Preparing for the Politics of Life: 
An Expansion of the Political Dimensions of College Women’s Literary Societies

One week before the 1908 U.S. presidential election, the women of the Hesperian Literary Society at the State University of Iowa (today the University of Iowa) presented “a unique program” in the form of a mock political rally. Imagining that they lived in a town where women had “been honored by the legislature with the ballot,” the “Hep” members divided into clubs that supported various causes. Several women formed the Utopian Club, promoting William Jennings Bryan’s presidential ambitions, while the members who constituted the Women’s Culture Club supported William H. Taft. Heps who pretended to be Women’s Christian Temperance Union members argued for prohibition. The Heps displayed the political dynamism of the period with other members representing anarchists, socialists, and independents. A woman from each group spoke in support of her cause in front of a crowd that included “a lot of” college men. SUI senior and Hep member Ione Mulnix described the rally in a letter to her parents: “[T]he speeches were of course very ridiculous. The reasons why each was the best were very feminine and would hardly convince a man.” She explained that the Utopian Club representative “argued for Bryan because he was the best looking.” The Heps ended their program by setting loose a toy mouse, causing the actors to scream and scatter. Finding the fictitious rally “awfully funny,” Mulnix noted that the Hep women “acted their parts to perfection” and that the college men “seemed to appreciate it immensely.”

Following the program that evening, William Carberry, a member of SUI’s oldest student organization, the all-male Zetagathian Literary Society, walked Mulnix to her boarding house. SUI seniors had recently elected Carberry class president. Mulnix told her parents that during the walk Carberry “offered me anything I want in the way of class committee chairman.” Carberry
encouraged Mulnix to chair the senior breakfast committee, a highly-prized position among the women’s organizations on campus. In trying to build a coalition to ensure his election, Carberry had courted the women of the Octave Thanet Literary Society, who insisted on receiving control of this committee in exchange for their votes. When the coalition fell through but Carberry was still elected president, he offered the position to Mulnix, who had campaigned on his behalf. Mulnix expressed concern about the responsibilities of this high profile position, but decided that “it ought not to be so bad” with a committee to which to delegate responsibilities. Mulnix confessed to her parents, “I felt pretty highly elated to think that he gave me first choice apparently over sorority girls and all.”

Ione Mulnix’s account of this night illustrates that college women used their literary societies to engage political issues, become involved in campus politics, and develop heterosexual relationships. Yet even as these women acquired political awareness and conducted political activity, they realized that their political involvement was limited by enduring social customs and legal restraints. The Heps demonstrated a thorough awareness of the political landscape for the upcoming presidential contest, but, in front of an audience of men, they discussed the candidates’ physical characteristics rather than their policy platforms. Although college women campaigned for their male peers in campus elections and college men felt indebted to them for their electoral victories, the distribution of the electoral “spoils” remained a man’s responsibility and the rewards offered to women carried strong overtones of domesticity.

Historians have long located American women’s political activity in all-female clubs and organizations before they were guaranteed the right vote with the ratification of the Nineteenth

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1 “Hesperian Program,” Daily Iowan (Iowa City, IA), Oct. 25, 1908, 1; Ione Mulnix to Sally Mulnix and James Mulnix, Oct. 27, 1908, Ione Mulnix Papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, IA (hereafter cited as Mulnix MSS). For brief descriptions of the senior class breakfast, see “Class Breakfast Tickets,” Daily Iowan (Iowa City, IA), June 3, 1909, 3; and “Class Breakfast,” Daily Iowan (Iowa City, IA), June 15, 1909, 1.
Amendment in 1920. Stretching back to the colonial period, the political activity of women’s clubs peaked during the Progressive Era (1890-1920), which included Mulnix’s college years. Women, often quite successfully, used their organizations to advance political agendas by focusing on issues that they could connect to the domestic sphere, such as education, child labor, temperance, and woman suffrage. While many scholars have noted that clubwomen tended to be well educated and relatively wealthy, few have connected women’s extracurricular experiences at the colleges and universities they attended in increasing numbers to their later political activities.²

debate within these societies. More recent historians have demonstrated the importance of women’s literary societies at various types of higher education institutions from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century. Yet similar to the earlier generation of scholars writing about college men, these historians refrain from labeling most of women’s literary societies’ activities political, save for their debates.

Perhaps historians have perpetuated a narrow consideration of the political features of literary societies because they have typically been interested in these organizations’ contributions

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3 Frederick Rudolph attributes the development of literary societies at eastern men’s colleges “to the general atmosphere of colonial political debate.” Rudolph finds that within these societies college men debated “the exciting political issues of the day.” Nearly a forgotten aside, Rudolph is one of few historians who acknowledge the possibility of internal society politics, as he notes that fraternities contributed to the demise of the literary societies by introducing “new political complications into literary-society elections.” James McLachlan asserts that the debates of Princeton’s two literary societies served “as the capstone of the informal curriculum” in the early nineteenth century. Regarding the influence of these debates on the average Princeton man, McLachlan claims “they pushed him outward, upon the public stage.”


4 Mary Kelley argues that literary societies at seminaries and academies developed women students’ “reasoning and rhetorical faculties” by encouraging women “to read critically, to write lucidly, and to speak persuasively.” While noting that these organizations competed for members, argued in favor of women’s intellectual equality with men, encouraged their members to “influence” society, and confronted “the most explosive issues” in their writings and debate, Kelley explicitly labels none of these activities “political.” In both single-sex and coeducational literary societies at four land-grant university in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Andrea Radke-Moss claims, “Debates gave women students the advantage of finding their own political voice.” But the only intra-society political activity Radke-Moss notes is members of single-sex literary societies voting on whether to become coeducational organizations. Christine Ogren demonstrates that at state normal schools men and women students, typically far poorer than their peers at colleges, used literary societies to “become conversant with the high culture of the well-educated” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ogren limits the consideration of politics within these societies to the “social issues and progressive reforms” students explored in their debates. Certainly many activities of these women literary societies can be construed as political, but when historians do not label it so it obscures the multiple power differentials college women experienced on campus. Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute on Early American History and Culture, 2006) chapter four, quotations on 118, 129-130; Andrea Radke-Moss, *Bright Epoch: Women and Coeducation in the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008) chapter three, quotation on 80; Christine A. Ogren, *The American State Normal School: “An Instrument of Great Good”* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 108-119, quotations on 114, 116.

Kolan Thomas Morelock details men’s and women’s literary societies at two colleges in Lexington, Kentucky in the late nineteenth century and describes how the men’s societies’ oratorical contests served as a prominent community activity, but does not consider the political skills that such activities might have fostered, *Taking the Town: Collegiate and Community Culture in the Bluegrass, 1880-1917* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008) chapters three and four.
to students en masse, rather than how individual students experienced such organizations.

Considerations of how literary society membership affected individuals have been limited to brief mentions in biographies of white men who went on to become accomplished public figures. These biographers, similar to other historians, considered how literary societies debates prepared these men to become successful public speakers. But microhistory, a scholarly approach that arose from the social history movement, is well suited to both complicate and enhance historical understandings of the political nature of literary societies. Narrow in scope but sharp in focus, microhistory adds substantially to the extant historical scholarship by focusing on a small unit of analysis that ultimately suggests a more complex understanding of larger significance.

For example, Jonathan Messerli notes Horace Mann and his fellow students joined one of Brown University’s two literary societies in the early nineteenth century for two reasons, one being the social opportunities and the other “was the sheer joy which came from debating.” Although Mann rose from the society’s second librarian, the “lowliest position in the hierarchy of [society] officers,” to its official lecturer, the “highest honor the brethren bestowed,” Messerli does not describe any internal political struggles that coincided with Mann’s ascension within his society. Historian Henry Bragdon demonstrates that the future president Woodrow Wilson “met with only modest success” within his literary society’s “competitive debates and oratorical contests” at Princeton between 1875 and 1879. But in an effort to gain experience with a style of debating based on the British House of Commons that focused on persuasion, Wilson and several classmates formed the Liberal Debating Club to consider “contemporary political topics, both foreign and domestic.” William Jennings Bryan, who attended Illinois College nearly contemporaneously to Wilson’s attendance at Princeton, worked toward perfecting his oratorical skills as a member of the Sigma Pi literary society. A recent biographer, Michael Kazin, notes that Bryan “reserved his zeal for oratory” and describes his quest to win the campus’s “top prize in elocution,” a reward that Bryan eventually earned on his third attempt. Jonathan Messerli, Horace Mann: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 1972) 44-48, quotations on 45, 46; Henry Wilkinson Bragdon, Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967) 30-34, 43-45, quotations on 31, 32, 34; Michael Kazin, A Godly Hero: The Life of Williams Jennings Bryan (New York: Anchor Books, 2006) 10-13, quotations on 10, 12.

In contrasting biography with microhistory, Jill Lepore writes, “If biography is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual’s contribution to history, microhistory is founded upon almost the opposite assumption: however singular a person’s life may be, the value of examining it lies in how it serves as an allegory for the culture as a whole.” “Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” The Journal of American History 88 (2001): 141. Matti Peltonen considers how microhistory informs the larger historiography, arguing that it allows historians to “show the way in concrete detail how actual entities, personal experiences, or events can relate the micro with the macro,” “Clues Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research,” History and Theory 40 (2004): 359. Historians of early modern Europe have been the best known practitioners of microhistory, see most notably Natalie Zemon Davis, The Return of Martin Guerre (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Robert Darnton, The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Carlo Ginzburg, The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Historians of education, in comparison, have generally either not employed microhistory or refrained from labeling their scholarship as such. A keyword search within the History of Education Quarterly reveals only one research article that mentions
A microhistory of Ione Munix’s experiences in the Hesperian Literary Society at the State University of Iowa at the turn of the twentieth century encourages a reconsideration of the political dimensions of literary societies. Munix, the only child of a physician and a housewife from a small town over 150 miles from SUI, was one of a growing number of white middle-class women who attended to college to receive a higher education and prepare for a brief career before marrying and exiting the paid labor force to become a stay-at-home mother. Gleaned from her many surviving letters written to her parents during her college years, Munix’s most meaningful involvement at SUI was as a member of the Hesperian Literary Society. Confirming earlier historians’ accounts that college women considered the pressing issues of their day and honed public speaking skills through debates, Munix’s letters also reveal that she and her contemporaries also learned political skills through intra-society conflicts, engaged in campus political contests via their literary societies, and used their literary society to negotiate the sexual politics of the era. Indeed, these young women’s experiences suggest that literary societies served as a particularly useful feature of the extracurriculum through which they learned various political skills useful in their adult lives.

*Joining a Literary Society, Intra-Society Politicking, and Campus Electioneering*

In September 1904, sixteen-year-old Ione Munix entered a university that was experiencing dramatic growth, with SUI’s student population increasing from 1,560 in Munix’s first year to 2,473 in her last. SUI remained overwhelmingly white, enrolling no more than ten African Americans annually. Under the leadership of President George MacLean, who served from 1899 to 1911, a university in name made significant strides towards becoming a university in fact. When MacLean assumed office the university consisted of six “departments”; when he

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left office it was comprised of nine “colleges.” Creating various deanships and new offices, MacLean facilitated the rise of the university’s bureaucratic structure. He also realized the problems and possibilities of intercollegiate athletics, hiring the first athletic director, joining an athletic conference, and dealing with several scandals involving athletics (and the athletic director).  

When Mulnix entered college, many Iowa women were celebrating two political accomplishments. First, Iowa women commemorated their first decade of partial suffrage. In 1894 the state legislature granted Iowa women “the vote in school and municipal referenda where bond issues or tax increases were at stake,” although they could still not vote for candidates running for office. Not only did Iowa women enjoy greater (though incomplete) enfranchisement than most American women, but one of their own served in a nationally-prominent political role. Carrie Chapman Catt, who moved to Iowa at age seven with her parents in 1866, earned a degree from the State Agricultural College in 1880, and served for several years as a reporter for a newspaper in Mason City, finished her term as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1904, having replaced Susan B. Anthony in 1900. (Catt would serve again as president from 1915 to 1920.) While likely aware of these accomplishments, most Iowa women, like their contemporaries in other states, fostered most of their political activities through women’s clubs. By 1903, nearly three hundred women’s clubs were affiliated with the Iowa Federation of Women’s Clubs. Many of these organizations engaged political topics during

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their meetings, canvassed their communities to garner support for their causes, lobbied state legislators for reforms, and confronted local politicians with their concerns.\(^8\)

Probably realizing the important role of women’s clubs in the lives of middle- and upper-class Iowa women, Mulnix spent little time determining whether or not to join a society and much more time deciding among them after arriving on campus. By 1900, six literary societies existed for students in the collegiate department, divided evenly into single-sex organizations: the Zetagathian, Irving Institute and Philomathean for men and the Erodelphian, Hesperian, and Octave Thanet for women. Mulnix identified class-based distinctions among the three women’s societies in her first weeks at college. Regarding the newest society, Octave Thanet, Mulnix admitted, “They are nice girls but they, well to be plain spoken, are rather slow…. They aren’t my style.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, Mulnix found the Erodelphians “cold” and “aristocratic.” Sorority women comprised most of their membership, and Mulnix had a negative opinion of these more exclusive organizations. Mulnix fell “into a Hep crowd from the start,” finding “a fine crowd of girls.” Hesperian women seemed “to be the medium class and … mostly Y.W.[C.A.] girls.” “I looked around as much as I cared to before I joined,” Mulnix wrote her parents; she accepted the Hesperians’ invitation, paid three dollars, and became a Hep pledge.\(^9\)

During Mulnix’s college years women could participate in a wide range of organizations and events on campus, though somewhat narrower than those available to their male

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\(^9\) IM to SM and JM, Early Oct. 1904, Mulnix MSS. For a description of a society reception designed to recruit new students, see “Irvings and Eros Entertain Freshmen,” *Daily Iowan* (Iowa City, IA), Sept. 30, 1908, 1.
counterparts, but the six literary societies “dominated extra-curricular activities for students.” Through their literary societies, students planned public programs in which they demonstrated and refined public speaking skills, fostered their musical interests, offered dramatic programs, and served as editors of the campus newspapers. Each men’s society allied with one of the women’s societies; these brother and sister societies shared a “society hall” in one of the university’s buildings. While literary societies and fraternities and sororities (the membership of the Hesperian Literary Society was more than double the largest sorority Mulnix’s freshmen year) remained segregated by sex, college women could join many coeducational organizations, usually organized around an academic subject such as the Die Germania Club. Yet women usually comprised a minority of the members and seldom served as president of a coeducational organization, and the women’s basketball teams played inter-class games while men’s football, baseball, and track and field participated in intercollegiate contests. Literary societies lost their dominance of campus life following World War I. Due primarily to students’ shifting interests and the usurpation of much of their activities, including journalism, dramatics, and public speaking, into the formal curriculum, all of SUI’s literary societies became defunct by the early 1930s.10

While Mulnix likely expected her literary society to foster her political involvement in campus and community concerns, she may have been more surprised to find many political struggles within Hep. A month after she pledged Hesperia, Mulnix expressed her fears about her

upcoming initiation to her parents: “They initiate into everything here and they are something fierce, too.” Noting that initiation periods could last up to a week, she recalled a sorority pledge who was forced to propose to a professor in front of a class wearing her gym suit. After playing “a few jokes” on the pledges, the Hep members wrote “H” in charcoal on the pledges’ left cheeks, put dunce caps on the their heads, and forced them to march into the society hall and sit in the front of the room after all the guests, primarily Zet men, had arrived. The members required that the pledges learn and sing the “Hep Song” to begin the program. After the pledges sang, the audience encouraged an encore performance. With their encore, the pledges gently retaliated and usurped the authority of the older members. The pledges performed a parody of the “Hep Song.” Hep’s newest members melodically suggested that the days of their initiators controlling the society were limited, singing, “We’ve reached initiation time, and to its follies we resign; Here shines undimmed the future stars, as all old Heps must be awares.” This parody “brought down the house,” particularly among the Zet men, and the pledges garnered a lengthy applause. Mulnix wrote, “[T]he old Heps hardly knew what to think when we got up and went back so we thought we got even with them.”

As her personal concern about and the pledges’ resistance to their initiation only scratches the surface of the struggles within Hep, Mulnix soon developed various skills that would further her later political efforts. To the extent that a strong public speaking ability and comfort in front of crowds were essential political skills, Hep fostered both. During her years at SUI, Mulnix read selections, gave papers, and participated in debates during Hep’s public programs. Mulnix took these public speaking opportunities seriously. She often read selections

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11 IM to SM and JM, Nov. 14, 1904, Mulnix MSS.
12 By naming these skills and characteristics “political,” I do not suggest that these skills are only useful to political ends. Rather, I argue that they empower individuals to maximize their potential political impact.
she had previously prepared and presented to friendly, less formal audiences; she often wrote to
her parents seeking advice for her debates. Even when Mulnix lost a debate, Heps praised her
improving public speaking ability. Noting that one Hep member said she gave “the best speech”
during a debate her junior year, Mulnix told her parents, “They spoke of how I just said things
right off without hesitating. You know I have never spoken off hand before. I am pretty proud of
that.” With the general public invited to most Hep programs and Zet men typically attending in
large numbers, when Mulnix found herself on the Hep program, she spoke to an audience of both
men and women.¹³

Hep members learned parliamentary procedure to participate in the society’s business
meetings. Mulnix complained these meetings “have been run … carelessly lately” in the spring
of her junior year. She purchased Robert’s Rules of Order and told her parents, “I am going to
post up as much as I can [about parliamentary procedure] and then set a good example for the
others.” Mulnix was good on her word. She soon led the members in regular “parliamentary
drill[s].” Such adherence to parliamentary procedure not only allowed literary society women
participate in class meetings but also prepared them for involvement in women’s club after
graduation.¹⁴

In addition, Hep women created opportunities for members to practice their
organizational skills and demonstrate their potential as leaders. During her first year, Mulnix
served on the society’s decorating committee. As a sophomore, she was responsible for taking
tickets at the society’s annual dramatic performance, the “Freshman Hep Farce.” The Hep
women appointed Mulnix and two other members to plan the next year’s farce. In the week

¹³ IM to SM and JM, Late Nov. 1907, Mulnix MSS.
¹⁴ IM to SM and JM, March 18, 1908, April 27, 1908, Mulnix MSS. According to Anne Firor Scott, “Every
[women’s] group, however small, had its constitution and by-laws, and hewed to the line of Robert’s Rules of
Order,” Natural Allies, 81.
leading up to the performance, Mulnix attended practice every night to “drill the ‘Freshie’ Heps.” Although many of these early roles were menial, they served as proving grounds for motivated college women. The Heps rewarded their members who succeeded at these responsibilities with subsequent leadership positions of increased prominence and importance.

Mulnix’s work apparently impressed her peers because in her final two years she held multiple leadership roles. At the start of her junior year in fall 1907, Mulnix served on three Hep committees. Two of these committees were temporary; the Heps charged one with improving the society’s bulletin board and the other to get “some money out of the Zets for the piano.” The Heps also selected Mulnix as “chairman” of the social committee and for the spring term that academic year elected her vice president. Her responsibilities included planning Hep programs and occasionally fulfilling the president’s duties. Mulnix found the vice presidency consumed “a good deal of time” because she had “to pick out the people who need[ed] appearances the worst” for the programs. Nonetheless, she was soon responsible for two more committees. Despite Mulnix’s election to vice president for the spring of 1908 and leadership on various committees, the Heps selected Ora King president for following fall term. But the Heps eventually recognized Mulnix’s contributions and leadership skills by electing her to the society’s highest position for winter term her senior year. Her three-month presidency served as the culmination of Mulnix’s college career.15

Mulnix’s path to the presidency coincided with her growing sense of confidence, a large measure of which was the result of her literary society experiences. Mulnix arrived to campus like many new students: timid, uncertain, and shy. But mid-way through her college career a bolder woman began to emerge. In spring 1907, the Heps met to vote on new members. Some

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15 IM to SM and JM, March 28, 1905, March 21, 1906, March 22, 1907, April 8, 1907, March 18, 30, 1908, April 9, 27, 1908, June 6, 1908, Dec. 14, 1908, Mulnix MSS.
Heps “blackballed” one SUI woman. A Hep member who was friends with the excluded student, sat next to Mulnix and complained that the members should have spoken up if they “didn’t know the girl proposed.” Mulnix “foolishly” commented that she did not know all the women proposed for membership. Person responded, “Well why don’t you know them? You’ve had plenty of time to get acquainted with them in!!! It’s your business to know them!!!” Mulnix coolly said, “Oh, not necessarily.” Mulnix “surprised” herself with her response. She told her parents, “You know how embarrassed I would have been several years ago. Well, I am very glad to know that I can spunk up when the occasion demands instead of taking everything.” Although her comment to Person was a relatively private exchange, Mulnix was soon demonstrating “spunk” at Hep business meetings. Mulnix described her increasingly prominent role to her parents: “It seems as though I talk more [in Hep business meetings] than any other two persons put together. But some one has to and when no one else does, I do.” When Hep president Glenn Ogden was scheduled to perform in a program during Mulnix’s vice presidency, Mulnix occupied the president’s chair for the first time. Ogden addressed Mulnix as “Miss President” (although Mulnix noted she should have said “Miss Chairwoman”) and Mulnix “recognized her most dignifiedly.” Mulnix “then announced the music and then made the usual little closing speech” to end the program. Confident in temporarily fulfilling the role, Mulnix may have convinced several Heps that night she should be elected president.\footnote{IM to SM and JM, March 4, 1907, March 18, 1908, April 27, 1908, Mulnix MSS.} 

Being elected Hep president required political acumen, and Mulnix began demonstrating a particularly impressive amount in her senior year, best revealed in her and her allies’ frequent struggles with a group of Heps who lived together in a boarding house. When Mulnix considered moving into “Hep House” as a junior, Hep member Florence Mingus warned her that the group
was “clicky”, “jealous”, and “so spoony.” Mulnix, who took Mingus’s advice and did not move in, found herself continually at odds with these members during her senior year. Several Erodelphian women proposed the six literary societies combine efforts to present one spring play in contrast to the typical three plays. The Hep House residents supported the proposal, but Mulnix and her allies opposed it. The two sides debated the venture at the next business meeting. Mulnix’s side initially won when a majority voted against the proposal, but the Hep House residents attempted to circumvent the vote by having president Ora King, who lived at Hep House, appoint a committee for the play. In the parliamentary procedure battle that followed, King became so confused she had to ask Mulnix for guidance. When the president made another procedural mistake, Mulnix identified the opportunity. “Here was our chance,” she wrote. “So our girl then made her motion as we had first planned and it carried beautifully.” The Heps voted Ella Grissel, an ally of Mulnix’s who was also opposed to the joint play (and would later become Mulnix’s sister-in-law), chairman of the play committee.17

Mulnix secured her election to the presidency by taking advantage of the divisions created by the Hep House residents. The same women who blocked the joint play became concerned that King had been giving her housemates “more than their share” of the society’s honors and opportunities. Several Zet men began referring to the Hep House residents and its dominating influence as “Tammany Hall,” asking Mulnix and her allies why they “didn’t squelch it.” Frustrated with Hep House residents’ control over the society and perhaps both motivated and slightly embarrassed by the Zets’ comments, several Heps “formed an idea that there … [would] be no more presidents from Hep house.” Mulnix argued, “They simply run things their

17 IM to SM and JM, Nov. 1907, Nov. 25, 1908, Mulnix MSS. The independent play that the Heps and Zets presented seems to have been quite successful, “Hep-Zet Play to be Repeated,” Daily Iowan (Iowa City, IA), May 7, 1909, 1.
way and we have decided that is it time for it to stop. We can’t do anything unless we organize
for they are organized, so we have formed a ring too.” The ring “held a secret meeting” to slate
candidates for the year’s remaining two elections, which included nominating Mulnix as
president for the next term.\(^{18}\) Mulnix and her allies usurped the society’s public political process,
replacing it with secret meetings and closed-door decisions more regularly attributed to the
political machines of their era.

Even as Mulnix revealed to her parents the “little ring” and her upcoming nomination,
she realized that “electioneering” for personal gain breached the boundaries of acceptable
political behavior for women. Mulnix justified her actions on multiple grounds. First, she noted
the wide-spread discontent with the Hep House residents. When informed of the ring’s plan,
sisters and Hep members Louise and Florence Mingus became “tickled over it because they have
wanted the [Hep] house smashed for several years.” Mulnix also attributed her presidential
nomination to other members of the ring. When the group gathered to select nominees, Mulnix
claimed that Audrie Alspaugh “has had me in mind for the next term all year – so she suggested
me.” Mulnix left the active campaigning to her allies. She also expressed regret about resorting
to such political methods to get elected: “I am sorry it had to come about in this way—sorry that
if I was to be pres[ident]—I had to know about it before hand. But I couldn’t help it. I was forced
into the deal almost.”\(^{19}\) Mulnix and her allies used conventional political skills—despite their
awareness that such maneuverings exceeded “appropriate” behavior by women—to end the Hep
House residents’ dominance over the literary society and place Mulnix in the Hep president’s
chair.

\(^{18}\) IM to SM and JM, Nov. 25, 1908, Mulnix MSS.
\(^{19}\) IM to SM and JM, Nov. 25, 1908, Mulnix MSS.
Ione Mulnix found the Hesperian Literary Society a contested political environment. Tensions between new and older members, between popular and less popular members, and between officers and general members revealed themselves in many of the society’s activities. Motivated members worked hard to gain the respect of their peers that would allow them to become society officers, and members often competed overtly and covertly for these leadership positions. Within the society itself, individuals and groups of women could have vastly different goals and aspirations. As these members worked to gain a majority to support their aims, they engaged in fierce political battles. Through these experiences, Mulnix and her contemporaries learned valuable and varied political skills which they used in campus political contests.

*Campus Electioneering and Society Debates*

Enfranchised on campus before enfranchised in their country, literary society women transferred the political skills learned within their societies to maximize their limited power in campus politics. Mulnix realized that her fellow students adopted professional politicians’ methods, telling her parents, “Well the literary societies get out regular tickets like the Republicans and democrats [sic].” Brother and sister societies nominated candidates for various campus leadership positions, while shifting coalitions of literary societies, fraternities and sororities, and other student groups, both formal and informal, determined the outcomes of campus elections. During Mulnix’s sophomore year, the Zets and Heps combined efforts with the Philo men and Octave women to win every class office except secretary. The fraternity men joined this coalition the following month to elect a yearbook editorial board comprised of Zets.\(^\text{20}\)

SUI students divided class offices between the sexes. Women typically filled the vice president and secretary positions, while men served as class president, treasurer, and class

\(^{20}\) IM to SM and JM, Oct. 8, 1906, Mulnix MSS.
representative. In October 1907, Mulnix found her name on the class officer ballot when the “Hep-Zet ticket” nominated Mulnix for junior class vice president. Mulnix considered her nomination and the potential office an “honor,” but worried lest she “should have to preside over the class” in the president’s absence. With the support of the Philos and Octaves, Mulnix received twenty-three more votes than her competitor, reporting to her parents, “your humble servant is vice president of the class.” As Carberry’s appointment of Mulnix as chairman of a campus-wide committee the next year demonstrates, the class president appointed both men and women students to serve on various campus committees.21

In their quest for SUI’s most prestigious student positions, campus men recognized the importance of securing literary society women’s votes and valued literary society women’s active campaigning. During Mulnix’s senior year, her Zet classmates struggled to determine their candidate for class president. Going into “the caucus” with the Heps to select the nominee, the Zets had divided into “two factions.” But two Zets, Robert Jones and Clement Loehr, surprised both sides when they managed to secure the nomination for their friend William Carberry “by talking to the girls” and winning their votes. Many Zets became upset with this election result that was primarily the result of Hep women’s votes. Worrying “that a split in our own party may do us like the Iowa republicans [sic],” Mulnix demonstrated her awareness of state politics while explaining that while most Zets liked Carberry many disliked his political handlers Jones and Loehr. Although she considered Jones and Loehr’s political maneuvering that secured Carberry’s nomination “an underhanded trick,” Mulnix decided “to work for him with all my might.” Demonstrating that Hep women publically campaigned for candidates Mulnix found election day “pretty strenuous” as she “electioneered” all day. The Philos and Octaves decided to support the

21 IM to SM and JM, Oct. 8, 1906, Oct. 12, 1907, Mulnix MSS.
Irving’s candidates, but by garnering the votes of Catholic students Carberry won the class presidency by seventeen votes. Mulnix’s ticket also claimed the class representative, but the Irvings’ slate secured the remaining three class officers.²²

Even though college women participated in campus politics and served in elected office, their roles were less significant and more constrained than those they found within their all-female literary societies. Not only did men enjoy one more class officer position than did women, the two available to women came with less prestige and carried few responsibilities. Mulnix considered her nomination and election as junior class vice president a “nice…honor” “as there is practically no work.” She worried about the possibility of having to run the class meetings if the president were absent, seemingly the vice president’s only responsibility. And while college men might reward college women for their electoral support with prominent appointments, they were eager to demonstrate to women their seemingly superior political skills. During joint society programs, the president of the men’s society sat in the president’s chair on stage and presided over the event while the president of the women’s society served as vice president and did not have a prominent seat. At one such program when Mulnix was Hep president the Zets “decided to have a mock business meeting.” Some mischievous Zets “levied a fine” on their president who had to step down to manage his defense while Mulnix assumed the president’s chair and responsibility to conduct proceedings. She soon realized that the men had devised this situation to demonstrate their social status and to test her parliamentary skills: “They fired one thing after another at me till I didn’t know who was talking or what they were saying.”

²² IM to SM and JM, Oct. 7, 10, 1908, Mulnix MSS; “Carberry Chosen Senior President,” *Daily Iowan* (Iowa City, IA), Oct. 13, 1908, 1. Indeed Carberry’s election was the Zets and Heps sole bright spot in campus elections that year, having lost the junior and sophomore class elections. “Much Politics in Class Elections,” *Daily Iowan* (Iowa City, IA), Sept. 29, 1908, 1; “Carl Loos Elected Sophomore President,” *Daily Iowan* (Iowa City, IA), Oct. 4, 1908.
The temporarily deposed president agreed to the fine “in order to simply matters.” Mulnix admitted, “This relieved me wonderfully.”

Soon after joining Hep, Mulnix learned that SUI literary societies were the only feature of the extracurriculum that promoted students’ awareness of political issues and their persuasive argumentation through debating. Mulnix and her fellow Heps also encountered many political issues by attending “Zet” programs and campus debates between the men’s societies. Eight months before the Heps held their fictitious political rally, Mulnix attended a Zet program that consisted of “a mock Republican National Convention.” Zet men dressed up as Republican leaders, including Iowa’s U.S. Senator Jonathan Dolliver and Governor Albert Cummins. The Zets nominated then Secretary of War Taft, who “was padded to perfection with white trousers & black coat,” for president and Governor Cummins for vice president. After Mulnix opened a Zet program with a piano performance one March, she stayed and listened to four college men debate women’s suffrage. In January 1909, Mulnix attended the University Championship Debate, a contest between the best debaters of the men’s societies. Considering the benefits of a federal income tax for Americans who annually earned more than five thousand dollars (more than $120,000 in 2010 dollars), Mulnix watched the Zet team defeat the men from the law school before losing in the final round to the Irving men.

Debates were also a regular feature of Hep programs and the political issues Mulnix considered most thoroughly were the ones she personally debated. Mulnix’s first debate occurred in the winter of her freshman year. Scheduled to debate on vaccination, Mulnix worried, “I wouldn’t care but I have the wrong side of it – that it is inadvisable – and I can’t get any points

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23 IM to SM and JM, October 12, 1907; March 8, 1909, Mulnix MSS.
24 IM to SM and JM, March 30, 1908, Mulnix MSS; Program Poster for May 8, (no year), Zetagathian Program Poster Collection, Zetagathian Literary Society Papers, UIUA.
on it.” She asked her physician father, “Won’t you please look it up a little – think of the objections you meet and if you know of any big man saying anything against it, please send me the article.” Mulnix’s worries were abated when she managed to switch sides. Receiving two of the three judges’ votes, she won the debate. In later years Mulnix debated educational issues that remain politically contested. She argued that “coeducational institutions” were “preferable to women’s schools” and that large universities were preferable to small colleges. In their preparation for debates, Mulnix and other Heps learned both sides of an issue and attempted to predict which “points” would most likely sway the audience and the judges’ opinions. Sometimes women were in a position to support their personal political stances; sometimes they learned more about an issue by representing a side that they personally opposed. Either way, they women learned about new issues and considered the complicated political decision making process.

Women debaters learned the same skills and were governed by the same rules as their male counterparts, but the distinctions in debate topics reflected the limitations of women’s “appropriate” political activity. Men usually debated national or international political issues, usually considering diplomacy, military actions, or the adoption of a feature of a foreign political system in the United States (e.g., the model of referendum and initiative in Switzerland). Women were more likely to argue issues closer to home, literally and figuratively. Women considered campus concerns, education, state politics, or issues that had domestic overtones, such as a

Constitutional Amendment to give the federal government control over divorce laws or the effectiveness of consumer leagues to reduce child labor.26

Even if their debate topics did not span the entire political spectrum, Hep women transferred their skills in argumentation to support and advance their personal political beliefs. For Mulnix this centered on her ardent belief in national prohibition, by far the strongest political view she maintained while at SUI (but one she apparently never debated in a society program).27 Mulnix, whose mother belonged to the WCTU, likely arrived at SUI supporting prohibition, but did not begin advocating on its behalf until 1907. Having attended and participated in debates for over two years, Mulnix became increasingly confident in advocating for her own political positions. She recounted a temperance lecture in March 1908 to her parents: “Of course his talk didn’t hit me much but I tho’te he hit those who needed it for there are girls here who go down [the] street & other places with fellows who … [are] staggering.” When another Hep member complained the lecturer “might have said more for the girls’ benefit,” Mulnix responded, “But that is his business – to save men …. Anyway it’s the men here that need the fixing more than the girls.” As Mulnix demonstrated increasing interest in one Zet member, her mother wanted to know if she had “sounded” the college man “on the drink question.” But Mulnix had already “spoke[n] … pretty freely on the subject,” informing the young man that her mother “was very radical on the temperance question and … belonged to the WCTU.” The Zet “seemed to agree”

26 The best distinctions between the debate topics are the surviving literary society posters that announced upcoming programs, see Hesperian Program Poster Collection, Hesperian Literary Society Papers, UIA; Zetagathian Program Poster Collection, Zetagathian Literary Society Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA (hereafter cites as “UIA”). See also: Author, “Public Display of Student Learning,” 13-14.

27 Mulnix’s lack of mention of any controversies within Hep regarding women’s alcohol use indicates that the literary society served as a space that supported prohibitionist women. Mulnix never noticed the presence of alcohol or mentioned imbibing college men or women at the many Hep and Zet parties she attended.
with Mulnix’s temperance beliefs, telling her that he never knew his father to have gone into a saloon.²⁸

But Mulnix did not escape her college years without encountering students who drank alcohol. She used these incidents as opportunities to push her political beliefs on others. After watching a friend perform in the Erodelphian’s Freshman Farce in her junior year, Mulnix went to a restaurant with another Hep and two Zets. Three fraternity men shared a table near Mulnix and her friends. One of the fraternity men was drunk and “leaned his head on his arm on the table & began to babble.” Soon the sober fraternity men and the waiter dragged the drunk student into the kitchen. Mulnix heard “some commotion out there & … could just imagine that the fellow was vomiting.” Angered by this incident, Mulnix “delivered a temperance lecture all the way home.”²⁹ Regardless of whether the question centered on topics of personal relevance or not, participating in and listening to debates prepared women literary society members to advocate for the political issues they found most important.

Literary societies provided college women multiple opportunities to explore national political issues, develop leadership abilities, and to engage in campus politics. Women developed political skills that enabled them to demonstrate their expanding knowledge of political world and emulate the adult world beyond campus. In turn, literary society members used these experiences and their increasing political savvy to create opportunities to push the boundaries of acceptable heterosexual relationships.

Literary Societies and Sexual Politics

As they had since the beginning of coeducational higher education, Americans worried about the sexual propriety of men and (especially) women students on college campuses in the

²⁸ IM to SM and JM, March 30, 1908, March 22, 1907, Mulnix MSS.
²⁹ IM to SM and JM, March 17, 22, 1907, March 30, 1908, April 24, 1907, Mulnix MSS.
early twentieth century. In their treatment of the time that includes Mulnix’s college years, historians have developed an increasingly complex portrait of the campus climate that college women found at coeducational institutions. College women who attended institutions that began as men’s colleges before becoming coeducational faced the greatest hostility, while women who comprised the majority of students at state normal schools found the least. Those women who enrolled at institutions that began as coeducation but enrolled greater numbers of men, such as SUI, found middling levels of opposition to their presence on campus.\(^{30}\) Occurring during an era that bridged the Victorian era’s severe limitations on heterosexual interactions of the late nineteenth century and the increased sexuality on campuses in 1920s,\(^{31}\) Mulnix’s experiences reveal that literary society membership increased opportunities of heterosexual sociality while maintaining absolute restrictions on sexual behavior.\(^{32}\)

With the expanded opportunities to engage the opposite sex that accompanied their literary society activities, Hep women and Zet men faced the sexual politics of their day. For college students, this involved an awareness of community norms, parental expectations, campus rules, and religious standards. But SUI students encountered not only external constrictions on

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\(^{30}\) Perhaps the most well known account of college men’s hostility towards women students in this era is Lynn Gordon’s discussion of the University of California – Berkeley. Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990) chapter two. See also Charlotte Williams Conable, *Women at Cornell: The Myth of Equal Education* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977). For women students’ full-fledged involvement at state normal schools, see Ogren, *The American State Normal School*, chapters four and five. College women who attended state land-grant institutions see to have experienced a medium level of hostility similar to SUI women, see Radke-Moss, *Bright Epoch*.


\(^{32}\) Only recently have historians begun to explore the role of literary societies in providing opportunities for college men and women to interact in socially acceptable way. Radke-Moss finds the conversations and refreshments following literary society programs at land-grant colleges in the 1870s one of the “few opportunities for socializing” between men and women students, Radke-Moss, *Bright Epoch*, 111. I borrow “heterosexual sociality” from Radke-Moss, *Bright Epoch*, chapter four.
their heterosexual behavior. They developed personal desires and received influences from their peers who encouraged heterosexual interactions, leading students to experience romantic hopes, opportunities, and disappointments with each other. Indeed, the university served as an environment for both learning and practicing heterosexual courtship behaviors. The manner in which students designed their literary societies to provide heterosexual interactions demonstrates these college students’ sophisticated understanding of the sexual politics of their day.33

All of SUI’s literary societies remained single-sex organizations, but their members encouraged heterosexual relationships through both formal and informal events. Members of brother and sister societies regularly attended each other’s programs and held joint programs several times a semester. Literary society programs permitted heterosexual interactions but were not necessarily designed to foster them, so members created events specifically to encourage these relationships. Hep women regularly planned parties for Zet men, and the Zets returned the favor with their own parties tailored to “entertain” the Heps. In addition to official society parties, smaller groups of Hep women and Zet men arranged more intimate gatherings. In February 1907, Mulnix and eight other Heps organized a party for themselves and eight Zets on a Hep member’s farm outside of Iowa City, which included a sleigh ride, parlor games, and making popcorn and fudge. During her last term at SUI, Mulnix and four friends planned a “backward party” for the senior Heps and Zets. Receiving their “invitations backwards and upside down,” attendees entered the party walking backwards through the back door, “said farewells at first, shook hands … left handed and so on.” The hosts “passed the favors first, then

33 Theorist R.W. Connell conceptualizes sexual politics as “the contestation of issues of sexuality by the social interests constituted within gender relations.” R.W. Connell, “The State, Gender, and Sexual Politics: Theory and Appraisal,” Theory and Society 19 (1990): 509. Although Mulnix, other Hep women, and Zet men would not have considered their behaviors and decisions as furthering sexual political goals, they would have recognized their literary societies provided the primary resource for their heterosexual interactions.
the mints, then macaroons, ice cream, spoons, then coffee, & then sandwiches, salad, & olives.”

Although both Hep women and Zet men shared responsibility in planning activities that encouraged heterosexual interactions, college men generally determined if college women received a date to these events and who their companion would be. Zet men regularly asked Hep women to attend Zet programs, Hep programs, campus debates between men’s literary societies, non-literary society events on campus, and community entertainments. If Hep women did not have a date to accompany her to these activities, Zet men regularly offered to walk them home. In most instances the responsibility rested upon an individual Zet to ask the Hep woman to attend a function. Sometimes the Zets relied upon “scratch-lists” to facilitate dates between the societies. Finding their use “a good plan,” Mulnix described the scratch-list method: “Each boy has to scratch a girl’s name whether they want that one or not. Of course the first ones have their choice.” An astute method that maximized the number of dates, scratch-lists motivated shy, awkward young men to ask Heps to attend events and appeased the relations between the two societies as a majority of Heps received dates. Although Hep women generally did not have the power to chose their dates, they collectively had the power to chose to participate in the Zets’ activities or invite the Zets to their own events.

Constrained by social expectations, Hep women found themselves with far less power than Zet men regarding their ability to create their preferred heterosexual pairings. Whether asked to attend an event or to be escorted home, Hep women were expected to accept the first

34 For mentions of joint programs, see IM to SM and JM, Oct. 7, 1908, Dec. 14, 1908, March 8, 1909, May 25, 1909, Mulnix MSS. For examples of society parties, see IM to SM and JM, Nov. 12, 1906, Jan. 24, 1907, Feb. 4, 1907, April 8, 16, 1907, Late Nov. 1907, March 8, 1909, Mulnix MSS. For examples of smaller, informal gatherings, see IM to SM and JM, Feb. 11, 1907, April 24, 1900, May 8, 1909, Mulnix MSS. Mulnix letters never mention the presence of chaperones, but several newspaper articles do mention that university regulations required chaperones at dances.
35 IM to SM and JM, Late Nov. 1904, Mulnix MSS.
invitation offered by a Zet, regardless of their feelings towards the man or any subsequent invitations they received, even if they preferred a later suitor. Of course being asked to attend an event or to be accompanied home did not guarantee a college woman liked or was attracted to the college man. Mulnix never mentioned turning down an invitation and accepting a later invitation to the same event, or reneging on an accepted invitation in favor of a preferable offer. After accepting an invitation, Mulnix “hated like everything” to turn down any invitations that followed by other college men.

Mulnix’s accounts demonstrate her own mixed successes with her Zet escorts. As a result of a scratch-list her freshman year, Mulnix received an invitation from “a good student … but … rather bashful … boy … clear from Montana.” In order to attend a Zet dinner celebrating its members’ recent debating success, Mulnix accepted an invitation from a Zet man whom she “didn’t care much about” in February 1907.36 Mulnix was normally pleased with her Zet escorts. Mulnix received several invitations from the “quite good looking” Louis Phelps her freshman year.37 Mulnix was particularly happy when William Carberry, who two years later would appoint her chair of the senior breakfast committee, “urged” her to join him ice skating. “Now wasn’t that nice,” she wrote, “Especially since Mr. Carberry is a Zet, a prominent football man, member of the nicest Frat, and won the Freshman oratorical contest last year.”38

Although Hep women did not have equal footing with Zet men in determining their dates, they developed strategies to increase the likelihood of satisfying heterosexual experiences. Occurring far less often than Zet invitations or scratch-lists, occasionally Hep women were responsible for asking Zet men to attend events. Given “free tickets” by the men’s societies, Hep

36 IM to SM and JM, Late Nov. 1904, Feb. 25, 1907, Mulnix MSS.
37 IM to SM and JM, Oct. 26, 1904, Jan. 5, 1905, Late May 1905, Mulnix MSS.
38 IM to SM and JM, Jan. 5, 1905, Jan. 13, 1907, Mulnix MSS.
“girls were to take the [Zet] boys” to a Zet-Philo “leap-year debate.” With little experience asking men out, Hep women were particularly vulnerable in this situation. Mulnix asked Frank Thomas—whose absence in Mulnix’s earlier letters suggests he rarely if ever asked Mulnix to events—“but he already had an invitation so of course couldn’t go.” Even as an increasingly confident junior, this gentle rejection “discouraged” Mulnix and she “didn’t try again.”

While men generally controlled which women they invited to events, Hep women learned strategies to create a date with a man they desired. At a Hep-Zet party in December 1907, Phelps confessed to Mulnix that “he had missed when they drew for supper partners so he had none.” Recognizing an opportunity to spend time with a man she liked, Mulnix “kindly offered to go with him and we did.” Hep women sometimes strategically approached Zet men to discuss an upcoming event in a manner to prompt the man to extend her an invitation. Mulnix, serving on a “committee to entertain the non-dancers” for an upcoming Hep party, described the “funny … way” Vincent Starzinger asked to take her to the party: “I saw him up in the library and since we were giving special invitations to the non-dancers I went over & spoke to him…. And then he asked to take me.” While Mulnix claimed to be “surprised but pleased” with this invitation, she confessed, “The girls roasted me about just going right after an invitation and succeeding so well.”

Sometimes officially sanctioned and sometimes personally motivated, Hep women occasionally controlled their own dates.

Hep women also reduced the effect of men’s sexual power by creating enjoyable all-women’s activities for those members who did not receive men’s attention. In the 1906-07 academic year, fewer men expressed interest in Mulnix than they did in preceding years or in the years that would follow. Telling her parents that “none of them [the Zets] take me home any

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39 IM to SM and JM, March 9, 1908, Mulnix MSS.
40 IM to SM and JM, Early Dec. 1907, Feb. 4 1907, Mulnix MSS.
more [sic],” Mulnix increasingly mentions enjoying “a Dutch treat” with other Heps. A Dutch treat occurred when a group of Heps who had not received invitations from Zets to attend an event or to be walked home went to a restaurant or ice cream parlor, with each Hep covering her own expenses.⁴¹ While often preferring a date with a man over a Dutch treat with women, Heps nonetheless enjoyed their time together.

Even as they worked to mitigate college men’s power over interactions between the sexes, literary society women perpetuated rigid boundaries of acceptable heterosexual behavior. Because the literary society served as their primary conduit for heterosexual interactions, Hep women demonstrated neither patience nor compassion for any members who violated sexual norms. No incident during Mulnix’s years galvanized Heps behind a single course of action as much as the Cecil Heinius affair. Heinsius joined Hep along with Mulnix in the fall of 1904. Two years later, however, Heps worried that her increasingly poor reputation would ruin their society. Mulnix told her parents that Heinsius “was pretty attractive and consequently popular and it turned her head so she didn’t know where to stop.” Heps learned that over the summer Heinsius had traveled across the state to visit at least two different men, staying in the same house of at least one of them. During one of these visits, Heinsius bleached her hair. “She makes me so mad,” Mulnix wrote, “with her peroxide hair.” Mulnix and several other Heps planned on “appointing a committee to wait upon Cecil and tell her that we disapprove of her action and if she don’t change we would rather she would be out of the society.” The Heps hoped this would “make her mad so she would leave.” At the first business meeting in January 1907, these members “dropped Cecil Heinsius from our roll.” Mulnix explained, “Of course the excuse is back taxes and dues but we have just been waiting for the chance for a long time. We will ask

⁴¹ See IM to SM and JM, March 17, 1907, Oct. 8, 1906, Jan. 6, 1907, Mulnix MSS.
her, also, to give up her pin as we don’t want people to see our pin on her.” Unable to expel a member for promiscuous activity they couldn’t prove, Heps used other political tactics to convey their disapproval and remove her membership.\footnote{Less than three months after Hep dropped her, Mulnix reported to her parents that the Dean of Women had expelled Heinsius from SUI after the young woman “was found in a man’s room … by his landlady.” IM to SM and JM, Oct. 8, 1906, Sept. 28, 1906, Jan. 6, 1907, March 17, 22, 1907, Mulnix MSS. Heinsius’s student record notes that she “accepted official advice to withdraw from the University” in the spring of 1907. Cecil Mercedes Heinsius student file, Office of the Registrar, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA.} With nearly all their power to develop relationships with men tied to their society, Hep women found little patience for any member who threatened their fragile position.

Mulnix encountered perhaps the trickiest quagmire of her collegiate career when attending literary society dances. Mulnix’s parents, particularly her devout Methodist mother, opposed dancing. Adhering either to their personal or familial religious and moral beliefs, some Zet men and Hep women – although the evidences suggests a higher proportion of women – chose not to dance at SUI. But enough literary society members approved of dancing to have the activity serve as the central feature of Hep-Zet parties.\footnote{While serving as Hep president, Mulnix wrote home: “We are going to give a party for the Zetz in a week which won’t be a dance. It is the first time in four years.” IM to SM and JM, Jan. 31, 1909, Mulnix MSS.} Mulnix’s refusal to dance limited her social opportunities as Zets regularly held events solely devoted to dancing and preferred to escort Heps who danced to any events at which dancing occurred.\footnote{IM to SM and JM, April 5, 1906, March 4, 1907, Mulnix MSS.}

Mulnix’s desire to dance grew over the course of her college career. Consequently, she devised a practice at dances that would not damage her reputation among fellow non-dancers or her parents. When a man asked Mulnix to dance while attending a Hep or Zet party, Mulnix offered to “dance her way.” This involved “sitting out” the dance and talking to the man.\footnote{IM to SM and JM, Early Dec. 1907, Jan. 29, 1908, Mulnix MSS.} But this method became increasingly less satisfying. Complaining “the temptation to dance was stronger than it ever has been before” in April 1907, Mulnix told her parents, “I could have had
at least five partners and three urged real hard. When I mentioned principle however they didn’t urge anymore.” Mulnix “didn’t give in,” but by her senior year she began pressuring her parents to agree to some acceptable form of dancing. Applying her political skills to the dance issue—giving her parents little time to respond, anticipating and addressing potential objections, and indicating her strong preference—on a Tuesday Mulnix sent this query:

Oh say - I wanted to ask you what you think about my going to a Hep dance Sat. afternoon. It will be just the Hep girls - no boys - & I think it will be lots of fun. I don’t object to dancing with girls do you Mama? The only harm I can see is getting to know how & then wanting to dance other times. But I think I am safe there because I couldn’t want to any worst than I have I guess. Mrs. Baird seemed to think it would be throwing my influence that way but I think they all know how I stand well enough and I never have pretended to object to girl dances. What do you think Mother?46

Mulnix’s letters do not reveal whether she chose to dance this time, but in her final letter home before her parents traveled to attend her graduation Mulnix admitted she “shocked and disappointed all my friends” by dancing. But this was a savvy overstatement, designed to lessen any of her parents’ negative reactions by admitting to the behavior and then justifying herself. First, Mulnix noted that she “managed to go pretty well” at a “girl dance” the Hep juniors threw for the seniors several days earlier. The next Monday the Zets and Heps took a picnic “up the river at a little park” that included a dance hall. Mulnix claimed “I have said for about 2 years that if ever I wanted to dance it is when I see that ‘Little Dutch Hall.’” Because women outnumbered men at the picnic, a large group of Heps danced together. Mulnix joined them. “I didn’t think much about the consequences till finally Carl Hollman asked me for a dance,” she wrote. “Of course I couldn’t say I couldn’t for he had seen me.” Like so many times during her college years, Mulnix offered to dance “her way” and sit the song out with him. Hollman offered a compromise: “he would do half my way if I would do the other half his” and dance with him.

46 IM to SM and JM, Nov. 3, 1908, Mulnix MSS.
Mulnix conferred with her friends and received conflicting advice. Admitting she was “in a don’t care mood and wanted to try it,” she “gave in.” After dancing half a song with Hollman, she accepted one more Zet’s invitation before dancing “the rest of the evening with the girls.”

Having disobeyed her parents’ wishes, Mulnix tried to minimize the damage. Describing her dance with Hollman, Mulnix argued, “Really if every fellow were as nice as he is—dancing would be alright—for he scarcely touched me. I could hardly feel his arms at all and our heads weren’t any closer than in ordinary conversation.” In her last month at SUI, having developed debating and political skills in her literary society, Mulnix managed to fulfill her desires and minimize her parents’ displeasure. Mulnix’s drew upon sophisticated political experiences fostered by her literary society to address the trickiest situations she faced.

*Prepared for the Politics of Life*

This microhistory of Ione Mulnix’s experiences as a Hep both supports and expands previous historians’ arguments regarding the political nature of literary societies. Future historians, relying on similarly rich archival material of individual students’ experiences, may find literary societies that served both similar and different political purposes at other types of institutions, in different geographical areas, and during different time periods. Nonetheless, from the individual student’s perspective, literary societies were the site of political struggle and success far beyond their debates.

Since Mulnix’s archival records consist of only letters written to her parents while a college student, minimal biographical information exists about her later life. After graduating from SUI in June 1909, she seemingly led a typical life of a middle-class midwestern woman. She taught music at the elementary school in her hometown for two years before marrying

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47 IM to SM and JM, June 2, 1909, Mulnix MSS. The picnic that Mulnix danced at seems to have been announced in the student newspaper, “Hep Zet Picnic,” *Daily Iowan* (Iowa City, IA), May 27, 1909, 3.
Walter Grissel, the brother of a Hep member, and moving to Cedar Rapids. Living there the remainder of her life, just thirty miles north of her alma mater, Mulnix devoted most of her attention to raising three children. Mulnix also became active in various women’s clubs, including the Shakespeare Club, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the American Association of University Women. If the activities of the Cedar Rapids’ Shakespeare Club resembled those of the similarly-named organization in Osage, Iowa, the women focused, like SUI’s Heps, on “cultural education, the discussion of political issues, and direct involvement in promoting political and social causes.” In addition, Mulnix would have participated in a dramatic transformation of the DAR, as the influential organization changed from a typical progressive women’s organization interested in promoting American history, leading war relief efforts, working with immigrants, and fighting child labor before World War I to one of a notable conservative bent that supported anti-Communist campaigns, high levels of military spending, and nativist attitudes in the 1920s and 1930s.48

Along with millions of other American women, Mulnix was enfranchised to vote through the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. While “the vast majority of American women were uninitiated into formal political activities—voting, campaigning, stumping,” this was not true for Mulnix.49 Both while a student and in the years following her graduation, Ione Mulnix Grissel, like every other person who lived then and now, encountered the politics of life: causes to support or oppose, organizations to join or create, employment to seek or to quit, relationships to begin or end, votes to cast or not, children to have or not, sexual advances to make or refuse, and people to love or hate. But in every political environment she found herself, regardless of which

48 Pawley, “Not Wholly Self Culture,” 29; Morgan, “Regions Remote.”
political decisions she faced, Mulnix, unlike the majority of men and women who did not attend college and the smaller number who attended but did not join a literary society, could draw upon years of political experiences fostered by the Hesperian Literary Society. While college students would turn to other outlets to learn political skills as the influence of literary societies began to wane before disappearing all together, for the college women of Mulnix’s generation—at least at one public university in the middle of the United States—their literary societies proved a particularly useful feature of the higher education that prepared them for the politics of life.