from Sarah
Pierce’s Litchfield Female Academy.

It was because of this increase in schools established by graduates of the Litchfield Female
Academy that it eventually had to close its doors. Through the work of its own graduates, the
academy was no longer the only advanced resource for education for girls in the area, thus causing
attendance to decline accordingly. In a way, the demise of the school was also its greatest
accomplishment. It was because of the academy’s impact on its students that more schools could
open, and thus more women could have access to the higher branches of education. The intellectual
equality of women was slowly being vindicated by the success of female educational institutions
across the country, largely due to the graduates of the Litchfield Female Academy.

One of the best known schools to have been created by a Litchfield graduate was the
Hartford Female Seminary, founded by Catharine Beecher in 1823. Her school achieved great
success and reputation after she utilized many of the same techniques and teaching methods used by
Pierce and Brace at the Litchfield Female Academy. She even had John Brace himself replace her as principal of the school when she transferred to a position as head of the Cincinnati Ladies’ Seminary in 1832. Beecher’s career as a writer and an educator made history, making her a notable name within a notable family in 19th century literature. She firmly believed in properly training women to work as teachers throughout the country, and established training programs to prepare women for teaching careers, claiming their careers were more important than that of lawyers or doctors. Most certainly based on her experiences at Litchfield, she also supported the inclusion of daily exercise and reading aloud. She went on to write several works, some of which included, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education* in 1829, *The Moral Instructor for Schools and Families* in 1838, *Physiology and Calisthenics for Schools and Families* in 1856, and *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* in 1874. She is a major reason why the profession of teaching became women’s work nationwide.

Students at the Litchfield Female Academy spent their adolescence as living examples trying to prove intellectual equality amongst genders. This task proved exasperating. Close friendships were essential of the lives of young women students at the academy in the early nineteenth century. These companionships, particularly in pairs, provided students the ability to safely display emotional vulnerability, and the confidence to share emotions in a space of free expression. This outlet of communication amongst friends was a source of self-care that the academy and boarding homes could not typically provide to students. This was due to the constant surveillance, public assessments amongst classmates, and pressure to live a perfectly rational and academic life to prove intellectual equality amongst genders. The young women of the Litchfield

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62 After Brace left the school, the aging Pierce remained in control until the academy’s closing about two years later. The last documented meeting in which board members hired teachers to assigned subjects was in 1833, see Brickley, Lynne Templeton. *Sarah Pierces Litchfield Female Academy, 1792-1833*. PhD diss., 1985. 546.
Female Academy lived in a perpetually competitive environment with strict supervision at all times. Through the written communication of letters between friends and diary entries by individual students, the young women of the Litchfield Female Academy were able to create a written world of privacy to escape to. As student Sarah Clark wrote to Sophia Griswold in 1825, “Welcome, very welcome was your well filled letter & thanks many do I render you for it. It operated as a healing balm to my lonely & dissatisfied mind: in imagination I was again with you participating in your enjoyments & sympathizing in your distress.”


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