Achieving Power Through Female Persuasion in
*The Sweet Girl Graduate*

During the nineteenth century, a gender hierarchy existed in Canadian society, creating roles and divisions that often marginalized women. Women were relegated to domestic roles, while men dominated the outside world. The inequality motivated women to fight for higher education, jobs, and power in society. Canadian playwright Sarah Anne Curzon wrote the closet drama, *The Sweet Girl Graduate* (1882), to encourage social change for women’s rights. Curzon wanted women to be allowed into lectures with their male counterparts rather than just being allowed to sit the exams. Professor and scholar Celeste Derksen argues that Curzon’s character, Kate, gains power through feminine persuasion (3) and that this demonstrates the absurdity of gender limitations (1). However, Derksen feels that Curzon ultimately reinforces gender hierarchy when Kate forfeits the authority she has achieved when she reveals her true gender to her male classmates at the end of the play and relies on their support to fight against gender inequality amongst post-secondary institutions (2). I disagree with Derksen and argue that Curzon does not surrender Kate’s power to the men at the end of the play, but instead that Kate continues to use feminine persuasion as a tactic in her quest for gender equality in educational institutions even when she turns to her male classmates for support. In this essay, I will compare Curzon’s text against literature by various literary scholars and feminist movement historians to prove that Kate successfully becomes a woman with agency and power. First, I will examine the contemporary social and educational practices of nineteenth-century Canada that influenced Curzon’s writing which will allow for important connections between Curzon’s play and real-life suffrage movements to be made. Next, I will identify the ways in
which Kate gains power through feminine persuasion. Lastly, I will show how Curzon’s work functions as a feminine persuasion tactic itself, representing the capabilities of women and becoming an influential text during the nineteenth century to inspire positive change in gender limitations.

During the nineteenth century, gender inequality was prevalent and established limitations on the actions and responsibilities of individuals. Highly regarded women’s rights activist and university professor Sandra Pyke describes nineteenth-century Canada as a time when people questioned whether men’s rights should be available to women as well; this was often referred to as “the woman question” (154). During this time, women were refused co-education because they were thought to be incapable of keeping up with men, as they were “intellectually inferior” (Pyke 154). In addition, men argued that women were at risk in the public sphere, which included universities. Pyke states the risks associated with the public sphere for women included not only facing “reproductive harm” but also losing their femininity (154). These fears forced society to stay firm in their debate, stopping women from entering the public sphere through higher education.

The Sweet Girl Graduate was relevant to the time it was written, as the plot is based upon real obstacles that women faced in pursuit of higher education. During Curzon’s contemporary, women began to leave their domestic sphere, often working as teachers, thus gaining agency and power in society. Canadian lawyer and professor Martin Friedland states that the issue was that the profession was limited, as people were unable to teach in high schools without a university degree (87). Even though Canadian universities did not explicitly forbid women from applying, women were rejected constantly (Friedland 85). Progress was slowly made as a group that Curzon belonged to, the Toronto Women’s Literary Club, was successful in receiving permission from the Senate for women to write exams that allowed them to both enter and later graduate from the university (Friedland 87). Though this was a step in the right direction, issues began to arise from the women not being able to attend classes due to a lack of women’s rights and cultural beliefs from the period. During the 1870s, only one woman out of twenty-three admitted was able to
graduate (Friedland 88). Though women were given an opportunity for higher education, they were not provided with the same tools as the men were. Many found it difficult to afford private tutors or prepare themselves for their exams. As a result, a vast majority were unsuccessful. This injustice influenced Curzon and her play that would be released in 1882.

Curzon was an active feminine rights activist; she joined the women’s movement in the late nineteenth century, fighting for equality (Bird 17). At the time, university education was not easily accessible to women, and Curzon believed this interfered with a woman’s ability to interact in the public sphere on equal ground with men (Bird 17). When John Wilson Bengough, an editor of a paper called Grip that brought awareness to social and political issues, invited her to write for Grip, she presented The Sweet Girl Graduate. The play was written in response to the refusal of admitting women into the University College in Toronto (Curzon 141). At the time, the Minister of Education, George William Ross, advocated for women to be granted a university education, but the president of the school, Daniel Wilson, was adamant in his refusal (Curzon 141).

To further understand the impact Curzon’s play had during her contemporary, one needs to know the form in which it was delivered. Bengough edited a paper that functioned as a platform for social and political issues, and he encouraged Curzon to write a play to address the fight for women rights in Canada (Burr 56). Leading up to the publication of The Sweet Girl Graduate in Grip-Sack, Bengough was known for presenting “truths’ about social and moral reform” in his cartoons (Burr 56). History professor Christina Burr states that Bengough was a man that wanted to ignite social change (56). Bengough wanted Grip to become a household voice, shaping families’ behaviours and attitudes (Burr 514). This goal was accomplished, as the paper’s audience was vast and included politicians (Burr 56). By working through Bengough and his socio-politically forward platform, Curzon was able to contribute to defining moments of Canadian history. Bengough provided Curzon with a platform to “generate sympathy for women’s access to university” (Bird 48). This allowed the feminist movement to become more acknowledged
in the public sphere and encouraged others to participate in the fight for equality in education.

It has been established that Curzon was motivated to write The Sweet Girl Graduate to combat restrictions placed on women due to a gender hierarchy that was present in nineteenth-century Canada. I will now examine the play to demonstrate Kate achieving power through feminine persuasion. Derksen defines “feminine persuasion” as a strategy that women use when they “remain within their traditional roles…to employ emotional and sexual guile to influence men and so secure their needs” (3). This is exactly what Curzon has Kate do: to sway the men and take control, Kate retreats into her feminine role when she encounters men and adapts the qualities that women are expected to have. Curzon highlights the feminine persuasion tactic by characterizing Kate as a strong-minded, logical woman when she is on her own or around other women, like her cousin. In Act I, Scene I, Kate shows not only her rage at being denied entrance to the University College, but at the arbitrary gender limitations that forbid her from taking university classes because “[she wears] The Petticoat” (Curzon 143). Kate’s shorting opening speech allows the reader to understand the values that her society upholds, primarily that men are “vested in all the pride of place and power…[reaching] past the clouds” (Curzon 143), while women must remain in the private sphere. This passage is significant to the rest of the play as it introduces the audience to the real Kate. It shows who she truly is when she is not in the presence of men and what her motivations are.

Kate’s anger at the discrimination against her gender, however, immediately changes when she is with her father so that she instead comes across as sweet and innocent. Kate first uses feminine persuasion while talking with her father, Mr. Bloggs. Her father is not surprised about her rejection and tells her that she no longer needs school because she is ready to “get married” (Curzon 143). Kate responds firmly that she will not marry, and the audience sees her determination to get into school as she refuses to accept that this rejection means that her education is complete (Curzon 144). Her father does not respond well to what she is saying, telling her that she will not be admitted, for fear of the trouble that would
occur from mixing young men and girls together. Instead of fighting with her father, Kate employs feminine persuasion:

KATE: P'rops not, papa. But yet I mean to have
The prize I emulate…
Will you defray the cost, as hithero
You've done, like my own kind papa? She kisses him.
MR. BLOGGS: I guess I'll have to: they won't send the bills to you. (Curzon 144)

This encounter contrasts the way Kate previously speaks when she is alone at the start of the play. She adapts a softer tone, avoiding confrontation and becomes a loving, docile daughter. This secures Mr. Blogg's financial support for her education at the University College, even though earlier her father tried to discourage her academic pursuit and convince her to settle down and marry. Kate also plays up her femininity by giving her dad a kiss. Though it is not sexual, it is an extension on what Derksen claims is an attribute of feminine persuasion. Through this exchange with her father, Kate achieves some power, as she now has the means to be in school once she figures out how to get accepted.

Curzon hoped to create a play with strong political and social messages that transfer to the real-life marginalization of women. One way that Curzon is able to make a play about a controversial issue and gain supporters is through what Bird calls the creation of a “third term” that exists outside of gender: the student (18). The role of the student seems gendered, since it is only by way of Kate cross-dressing as a male that Kate is allowed to attend classes and participate actively in a post-secondary education. However, Bird explains how Kate’s plan allowed “Curzon [to] cleverly work the natural association between women and the feminine by showing the public acts as an extension of their feminism” (19). This is important, because at the unmasking of Kate to her male classmates and professors, Curzon needs to attribute feminine characteristics to the student role so that the audience understands the capability women have in the public sphere. Thus, by seeing that the student role can belong to both males and females, the student role becomes genderless. Though analyzing the relevance of Bird’s idea of the
“third term” (18) does not demonstrate Kate using feminine persuasion, it does set up her final use of feminine persuasion in the play.

Building on what Bird says about Kate cross-dressing, Derksen argues that the play “reveals the arbitrary and artificial nature of gender constructions” through the theatrical tradition of cross-dressing (1). Like Derksen, I argue that Kate cross-dresses to find power in the public sphere by allowing her to jump gender boundaries. However, Derksen feels that as successful as the cross-dressing may have been, Curzon traps Kate with this technique, rendering the power she has gained ineffective, as she must seek help from male authority at the end of the play (5). I do not find this to be the case at all. I think that through the unmasking in the final scene, Kate regains her femininity and uses this to her advantage in the form of persuasion.

While Derksen agrees that Kate uses feminine persuasion to initially achieve power, she also feels that Kate surrenders this new power through her “[appeal] to male authority which demonstrates dependence on men” (5). I argue that the preparation Kate puts into staging the final scene of the play shows intent. In her letter to her cousin Orpha, Kate describes in great detail the “elegant costume” she is to wear when unveiling her identity to her colleagues (Curzon 150). A gown with beautiful jewels, lovely accessories which includes a bouquet of flowers, and the return of her long hair allows Kate to immediately regain her feminine self and functions as a diffuser between her and the men she is about to surprise (Curzon 150). Kate wants to look “sensation[all]” (Curzon 150) so that she appeals to the men while telling them the truth of her deceit. I see this as an extension of the sexual guile Derksen deems important for feminine persuasion to be successful. In addition to her physical femininity, Kate makes herself a victim in her explanation for deceiving her classmates and using her vulnerability and remorse as a tactic to gain their forgiveness and support:

KATE: I stumbled for the teaching that is chained—
Like ancient scripture to the reading desk—
Within your College walls. No word of mine
Could move the flinty heads of College Council.
Order and discipline forbade, they said,
That women should sit side by side with men
Within their walls. At church, or concert, or
At theatre, or ball, no separation's made
Of sexes. And so I, being a girl
Of firm and independent mind, resolved
To do as many a one beside has done
For lesser prize, and, as a man, sat at
The feet of our Gamaliels until I got
The learning that I love. That I may now
Look you all in the face without a blush, save that
Which naturally comes at having thus
To avow my hardihood, is praise, I trow,
You will not think unworthy; and to me
It forms a soft remembrance that will ever dwell
Within my grateful heart.
Can you forgive me?
MANY VOICES: We do, we must. All honour to the brave!
(Curzon 153)

Kate’s speech is intricate and poetic, saying that she wanted an education
so passionately that she had no choice but to dress as a man. Instead of
showing her anger towards society, she tells her classmates that she was
so motivated to pursue her love of education that she was willing to dress
as a man. While she shows her true intention within this speech, Kate uses
the gender hierarchy in her quest for forgiveness by suggesting that her
male classmates have the power to deem her unworthy, despite the hard
work and success she has had in school. Furthermore, she acts as though
her deceit causes her distress, presenting the male classmates with an
opportunity to save a damsel in distress. The men are in shock from
seeing their friend change identity from male to female; Kate’s speech and
beauty make them all ignore her plea for forgiveness and instead ask her
to forgive them (Curzon 153). This reaction from the men allows Kate to
continue to manipulate them for her own intentions. She is aware that
women will only achieve social power and equality if men join the cause.
She is able to take this situation and convince the men to ignore her
deception and instead sign a petition that asks for co-education. The men
immediately oblige and vow to spread the message to others (Curzon 153). Kate does surrender her power to the male authority, but instead carefully crafts a plan in which she reverts to stereotypical feminine behaviours to persuade the men into helping her achieve her objective by getting them to “look out for those petitions...and each one sign” (Curzon 153), thus supporting gender equality in post-secondary education.

The Sweet Girl Graduate is a closet drama, meaning that it is a play that is read, not performed. Bird argues that the format of the play contributes to the intent of the context (32). Theatre was not a platform that was available to women in the late nineteenth century, so Bird identifies closet dramas as a reflection of women within the domestic sphere (32). In addition, closet dramas “avoid censorship” (Bird 31) and, as we see within Curzon’s play, acts as a “way of moving women’s social, historical and legal status to the centre of Canadian political discourse” (Bird 58). Bird shares the claim that “the impassioned plea for the cause of women’s right which ends The Sweet Girl Graduate” (33) influenced the change in admittances at the University College. On March 5, 1884, two years after Curzon’s play was published, the Ontario Legislative Assembly passed the motion that forced the University College to accept women into the school, allowing them to not only take the exams, but to attend lectures (Friedland 89). This decision was met with disagreement, as the president of the school, Daniel Wilson sent tuition fees back to the women who had plans to attend school in September 1884 (Friedland 90). As a result, the government passed an Order-in-Council on October 2, 1884, that granted the Minister of Education power to make decisions for the school (Friedland 91). Though the number of women to join the school was initially small, they rose steadily through the years due to progressive works like Curzon’s.

Although this social change for women was not entirely due to Curzon’s play, she did help to raise awareness and provide women with a societal voice. Interestingly, the way Curzon wrote the play and the medium that delivered it can be seen as feminine persuasion tactics, just as Kate uses. Curzon chooses to publish this particular play within a paper that is run by a man that reaches both male and female audiences. She is
aware that in order for the play to be well-received and have a chance at igniting real change for women, the story needs to appeal to both genders. As a result, she includes characters that are reflective of the typical maternal women who want nothing more than to remain in the domestic sphere such as Kate’s mother, as well as men who are hesitant but offer support, like Kate’s classmates. Like Derksen states, an aspect of feminine persuasion is to be emotionally appealing, and Curzon effectively demonstrates this.

Once women began to attend lectures at the University College, many were nervous about the effect that co-education would have on the students. Concern over men becoming effeminate and women becoming masculine was common (Burke 223). To deal with this, the female students “were careful to draw attention to themselves” (Burke 221), so they behaved the way society expected: quietly, respectfully, and obediently. Women did this willingly, and this reversion to the gendered norms was not regression, but instead was an imitation of Curzon’s character, Kate. The female students used their femininity to soothe the critics of co-education. To do this, the women “drew up a code of regulations [to govern] their movements...[and declined] all the invitations received from the male students to join in their societies” (Burke 227). This strategy was cleverly composed in order to allow men to adjust to the social changes, particularly the new-found women’s rights. This feminine persuasion strategy extends to the attainment of the societal agency that the women of the late nineteenth-century had been denied for so long. Once the women settled into school, they were able to demonstrate their power through participation in a strike in 1895, to support the men who were battling the administration for better educational institutions and access to resources (Burke 220). This gradual transition shows how Curzon was able to influence feminine behaviour through her play and provided the women in society a new tool to subtly gain power: feminine persuasion.

In closing, though Derksen feels that Curzon fails her character and reinforces gender hierarchies, it is clear to me that this is not true. Curzon only forfeits the power back to the men as a strategy to achieve more power for women, both in The Sweet Girl Graduate and in society.
The change that is needed cannot just come from women wanting it, they also need to have the support of the men. Social change was still new: women’s suffrage didn’t happen until 1917 in Ontario (Friedland 94), so during the period that the play was written, women still did not have a significant voice to fight for their rights. In the play, Kate’s ability to successfully go through university, reveal herself as a woman, and gain the support from her male classmates and professors is a testament to the power of femininity. Feminine persuasion is proven to work in society, as the women who first entered the University College used it to blend into the environment and develop support from male peers and teachers. The idea that Kate successfully manages to not only maintain her femininity, but to use it as a means to gain power in the public sphere is thus proven to be effective and illustrates the importance of this play to Curzon’s contemporary.

Works Cited


