

# Inventing the Lady Manager: Rhetorically Constructing the “Working-Woman”

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**Abstract:** *Situated in feminist rhetorical studies, this essay attends to how a select group of women assumed leadership and asserted authority in their work with the 1893 Columbian Exposition. The essay attempts to understand how women became managers and workers by studying the writing and symbolic acts of Bertha Palmer, President of the Board of Lady Managers, and several associates. Using archived correspondence, primary texts, and recent feminist rhetorical methodology, the essay recovers the women’s rhetorical practices, examines perceptions of gender and leadership, and sketches the challenge of “leaning in” in the rapidly changing working world of the late nineteenth century.*

**Keywords:** *rhetoric, women’s work, women managers, public memory, performing self, Bertha Palmer, Columbian Exposition*

“The Board builded better than it knew when it elected her to fill that office. And indeed Congress builded better than it knew when it created the Board of Lady Managers.” (McDougall 650)

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When Bertha Palmer became President of the Board of Lady Managers (BLM) of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, she presided over more than one hundred lady managers, successfully advocated for Congressional funding, supervised the design and building of the Fair’s Woman’s Building, negotiated the presence and selection of women judges, and coordinated the display of artifacts made by women from around the world. As noted in contemporary publications, the Board’s goal was to emphasize “the progress of women in a business and professional way,” made possible because “[t]raditional beliefs in regard to what constitutes a fit vocation or avocation for women are disappearing” (Yandell 71, Meredith 417). By taking on the unprecedented role of government-sponsored female leadership, Palmer unquestionably “leaned in” (Sandberg). Palmer’s role in the Fair brought her national, and even international, attention. Her actions were followed in the newspapers and monthly journals; her face was the icon of the Woman’s Building, appearing

on commemorative spoons and coins. Subsequently, she played a larger role in Chicago's civic affairs, including the founding of the Civic Federation and the mediation of the Pullman strike of 1894; she was the only woman appointed commissioner to the Paris Exposition in 1900; and, through her pioneering real estate and business ventures in Sarasota, Florida, she doubled her husband Potter Palmer's considerable fortune after he died.

Writing during the Fair, Isabel McDougall's praise for Palmer, expressed in the epigraph, continues: "previous to her acceptance of this office she was known merely as a woman of wealth and position, gracious, cultivated, a charming entertainer...." Yet as BLM President, Palmer's demonstrated gravity and rhetorical acumen were such that "[n]o unprejudiced person, reading the reports of their president, could fail to see in her clear statements executive ability, fertility in originating, and wisdom, tact, and firmness in carrying out her plans" (650). She also exhibited political savvy: "She makes frequent and emphatic acknowledgment of the liberality with which the Columbian Commission have treated the Board of Lady Managers. This is extremely frank and generous—or else it is a piece of clever diplomacy no less admirable in its way" (650). It was likely Palmer's "clever diplomacy" that helped her to acquire power; at its second meeting, the BLM gave her the ability to make decisions without needing to call a full board meeting (Garfinkle 340, n.34). And yet, Palmer is remembered not as a "lady manager," but as a rich man's socialite wife, and as the posthumous donor of Impressionist paintings that became the foundation of the Art Institute of Chicago. Our neglect of Palmer's business acumen would have surprised many contemporaries.

More recent popular tributes to Palmer also demonstrate how public memory has not focused on Palmer's executive and administrative abilities, but rather on her wealth and perceived conservatism. Biography titles are telling: there's *Silhouette in Diamonds* by Ishbel Ross (1960), and the more recent book by Sally Sexton Kalmbach, *Jewel of the Gold Coast* (2009). Chicago's Civic Federation pairs Palmer with the far more radical Jane Addams, and gives its Addams-Palmer Award primarily to corporations. Chicago's public television network recently honored Palmer with a recipe for a "Not a Feminist" cocktail (Gunderson). Chicago History Museum exhibits over the past ten years have not featured Palmer's numerous public speeches on gender and business or her significant managerial success, but rather, her elaborate clothes and royal

connections.<sup>1</sup> If recognized these days, it may be for co-founding the Palmer House Hotel, charity work, or “inventing” the brownie (she asked a chef to come up with a new dessert). But the fact is that, despite her achievements, Palmer is no longer a household name. In other words, selective public memory has largely erased this female manager along with her female associates who made leaning in possible—for Palmer’s executive and administrative abilities were not achieved in isolation. Due to collective forgetting, our ability to learn about the rhetorical complexities of female leadership is obscured, as is often the case. That we still need to know about how women have led and how they articulate their authority as leaders seems especially clear now, in the complex aftermath of a failed female presidential candidacy.

My project in this essay is to kindle a new public memory of how Bertha Palmer and several associates leaned in to invent themselves as “lady managers.” I have aimed to discover how this modern businesswoman managed—how she led, collaborated with, and mentored her associates—and how her subordinates supported their boss’s work while navigating their own professional efforts. Performing these roles was accomplished through rhetorical self-positioning at the intersection of language and cultural constraints, moves that involve “a rhetor’s relationship to authorities and to audiences, along with strategies and techniques for performing self” (Miller and Bridwell-Bowles 10). Thus, attending to the rhetorical invention of the lady manager through a feminist lens entails noting how she assumed and asserted authority, what she didn’t or couldn’t say and do, and how she understood and articulated her role. In the following pages, I scrutinize public and private words, workplace practices, and the symbolic meanings of body, image, and narrative in self-presentation. To examine the managerial and mentoring relationships among this small group of women, I read archived correspondence alongside contemporary published texts, stitching together evidence of the networks and actions that enabled the women to work and to manage public perception of that work.

In particular, I investigate Palmer and several associates in her inner circle: Sara Hollowell, an accomplished art consultant; Laura Hayes, Palmer’s personal secretary; Jean Loughborough, BLM file clerk and record keeper; and Enid Yandell, a sculptor whose caryatids supported the roof garden of the Woman’s

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1 “Bertha Honore Palmer” was on display 2009-2010. “Siam: The Queen and the White City” appeared 2013-2014. Both exhibits were part of the Chicago History Museum’s Costume and Textile Gallery. A recent improvement occurred when the label accompanying Anders Zorn’s portrait of Palmer at the 2018 Art Institute John Singer Sargent exhibit acknowledged Palmer’s organizational leadership and advocacy for women.

Building. I begin with Palmer, and then move to the other women in this circle, considering ways they worked together as well as independently in their pursuit of new opportunities for themselves and for women more generally. Although “recovery” is often viewed dismissively in recent feminist rhetorical scholarship, it fortunately persists and remains valuable. I therefore aim to trace the ways these women talked and wrote about their work, their attitudes and stances toward their actions, and the rhetorical strategies they devised to help themselves assume new roles as businesswomen. I recover their rhetorical practices and strategies not in search of exemplary models, but rather to provide clues for how the women situated themselves in the rapidly changing working world of this era.

Although little has been written about Palmer as rhetorician (for exceptions, see Lippincott and Wood), I am indebted to the extensive feminist rhetorical scholarship that has illuminated the era, providing important context and precedents to help situate this study. At least in part, Palmer’s rise to the BLM presidency came about through the rhetorical tradition of women’s clubs, which Anne Ruggles Gere reveals as a significant site for women’s rhetorical education. Palmer parlayed her involvement in Chicago’s vibrant, women-run service clubs into government-sponsored leadership (see Handy, Cott). Nan Johnson has shown how the rhetorical parlor constrained nineteenth-century women, and Palmer was affected by these cultural expectations even when her speaking engagements moved beyond the parlor. The work of scholars like Carol Mattingly and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell is also informative because Palmer worked parallel to women reformers like Frances Willard and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, yet without fully embracing and sometimes forthrightly rejecting radical causes like temperance and suffrage. Other issues, such as women’s labor, as well as art, were more central to Palmer’s concerns. Her rhetorical emergence as a leader should be seen amid the broader context of late nineteenth-century women’s activism—she was a somewhat inscrutable moderate who shaped and was shaped by the cultural sea change that enabled new kinds of women’s work.

As a feminist, my work encompasses several intertwined methodological and ideological assumptions. In this essay, I use the phrase “invent” advisedly, referring to the way the women I study were consciously aware of inventing themselves as they assumed increasingly public, professional roles. Simultaneously, as a scholar of history, my own work also entails invention, seeing and using available means. There’s a very real challenge of *finding and seeing* women at work at all, due to the “erasure and invisibility of much of women’s work” (Hallenbeck and Smith 2011). As with any historical project, we won’t reach full understanding of what work was like for these women. Approaching greater understanding involves responsible invention using

traditional and nontraditional methods and evidence. In their pathbreaking synthesis of emerging feminist methodologies, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch describe how “strategic contemplation” includes a researcher’s attention to emotional resonance: “researchers might linger deliberately inside of their research tasks as they investigate their topics and sources—imagining the contexts for practices; speculating about conversations...” (84). My “lingering” has persuaded me of the extent to which these individuals saw themselves as “working-women,” and the degree to which they were emboldened by each other’s success. Indeed, their excitement at times is palpable. They knew where they stood in history: “What beautiful work you did in Springfield!” Hollowell writes to Palmer in 1891 regarding a significant lobbying effort, an achievement that makes Hollowell feel “it is something to be a woman” (Hollowell, March or April 1891). Another Lady Manager echoes such self-conscious enthusiasm for the historical change they are part of. Candace Wheeler, who designed the interior of the Woman’s Building, remembers a lunch guest during this period exclaiming, “Why,...we are all working-women; *not a lady among us!*” (422). Wheeler’s guest embraced the demise of the “lady,” but for many this move was neither comfortable nor welcome. The exclamation articulates a crucial boundary zone that Palmer and contemporaries continually negotiated: the sometimes murky distinction between the lady, or “true woman,” who embodied the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, and the “new woman,” who aspired to independence and professional standing. We will see that Palmer often attempted to straddle both roles, making her intentions and affiliations somewhat opaque.

I also acknowledge without apology that Palmer’s access to power and wealth was exceptional, and her politics were at times conservative. Recent feminist scholarship has pointed to our field’s tendency to promote the study of women who defended liberal causes, as these are more in keeping with dominant scholarly concerns (Royster and Kirsch 22, 76; Hogg 395). With Charlotte Hogg, I urge that we “also examine the less radical, more conservative women who shape cultural beliefs” (Hogg 392; Bokser 146-147). In the context of a rhetorical examination of work, doing so is especially necessary, because then and now women often succeed at work via conformity, terrain we should therefore study. Moreover, although Palmer’s ability to speak cannot be separated from her wealth and social status, neither do her wealth and prominence determine her political leanings. Because she was relatively unknown when she assumed the BLM presidency, radical suffrage groups hoped she might take on their cause (Kirkland 254). Though Palmer steered clear of that affiliation, her allegiances are not always certain, as discussed below. She was a capitalist with moderately tolerant political views who championed the cause of women’s labor yet used questionable means at times and

silenced both women of color and women with more radical ideologies.<sup>2</sup> Her accomplishments were “exceptional,” yet she often took pains to portray herself as “ordinary,” even pointedly as a woman who was *not* breaking barriers. And indeed her pragmatic distancing from the suffrage cause was ordinary, shared by many women of the age. Additionally, some of Palmer’s associates examined here came from families of social standing and financial means, yet portray themselves as working “girls.” All of this underscores the complicated ways in which the rhetorical performance of self intersects with gender, class, and work at this historical juncture.

As these women rhetorically constructed themselves as working women, they also engaged in a rhetorical re-construction of work. In the immediate aftermath of the Fair, the collective influence of Palmer and her colleagues extended far beyond their own circle. Like other world fairs (see Clark), the Columbian Exposition exerted rhetorical influence on civic and national identity, especially gendered identity. Shortly after the Fair, former Wellesley president A. F. Palmer proclaimed its impact: “The entire nation knows itself a nation, possessed of common ideals. In this heightened national dignity, women will have a large and ennobling share” (519). Although her optimism was overstated (she predicted that the Fair would eliminate the need for women-specific venues in the future), Alice Palmer’s claims and confidence are evidence for how successfully the Fair deployed gender rhetoric. While they were by no means alone in their efforts, Bertha Palmer and associates were at the epicenter of the Fair’s portrayal of and messages about women and women’s work.

## What did women’s work look like?

Palmer herself may have struggled to visualize herself as manager; certainly, she understood the challenge of creating a public image for one. For her official portrait as BLM president, she resorted to the iconography of a queen; she chose to be painted by Anders Zorn in a white, flowing dress with a tiara, a gavel in place of the traditional royal scepter. This image was gendered and managerial, perhaps, but also ceremonial and fashionable, and the hazy brushwork and white gown convey bridal softness rather than serious business sensibility (see Corn 181-183). Contemporaries also struggled to see the female manager. For example, prominent teacher of eloquence Anna Morgan gave a speech at the Fair upholding Palmer as a model female rhetor, citing above all her femininity and grace. Since the venue was a fair-related event organized by Palmer, Morgan’s choice of subject may be disingenuous; nonetheless, her praise evidences culturally accepted gender norms. Palmer’s

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2 Space prevents me from elaborating here, but extensive accounts are available in Wadsworth ch. 2 and Weimann.

successful speaking must be shown to not taint her femininity: “The great beauty of her manner was, that she was entirely womanly, not a vestige being about her of aiming at masculine methods [the foil here are women lawyers].... In the woman speakers of the future, the assumption of virile methods will be in bad taste” (597). Women rhetors’ need to “project convincing feminine ethos” persisted well past the antebellum period (Buchanan 136).

Jane Donawerth has argued that Morgan’s publications and lessons on elocution helped women gain mastery over their bodies, “performing gender” by using accepted “bodily signals” to communicate moral purpose and controlled emotion (111). This explains why contemporaries remark so extensively on Palmer’s physical attributes when discussing her rhetorical participation. Her physical, feminine qualities compensate for her assertive speaking role; supporters emphasize her beauty, soft tone, southern accent, tiny waist. More often than not, when Palmer’s speeches and leadership are referenced, so is her undoubtedly feminine body, as in this biographical note in the *Congress of Women*, an 1893 publication of speeches that had been delivered by women at the Fair: “Her numerous addresses delivered in [the BLM’s] interests have been read and admired by thousands, but the peculiar charm of her beautiful face and bell-like voice can never be forgotten by those who were fortunate enough to hear her speak” (Eagle 820). Similarly, the *Woman’s Journal* declared, “Mrs. Palmer has this genius for organization, for leadership; yet fairer, daintier, more gracious woman never blossomed” (Adkinson). Donawerth argues that Anna Morgan’s eloquence lessons promulgated both traditional and resistant values (the latter include loose-fitting, uncorseted clothing and physical strength); Palmer also embodies dual alignments. When supporters insist on Palmer’s performance of femininity, it reflects an effort to align her with conservative rather than radical tendencies. In other words, Palmer’s body itself is positioned as a rhetorical response to entrenched opposition to or fear of the female executive.

For there were many in opposing camps who saw only “virile methods” in Palmer and the new breed of businesswomen. For example, a very different contemporary public image of Palmer may be gleaned from Henry Fuller’s novel, *With the Procession* (1895). One of the protagonists, Mrs. Bates, is a fictional stand-in for Palmer; she is a prominent socialite with multiple projects and plans. A young man ironically remarks to Mrs. Bates, “It must be a terrible thing to be cursed with ambition and executive ability.” Mrs. Bates responds, “Well, there it is....I’ve got to have something on hand. I’ve got to engineer. I’ve got to manage” (Fuller 229). The lady manager is portrayed here as aberrant excess, possessed by an unseemly appetite for “engineering.” McDougall, Morgan, and Fuller present divergent stances, yet they respond to the same prompt: what to do with the woman executive? More than twenty five years

later, in her 1918 book *My Chicago*, Morgan still upheld Palmer's virtues as one who could "speak as a lady and a woman too" (146). Although Wheeler's lunch guest took strength from the dissolution of "ladies," Morgan's comment highlights the persistent challenge that faced the female rhetor, whose threat to social stability was often met by the attempt to domesticate her (see Johnson, Mattingly, Campbell).

### What did Palmer say publicly?

So, how did Bertha Palmer, lady manager, speak? As the competing images above indicate, it is difficult to glimpse an accurate picture, particularly because her posthumous public memory has been well guarded by family and close associates, whose pains to paint an "uncritical" portrait filled with "adulation" has persisted to this day (Smith 5). Despite the fact that Palmer gave many public speeches in her presidential role, her words can be difficult to interpret. Some of her orations can be read as progressive. She used her role in the world's fair to advocate tirelessly for better labor opportunities for all women, more professions open to women, improved conditions for women in foreign nations, and to recognize women's historical oppression and future potential. Yet reading her as progressive is also undermined in the speeches. She often refused to admit that what she said might be political or controversial, even when it was. For example, at the Fair's dedicatory ceremonies on Oct. 21, 1892, she asserted "industrial equality" for women while denying this had any political relevance: "Without touching upon politics, suffrage, or other irrelevant issues, this unique organization of women for women will devote itself to the promotion of their material interests. It will address itself to the formation of a public sentiment which will favor women's industrial equality, and her receiving just compensation for services rendered" (*Addresses* 116). In other words, she asserted that equal pay was a practical, non-political matter.

The straddling of controversy could lead to contradicting herself. For example, at the opening of the Woman's Building six months later, Palmer came boldly close to refuting the dominant domestic sphere theory "that exists among conservative people, that the sphere of woman is her home" (133). Such a theory forces women into the same poorly paid "respectable occupations while starving in following them" (133). A devoted pragmatist, she disparaged "theory" in general, seeing "material" concerns as purely pragmatic; chivalric men "who have poetic theories about the sanctity of the home" seem to only see "the fortunate few" of their own "favored class" (133, 134). In reality, "necessity" demands that "the vast majority of the 'gentler sex'" are forced to leave the home and work: "They must work or they must starve" (134). This was nearly explicit refutation of dominant belief. But, like many of her time, she simultaneously claimed that when feasible, presiding over the home was



how a woman fulfills “her highest and truest function” (133-134). And a year later, at the Fair’s end, she reversed her emphasis, acknowledging “the home and domestic life to be the natural sphere of every woman, and that there is only one here and there who would prefer any other career than that of a happy wife and mother. But, alas, for my sex, there are, unfortunately, not homes for all women to preside over” because “most men are failures,” and many women who have homes are economically forced to leave them for work. The “wise course” is to accept what is—“that women participate in the industries of the world”—and to find out what exactly they are good at and give them “technical training and education” to pursue such work (*Addresses* 154-156).

Hence, frequently, while nominally agreeing with conservative ideology, she undoes its claim without admitting she is doing so. Alternatively, she can also be seen as pragmatically seeking remedies to existing economic conditions without engaging in systemic analysis. She blames men who don’t succeed at supporting their families, but this is a weak accusation and thin analysis. What results is a set of speeches with a few invigorating moments, such as the oft-quoted conclusion of her October 1892 dedication: “Even more important than the discovery of Columbus, which we are gathered together to celebrate, is the fact that the General Government has just discovered woman” (119). But as a whole, her public statements largely leave us scratching our heads. Moreover, Palmer’s behaviors often belie her somewhat progressive words. In her attempt to consolidate power and appease multiple factions, including southern women, she shut down the suffragist Isabella Society’s attempts to assert more radical views, and refused to allow African American women to join the BLM in any meaningful way (see note 2). That these actions were largely successful may suggest conservative instincts, or Palmer’s accurate read of the political climate.

## **How did Palmer and co-workers speak privately?**

If Palmer’s rhetoric was publically equivocal, how did she speak in private with her close associates and others? Gail Lippincott argues that Palmer was controlling and manipulative in her attempt to create a food science exhibit in the Women’s Building (see further support for this characterization in Ross 167). Such characteristics are often evident in the BLM correspondence archived at the Chicago History Museum: Palmer, terse and polite, rejecting exhibits and employment requests, and redirecting her own board members’ maneuvers. She tells associates not to contract with someone without getting terms in writing. She boldly dictates her vision for the content of Mary Cassatt’s mural. She tells another muralist, Mary MacMonnies, to keep the primitive women “draped” because “our people west of the Mississippi” don’t like even “semi-nudity” (Palmer, To Mrs. MacMonnies, 5 Jan 1893). She asks a fellow Lady

Manager to “incidentally” “find out whether or not [other board members] are members of the [rival] Queen Isabella Society without telling them that I wish to know” and then to discreetly report back (To Miss Shakespeare, 6 Feb 1891).

Some of the most significant points of negotiation required a more delicate touch, and these were often carried out by Sara Hallowell, a well known art consultant who, as Palmer’s right-hand woman, helped the Palmers create their collection of Impressionist paintings that became the foundation for the Art Institute’s renowned collection. Hallowell assisted with many of the BLM’s artistic projects in the World’s Fair, and often seems to have done the uglier tasks, hiding the “seamy side,” and saying things that Palmer felt she herself could not say. For example, in February 1892 Palmer asks Hallowell to communicate with the artist Elizabeth Gardner, “as it is so difficult to write and convey all of one’s meaning, and I think you could understand better than an absolute stranger, the position here” (To Miss Hallowell, 24 Feb 1892). In another letter, she tells Hallowell: “I cannot say to Goupil & Co directly what perhaps you can intimate indirectly, in case you are willing to do me this very great service.” Here she asks Hallowell to stop the publisher’s attempt to have “prominent women used as advertising cards to sell the book.” Instead, she wants “to have the text written from a serious stand-point by expert authorities in each line of work” (To Miss Hallowell, 5 Jan 1893). She closes the letter by repeating the request, which is really a command: “Would you be willing to go and see them and to say in my indirect way in conversation, whatever you think necessary.” Palmer sees her rhetorical options as limited and expects Hallowell to conduct herself as surrogate, speaking in Palmer’s own “indirect way.”

In yet another letter she explains in detail a contract dispute with the muralists Cassatt and MacMonnies, who are in France, asking Hallowell to smooth things over and negotiate new terms. She authorizes Hallowell to extend the date of delivery, appoints her to accept sketches, and blithely dismisses Cassatt’s claim of incurring excess expenses since “she is well enough off to make this a tremendous step on the road to fame.” Palmer continues, “I have written you thus fully so that you may understand the situation here and explain it to the ladies...,” subsequently adding, “This is only for your own eye and to be repeated to the ladies and not for general promulgation because we do not care to have the seamy side exposed to view” (To Miss Hallowell, 8 Aug 1892).

Hence, archived correspondence suggests that Palmer had a firm managerial hand, yet her firmness was often at a distance, as she appears to often have managed indirectly, at times in absentia, navigating innuendo through discreet letters to a trusted surrogate. Hallowell, in particular, becomes a proxy who can say what Palmer feels she herself “cannot say.” Indeed, indirection is something Palmer herself points to in other women’s rhetoric. She

notes that women from around the world contributed objects to display at the Fair “because they saw an opportunity [for future female industry], which they gracefully and delicately veiled behind the magnificent laces” they sent (*Addresses* May 1, 1893,140). Likewise, it can be argued that Palmer’s own rhetorical strategy was also to “gracefully and delicately veil.” With a strategic veil, Palmer hovers over both true and new woman roles. That Palmer chose this rhetorical strategy wisely for her time and not ours seems apparent. A “lady” speaking was a risky venture.

## **Evidence Can Be a Shared Glance**

The risks associated with evolving gender roles is apparent in *Three Girls in a Flat*, a quasi-fictional/quasi-autobiographical 1892 book about three working “girls” in Chicago, co-written by Yandell, Hayes, and Loughbrough, an artist and two office workers employed by Palmer. Portions of the book focused on the BLM and were excerpted and sold at the Woman’s Building, indicating they were intended to be read as authentic accounts (Wadsworth 27). Below, I speculate further about the way in which the hybrid genre served a rhetorical purpose. But first, I want to focus on a particular scene in the book that allows us to see another side of Palmer and her fellow working women, and to watch the latter watch Palmer begin to shed the rich lady and queen mantle. Hayes, secretary for Mrs. Palmer, narrates a story in one of the BLM chapters where Palmer, Hayes, and the art consultant Sara Hallowell are together in a Paris drawing room in 1891. They’re hosting a meeting to generate foreign support for the women’s exhibits at the Fair, and Palmer has been relying on others to do the talking until a question is asked that only she can explain. She tries to have someone else answer, claims she can’t speak French well, but finally takes the floor. What Hayes marvels at here is specifically Palmer’s rhetorical competence:

As I saw the interest deepening on every face, turned to this slender young woman, and noted the deferential attention given, not to her beauty or her position, or to the grace of her manner, but to her wonderful intelligence, and to the clear reasoning that dominated her hesitating speech, I felt a strange sense of emotion. Miss Hallowell leaned over to me and whispered, ‘I never expected to see such a sight as this,’ and I noticed the moisture in her eyes. (Yandell 36)

The emotion is striking, even mystifying from our cultural distance. That these two close associates of Palmer would be moved to tears when their boss spoke indicates the resistance Palmer had to navigate to be a manager, and highlights the need for “speculating about conversations” (Royster and Kirsch 84). “I shall never forget how she looked as she stood in the middle of the large

salon, explaining to these distinguished French people in their own language the difficult points that would require an unusual vocabulary and a judicious choice of words in one's own tongue," Hayes writes (36).

I propose that what is surprising is that Palmer spoke—and it was *not* in public. For within established confines, public speaking was largely an approved arena for women at this historical moment, especially when speaking to other women. For example, in the popular *Munsey's Magazine* in March 1893 just before the Fair opened, the writer Mrs. M.P. Handy touts Palmer in particular among the many "successful business women" in Chicago. Public speaking appears to be Handy's primary qualification for public management, especially if the female speaker maintains her femininity (609). Palmer's "'Southern vowels flow like wine,' and carry her audience with them wherever she will," Handy writes (610). "...There are many more Chicago women who can be depended upon to talk well upon any subject in which they are interested, to conduct a meeting, preside over a committee in a businesslike manner, or read a 'paper' before a literary club to the instruction and entertainment of its members" (612). But the Paris salon was a private gathering of about forty wealthy French officials. Perhaps what really moved Hayes and Hallowell was that Palmer was speaking in a private business meeting, to a mixed gender audience, with unprepared yet purposeful remarks. She elaborated on what we might now consider a feminist point: how, rather than have separate awards, women artisans would compete with men at the Fair, but that the Woman's Building would hold "special exhibits" of representative women's accomplishments. Palmer was revealing she was more than a pretty face. She knew her business. She was being a "lady manager," making a sales pitch for the organization. The surprise accords with Nan Johnson's argument that while women could speak publicly, approved rhetorical scenes were scripted and their power limited. To do real work was neither expected nor accepted. Yes, real work was indeed accomplished by many. But the intense study Handy sees in Chicago women seems removed from sites of actual power and business management. Women "found themselves stranded in the parlor with little hope of securing voice in public affairs," Johnson writes (14). If public works and public speaking had become the badge of the public role women could play, it also limited them to what was often only a figurehead-queen. Yet, some women managers crafted real power. Because the female manager's private discussions, both past and present, are hard to capture, we need to extract private transactions from available sources, such as the glance between Hayes and Hallowell. In other words, by applying "critical imagination," the shared glance in a semi-fictional text becomes a cultural artifact, offering clues about how these women experienced their roles and maneuvered within them (Royster and Kirsch 72). This scene allows us to glimpse Palmer's early,

successful assertions of power, while also noting their jarring effect on even her close supporters.

## Sara Hallowell: “Progressive, self-supporting womanhood” and Failure

Sara Tyson Hallowell is an intriguing female professional of the era. An art consultant who worked in Chicago and Paris, she was largely responsible for introducing Impressionism to Americans through her persuasive work with Palmer and other American art patrons. She was an acknowledged expert, who suggested the paintings that Palmer collected. She had managed several earlier, large-scale international art exhibits. She really knew painting and artists, yet her protracted bid to become Art Director for the Fair was ultimately unsuccessful. Moreover, she failed despite Palmer’s vociferous letter campaign to get her the post and despite endorsements from dozens of people in influential papers like the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (see “The Head of the Art Exhibit.”). Twelve years after the Fair, a *New York Times* feature described Hallowell as “thoroughly representative of our finest type of progressive, self-supporting womanhood” (“Miss Sara Hallowell Unique”). Yet despite her proven “judgment and discrimination,... considerable tact and diplomacy,” Hallowell had failed. Exactly what happened is still uncertain, but gender was certainly an issue. After Hallowell made a special trip to see Fine Arts Chairman Augustus Bullock about the position, he wrote to a fellow committee member citing her accomplishments and endorsements:

She has the strong endorsment [sic] of almost everyone East and West whose name might be expected to lend weight to her petition; not only of the leading artists American and foreign, but of presidents of Art Museums.... She also has the endorsement of the Chicago committee. I gave her a full hearing and told her that all the papers she left with me would be laid before our committee at its October meeting.

Then, his positive tone suddenly shifts: “I think it very important there should be several names under consideration by us for the place” (Bullock). Several *male* names, we can infer. Hallowell’s failure may begin here, long before her application was formally declined. A month later, The *New York Times* stated that Hallowell’s “sex was an insuperable objection” to the Committee, and a subcommittee was formed by Bullock and two others “to look about for the right man to assume management of the art department” (“World’s Fair Anomalies”).

Although this sounds definitive, Palmer campaigned heavily for Hallowell for several more months, sending numerous letters to request endorsements,

and advising Hallowell on her best moves. BLM archives even contain a letter “never sent” to a Mr. Woodward, revealing the machinations and second-hand reports Palmer was tempted to use: “I understood from Miss Shakespeare that you have said you would endorse Miss Hallowell....” Palmer’s apparent decision to not send this letter indicates sound judgment. Her assertions are based on hearsay, and she was overstepping her role (To Mr. Woodward, 14 Feb 1891).

While Palmer methodically attempted to influence the appointment, Hallowell’s letters to Palmer show the emotional toll of failing to obtain a post she was qualified for: “It is really a wretched thing to have any matter so much at heart as I have this” (12 Jan 1891); “I am really too bitter to succumb gracefully” (“Saturday”). Once again, Palmer’s response is to manage through a surrogate. She writes to BLM member Miss Busselle, requesting she look up Miss Hallowell in New York to cheer her, as “I am afraid she may be a little despondent with hope deferred” (Palmer, BLM Correspondence, Jan. 1891). Palmer’s directive responses attempt to deflect and manage business failure, but also show she understood its costs.

Hallowell, though, ran back to France. Recognizing that her authority might not be acknowledged, she mentally and physically positioned herself for failure.<sup>3</sup> Before the Art Director decision had been made official, Hallowell decided in a rush of emotion to leave Chicago. In a letter to Palmer written on a “Pullman vestibuled train” between Chicago and New York she explains her withdrawal:

Weeks may drag along before any shifts are taken so far as I am concerned and I am too hungry for the picture season in Paris to be able to wait amiably any longer.....[there is] uncertainty of my being in the fair at all. Should they want me very much—which is not at all likely—it is easier to return than to sit idly in Chicago waiting—and unless I am wanted badly *I will remain indefinitely on the other side,*... (April 1891, *emph added*)

Art historian Carolyn Kinder Carr points out that while the man ultimately appointed, Halsey Ives, was reported by the *Chicago Tribune* as “one of the handsomest men in America,” Hallowell was “short, stout, husbandless, and childless” (Carr, “Prejudice and Pride” 69, and note 31 p. 116). We can infer that Sara Hallowell was not selected as manager because she lacked masculine soft skills of dining, cigar smoking, and glad handing; although her rhetorical skills and aesthetic taste equipped her to pick a masterpiece and confer with

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3 Smith characterizes Palmer as repeatedly retreating to travel when attempts to enter the political male world fail.

and placate both artists and their patrons, she evidently couldn't be trusted to go to dinner—necessary for courting art donations.<sup>4</sup> After the position was finally offered to Halsey Ives, Hollowell grudgingly became Ives' assistant. Yet, to add insult to injury, she was initially offered \$500 less than men in comparable positions. She held out, and received equitable pay. But, after the Fair, she "remained on the other side," in Paris. She continued to be an art agent for wealthy patrons like the Palmers and for the Art Institute until World War I. Writing after the Fair, Hollowell tells Palmer of Mary Cassatt's feelings about gender relations stateside, but we might see them as her own views as well: "After all give me France. Women do not have to fight for recognition here, if they do serious work" (Cassatt, qtd in Hollowell 6 Feb 1894).

### **“Three Girls”: Public Sponsorship and Private Gain**

How were women to pursue serious work? This question pursued all five women in this study. Palmer tried but failed to elevate Hollowell to a managerial level; she somewhat more successfully promoted the professional ambitions of Laura Hayes, Jean Loughborough, and Enid Yandell. The secretarial work done by the first two women may be even more invisible than managerial work. We can see Hayes' penciled initials on some BLM correspondence, but with "critical imagination" more information can be gleaned from the book referred to above, *Three Girls in a Flat*, which the three women co-wrote (Royster and Kirsch 72). The book is a series of loosely connected narratives about three young working women who get an apartment together, each of them working in association with the BLM and the Fair. The three authors are its thinly veiled protagonists. Iconography on the title page mimics the commemorative coins sold at the World's Fair with Palmer's profile. Readers familiar with the Palmer icon facing to the right would notice the girls face left, suggesting a conversational relationship, and thereby using subtle visual rhetoric to both sustain the serious ambition of the girls' quest while also having fun. The "three girls" are independent, working women in a firmly urban setting, strapped for cash, figuring out how to live on their own, needing chaperones for parties, fending off intrusive neighbors and burglary. They keep house, decorate, skip church, and monitor each other's love interests but are notably not wholly focused on securing marriage. The text purports to be true, but the genre continually shifts. Official-sounding BLM history is juxtaposed with wry observations from

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4 In an essay explaining why she was supporting Hillary Clinton, Hana Schank wrote, "I understand what it's like to be the most qualified person in the room and still be overlooked in favor of the charismatic guy just because, well, you'd rather have a beer with him."

a workplace diary, realistic narrative, and sentimental romance. A mostly positive contemporary review noted that “[t]he introduction of living people under their real names side by side with characters who are presumably fictitious is not altogether a happy innovation” (“Today’s Literature”).

However, it may in fact be the way this unwieldy genre weaves fact and fiction that enabled its authors to assert themselves in contested space. It showcases new roles for women but also brackets them with uncertainty, since the fictionalized passages, slapstick incidents, and glib tone lead the reader to question how to read it. The genre itself simultaneously reveals and cloaks, providing some cover for the authors by retreating from full-on reporting. Nevertheless, in *Three Girls*, we see Hayes (Palmer’s personal secretary), Loughborough (BLM file clerk and record keeper), and Yandell (sculptor) perform as Palmer’s underlings and as independent working women. Hayes, as “Marjorie,” narrates the Paris scene recounted above, and also spends a work day buying flowers and food for a Palmer party; “Gene” (Loughborough) handles loopy correspondence and difficult petitioners; and “the Duke” (Yandell) manages her art studio. The text is tinged with fiction, but still allows the reader to glimpse the work of the century’s New Woman at multiple organizational levels. The chapter called “The Board of Lady Managers (To which the flat owes its being)” asserts a global reach for the Board, which was granted “entirely unprecedented authority” by Congress, and whose greatest accomplishment “will be the showing of the work done by the industrial women in this and all other countries” (Yandell 53, 73). Overall, the book offers a playfully irreverent portrait of young women in the process of becoming independent and self-sufficient, a necessary step on the road to successful female manager.

The fact that Palmer sponsored this romp is quite significant, though tricky to situate. Because the account was sold in the Women’s Building, Palmer stood to directly benefit from the positive portrayal of herself as manager, and also to benefit from the positive positioning of women’s work at the Fair. In other words, Palmer’s interest is that of an employer benefiting from employees’ actions. But, through her implicit support of the book, Palmer also sponsors women’s acquisition of literacy – their education as workers. For example, the book characterizes the Board’s work as instrumental in elevating the position and training of BLM members, giving “legal right, for the first time in the history of any nation, to the organization of a body of women to transact business for the Government” (Yandell 53). It notes how BLM members, in the initial meeting, had varying experience with parliamentary procedure and that “the majority were totally untutored in business methods and came together with a feeling of hesitation” (54) but that by the second meeting “new voices had gained confidence to speak” (59). The “girls” education as workers is also portrayed on a personal level, such as the Duke’s argument with Mrs. Ulysses



S. Grant, discussed below. The women learn to deal with both important dignitaries and insinuating intruders in their office work, and also succeed in setting up house on a budget. When Lady Aberdeen visits from Britain, Gene notes in her diary a workplace discussion of a recent article comparing the political advances of women in both countries. Lady Aberdeen declares “in a business way the American woman is far ahead of the English. We have no such system of bookkeeping and office work as I see here among your women” (128). Hayes and Loughborough have mastered such systems in their BLM work. In sum, the book shows the “three girls” as rhetorically aware, women who know themselves as daily workers, trailblazing for their gender even in shabby surroundings, and as strategically situated pioneers, women who are cognizant of the national and even global implications of their work.

It should be noted that these are “working girls” buffered by class: the text suggests the “girls” have access to other sources of income than what they earn, and their commitment to professionalization is not single-minded. Gene (Loughborough) gets engaged within the book’s pages (only Yandell never married). Nonetheless, the sponsored arrangement implies a move that is socio-culturally broader and more progressive than Palmer raising her own professional capital. The book promotes a form of female managerial and worker expertise, and as such, Palmer ideologically and economically endorses “girls in flats”— women professionals. Employing the young women is an act of private mentorship; endorsing the book that narrates their adventure also sponsors a *public* memorial of such activity. Master of the political hedge, Palmer sponsors a radical form of feminist literacy couched in self-promoting consumer capitalism, safely tinged with fiction.

In *Three Girls*, when the Duke, or Yandell, narrates how she “took up the cudgels on behalf of working women” in an argument with Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant, the former president’s widow, we witness a new woman attempting to persuade a true woman of the benefits of joining the work force (95). It’s not a failsafe argument; the conservative Mrs. Grant responds gradually and grudgingly during this chance encounter at the Palmers’ mansion. Yandell uses humor to defend her own vocation when Mrs. Grant says she doesn’t approve of women sculptors. Mrs. Grant maintains that “every woman is better off at home taking care of husband and children,” and Yandell responds that cutting marble prepares her for being a better housewife by “developing muscle to beat biscuit” (95). It is clear that at this juncture, women like Yandell have moved on from the antebellum attempt to justify domesticity (see Buchanan). Since Yandell continued her art career and did not become a housewife, the joke seems familiarly cynical, even dismissive, like an earlier version of Hillary Clinton’s infamous comment about not staying home to bake cookies.

Eventually, when presented with several scenarios of needy families who need extra income, Mrs. Grant concedes: "'You may be right; in that case,' [she said] slowly, 'they ought to go into the world'" (95-96). It's only a partial win for woman's cause. Mrs. Grant is allowed to remain hesitant, and the narrative is notably sympathetic to her. Soon, the new sculpture of General Grant is unveiled in a Chicago public park (the reason for the gathering). Mrs. Grant searches "with streaming eyes" not for the deceased leader, but for "the face of the man she had loved" (98). Her role as loving wife becomes a powerful source of ethos. These juxtaposed scenes serve to pull in both "ordinary" and "progressive" woman readers, persuading as much through empathy as through overt argument. Each woman has touched a chord in the other, crossing the divide between them, yet remaining where she began.

The "girls" succeed in living independently; what's not so apparent is their simultaneous struggle to do "serious work." Just like Yandell's joke, the hybrid, fictionalized form masks this effort, turning life into romanticized plot, and the work day into amusing anecdote. Yet the very quasi-ness of this genre, its in-between and not fully successful awkwardness, reflects the dual struggle of being a working woman, and representing her in recognizable forms. Yandell is a sculptor, but her rhetorical argument representing women's work is grounded in material necessity faced by women very different from herself, echoing Palmer's speeches. Neither woman can yet argue for, or represent her own role, her *choice*—not based in necessity—to be a professional. To invent woman's new roles, the "girls" compose in a new, unwieldy genre, inventing a fascinating but not entirely satisfying rhetorical form for themselves as well as their story. Similarly, Palmer equivocates, and Hallowell advances and retreats. Rhetorical self-presentation among this circle of women managers and workers was a work in progress.

It is because women's leadership is still a work in progress that we will benefit from rethinking our attitude toward recovery in feminist rhetorical studies. While it's clear that recovery has continued despite numerous calls to move "beyond," acknowledgement of its value will allow us to more productively consider how to do it—and how to use it. Scholarship always refracts its own present, and a conscious awareness of this can help us think carefully about how historical study also "recovers the present," allowing us to see our own era with more clarity (Singer 175). For recovery allows us to resurrect forgotten or misremembered women leaders and professionals so as to understand the past and figure out the future. Despite the many advances of the feminist movement, it is clear that we are still forging the ways in which women can step up and lead—departments, programs, countries—and we benefit by understanding how women assume rhetorical authority to move into and

through new roles. Just as importantly, we are still sorting out productive ways for those governed to respond to women leaders.

It should be clear by now that I believe it is not just successful women who serve as models for recovery; it is perhaps even more important to investigate the memory of imperfect rhetoric and failed rhetors. The recovery of Bertha Palmer and her circle allows us to see five women at the end of the nineteenth century who chose to become working women, and whose success and struggle to take on this identification are instructive. Their forthright assertions and backtracking, use of indirect or surrogate rhetors, and creative accommodation of genre show us much about the strategies of women's self-representation in the workplace. Their experience helps us think about how women wield power from within established systems, an insight with value beyond academia to currently widening circles of motivated, politicized citizens. My recovery of the rhetorical experiences of these businesswomen has included reading both traditional and unexpected sources for emotional undercurrent, meaningful glance, and attitude. Using feminist rhetorical method, "imagining the contexts" and "speculating," yields nuanced historical (and present) possibilities (Royster and Kirsch 84). Alongside the rhetorical presentation of Bertha Palmer as ultra-feminine, wealthy, and regal, we can invent other, alternative memories of real, flawed, powerful women working together.

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