



Author: Thealexa Becker, Class of 2013

Derived from STRIDE Research with Dean Maureen Mahoney

## Introduction

Through my work with the Center for Work and Life and Women's Narratives Project, I have been examining various themes related to the modern woman and society such as work life balance, the workplace, the home, etc. My work with Dean Mahoney for STRIDE led us to wonder what role commencement speeches had in forming an image of attitudes towards women from about 1945 to the present. Were speakers at Smith College encouraging of women's ambitions? Did they perpetuate social norms and traditional gender roles? Or were they topical and gender neutral with little or no attention paid to the gender of the audience?

After delving through the archives and obtaining copies of close to 100 speeches delivered here at Smith, my research has yielded some interesting statistics. For instance, prior to 1971, only four women spoke at commencement: Virginia Gildersleeve in 1919, Ada Comstock in 1925, Vera Micheles Dean in 1943, and Mildred McAfee in 1944.

## Gender Neutrality

Many early Commencement speeches were gender neutral. Gender neutrality as it applies to my paper is the idea that the speech could have been given at any college or university regardless of the gender composition of the audience. If a speech contains a reference to the audience, it is usually in passing at the beginning of the speech, with little bearing on the content.

## Resources

The Smith College Archives and Sophia Smith Collection are a great wealth of resources and information about Smith's history. I visited the Archives on a regular basis going through the graduating class records and the Alumnae Quarterly to obtain copies of the Commencement speeches for each year.

My secondary source material includes Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were*, and Maxine Margolis' *Mothers and Such*.

## The Early Period: 1945-1970

The Early Period of Commencement speeches addressed in my paper goes from 1945-1970 and the speeches fall into three general categories: gender neutral/topic speeches, civic responsibility suggesting a limited contribution from women, and the idea that women should fill more traditional gender roles.

Then Senator [John F. Kennedy](#) was an outlier among this group because he suggested that women, "[regardless of their chosen occupation, consider entering the field of politics at some stage in your career](#)" (1958).

However, there were more conservative points of view. Former Illinois [Governor Adlai Stevenson](#) could "[wish \[graduates\] no better vocation than \[motherhood and marriage\]. \[He\] could wish free society no better hope for the future. And \[he\] could wish \[them\] no greater riches and rewards](#)" (1955).

Noted journalist [James Reston](#) had a similar opinion about the role of women in society. In addition to being "[against all forms of segregation, including female segregated education](#)" he felt the progression from politically laced idle chatter to vapid dithering was an improvement since "[a gal had nothing to dream about except the continents and the oceans and Christopher Columbus ... but you have the universe, the moon and the stars to dream about-all this an Commander Al Sheperd too. And there, girls, if it hasn't occurred to you, is a man!](#)" (1961)

## Future Work

The next stage of my research is to examine speeches from 1986 to the present. This period poses some interesting questions: How many of the speakers shared personal stories, and what do they say about attitudes towards women? Can women have it all and what does that mean? I would also like to compare Commencement speeches from pivotal years here at Smith to other colleges like Amherst. A thematic comparison could further elucidate the significance of the speeches given at Smith.

## The Second Period: 1970-1985

"Motherhood is purely optional, but leadership is obligatory"- [Alan Frank Guttmacher, 1970](#)

That is just one of many sentiments expressed in this period promoting a change in societal expectations for women.

Feminist and alumna Gloria Steinem felt that "[the human animal \[needs to stop\] dividing itself up according to visible difference-according to race, according to sex- and \[start looking\] for the real, the human potential inside.](#)" She also could not understand why "[men need fulfilling work in addition to marriage and children, but that women, for some mysterious reason, do not](#)" (1971).

Dorothy Nepper Marshall, another Smith alumna who worked for many years at Bryn Mawr, described why women's colleges were important before explaining the importance of feminism:

"[But more fundamentally, \[feminism\] really seeks a whole new concept of woman-woman's role in society, women's sex role, women and the institution of marriage-and it seeks to change society's values and the process by which females are socialized...](#)"(1972)

One of the most pivotal speeches was given by author Adrienne Rich in 1979, who described what power was and how women could get it. She said that "[no woman is liberated until we are all liberated](#)" and that women should "[\[call\] up the inner voices](#)" within themselves and utilize its "[transformative power](#)" to break free from a male dominated world (1979).

The concept of women "having it all" was originated by opera star Beverly Sills in her 1985 speech. "[Women are told today that they can have it all. I would like to tell you that if the word 'all' means career, marriage, and children, then you can have it all, but someone is going to pay for it](#)" (1985).